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## Pop/Rock CD Reviews



## Birdsongs of the Mesozoic – Dawn of the Cycads: The Complete Ace of Hearts Recordings (1983-1987) – Cuneiform (2 CDs)

*Few [bands](#) have successfully straddled modern classical music and rock as well as the *Birdsongs of the Mesozoic* have done.*

Published on December 02, 2008



### Birdsongs of the Mesozoic – Dawn of the Cycads: The Complete Ace of Hearts Recordings (1983-1987) – Cuneiform, Rune 274/275, CD 1: 68:39; CD 2: 54:06 \*\*\*\*1/2:

(Roger Miller - grand piano, Yamaha CP-70 piano, percussion, organ; Erik Lindgren - minimoog, memorymoog, rhythm machines, percussion; Rick Scott - Farfisa organ, DX-7 synthesizer, percussion, piano; Martin Swope - guitar, percussion)



The liner notes to the *Birdsongs of the Mesozoic* compilation *Dawn of the Cycads: The Complete Ace of Hearts Recordings* (1983-1987) open with a quote from Friederich Nietzsche: "Life without music would be a mistake." Well, life without the music of the self-called "world's hardest rocking chamber quartet," *Birdsongs of the Mesozoic*, would be boring. Among the many fascinating groups that came out of the eighties, few matched the innovation, creativity or sheer bravado of the *Birdsongs of the Mesozoic* (the Residents come to mind, but in a completely different realm). In an era noted for hardcore punk, synth pop, Michael Jackson, or the burgeoning speed metal scene, the all-instrumental *Birdsongs of the Mesozoic* stood well apart from the pack. Although they shared stages with Siouxsie and the Banshees, Echo and the Bunnymen and They Might Be Giants, they had more in common with classical minimalists Terry Riley and Philip Glass or progressive Europeans Henry Cow and Univers Zéro [see Audiophile Audition review of latter]. Some thought the ensemble confounding and the band certainly couldn't be rated as conventional, conservative or dull.

The *Birdsongs of the Mesozoic* were brought to life as a one-off side project for Mission of Burma singer/guitarist Roger Miller, looking for an outlet for some of his piano-based compositions. Nearly thirty years later the quartet is now regarded as the longest running ad-hoc ensemble in music, with several line-up changes and a continuing goal to craft edgy, experimental music that defies categorization.

*Dawn of the Cycads* culls recordings made for Boston label Ace of Hearts (which was also home to Mission of Burma), along with unreleased live material from 1987, some bonus tracks and a surplus of archival information viewable via [computer](#).

Disc one begins with the *Birdsongs of the Mesozoic* EP (1983). The five songs range from exquisitely quixotic "The Orange Ocean" to anarchistic, riff-driven jam "Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous," with a relentless bass line readymade for improvisational discourse, where everything from manipulated bird whistles to maracas is added. This EP lays out the *Birdsongs'* basic blueprint, putting dissonant chords into tunes that more often conflict with each other rather than working together.

Up next is the full-length sophomore record, *Magnetic Flip* (1984), which

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substantially improves the Birdsongs' promise. The production is full rather than the flatness that unfortunately mars the 1983 EP. More importantly, though, the foursome's inspiration and accomplishment is much more confident and assertive. "Shiny Golden Snakes" is ignited by unadulterated rock power chording akin to the Velvet Underground. The nearly-primitive keyboard repetitions that push through "Ptoccata" display a Glassian influence without resorting to mimicry, although the style owes something to prog rockers such as Emerson, Lake and Palmer. The excerpted and highly modified version of Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" heaps blaring cacophony on top of roaring discord. But the quartet also reveals a predilection for combining high and low art with undeniable ease and comfort, thus a deranged reading of the "Theme from Rocky and Bullwinkle."

The first disc ends with three bonus cuts, two of which were issued on *Sonic Geology*: the appropriately titled "Pulse Piece," Miller's tune that inaugurated the Birdsongs of the Mesozoic; Robert Fripp-esque "The Common Sparrow" (which intercrosses a prerecorded list of avian animals with disharmony) and an odd unreleased remix of "Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous," dubbed "POP Triassic."

The second disc has numerous computer-accessible features that are a windfall for completists. There are five dinosaur dioramas youngsters or the young at heart can print out, color and tape together. Also included are thirteen archived newsletters; a selection of notations, print ads and set lists; more than sixty hand-crafted gig flyers; sheet music for four compositions; and in-depth tour itineraries (proving that universities paid [musicians](#) better than rock clubs). The compact disc package also has an 18-page booklet with photos and enlightening liner notes from band members and a former roadie.

But the real treat on the second disc is the music. It starts with the *Beat of the Mesozoic* EP (1986), which follows a slightly less radical approach than prior Birdsongs productions, but is nonetheless agitated and offbeat. Cut one, "Lost in the B-Zone," is an intricate indigestion of ascending electronic percussion and synth lines that veer through several trajectories at once. "Waterwheel" and Bach-like "Excavation No. 32" are initially formulated toward mainstream ears, but noise and rhythmic entanglements keep listeners off-balance. The prime pieces on this EP are "Scenes from a...," which layers taped voices, digital beats, synth, bells and surprisingly appeased piano; and the multi-effects title track extravaganza, a percussive-heavy outing which sounds like the main theme to a jungle film starring Zippy the Pinhead.

The crème de la crème for Birdsongs aficionados, however, is the previously unavailable 1987 live document that fills out the second disc, comprising a hometown Boston show with an appreciative audience. The eight-song concert contains then-new titles not yet released, Steve Adams on screeching sax, and ends with a turbulent rendition of "Pulse Piece." While the sound quality is uneven at times (audible buzz and crowd conversation is heard during quiet sections), the performances are priceless, balancing friction with refinement, exemplified by "Chariots of Fire" (*not* the movie theme) and elegiac "Slo-Boy."

Previously issued *Sonic Geology* had large portions of the studio music found on this 2-CD set. However, the single CD version of *Sonic Geology* excluded some items due to time constraints, so *Dawn of the Cycads* is the best place to find the complete Ace of Hearts Birdsongs material.

If a friend says "Hey, I want to hear something new," throw something old on instead and gauge the reaction from interest to disbelief. Few bands have successfully straddled modern classical music and rock as well as the Birdsongs of the Mesozoic have done.

#### **TrackList:**

CD 1

- 1 Sound Valentine
- 2 Transformation of Oz
- 3 Drift
- 4 The Orange Ocean
- 5 Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous
- 6 Shiny Golden Snakes

- 7 Ptocata
- 8 (Excerpts from) The Rite of Spring
- 9 International Tours
- 10 Terry Riley's House
- 11 Theme from Rocky and Bullwinkle
- 12 The Tyger
- 13 The Fundamental
- 14 Bridge Underwater
- 15 Chên/The Arousing
- 16 Final Motif
- 17 Pulse Piece
- 18 The Common Sparrow
- 19 POP Triassic

CD 2

- 1 Lost in the B-Zone
- 2 Waterwheel
- 3 Excavation No. 32
- 4 Scenes from a...
- 5 The Beat of the Mesozoic, part 1
- 6 Jay Reeg Intro
- 7 Carbon 14
- 8 Chariots of Fire
- 9 Lqabbliil Insanya
- 10 Modern Warfare
- 11 Slo-Boy
- 12 Laramide Revolution
- 13 Pulse Piece

-- Doug Simpson

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