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Pop/Rock/World CD Reviews

Phil Manzanera - Diamond Head - Expression Records

In a fair and just world, this 1975 release from Roxy Music guitarist extraordinaire Phil Manzanera should have elevated him to the highest level of recognition.

Published on April 04, 2011



**Phil Manzanera - Diamond Head - Expression Records
 EXPCD1R (2011 Collector's Edition reissue of 1975)
 57:37, ****½:**



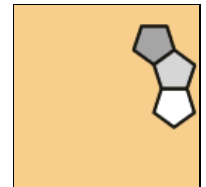
(Manzanera - guitars, triple misc; Brian Eno - vocals, guitar treatments, rhythm guitar, piano; John Wetton - bass, vocals; Paul Thompson - drums; Andy McKay, saxes; Eddie Jobson - strings, synthesizer, fender piano; Robert Wyatt - vocals, wyattisms; Members of Quiet Sun; other guests)

Oh my - in a fair and just world, this 1975 release from Roxy Music guitarist extraordinaire Phil Manzanera should have elevated him to the highest level of recognition. To a large extent, it did in England and Europe. But just as America was late to discover Roxy, it just let this masterpiece slip by almost unnoticed. So PM didn't get the stature deserved and instead merely led the pack of under-publicized throughout their careers British master guitarists like Mick Ronson (Bowie), Bill Nelson (Be Bop Deluxe) and Chris Spedding (ace session player).

Historically, this album was recorded following Roxy's "Country Life" - their fourth release and second following the departure of Brian Eno. Bryan Ferry had just fully taken over the band's sound and image - a situation that Eno felt too restrictive for his interests. But PM was getting more and more involved in the songwriting (a development which would truly reveal itself with Roxy's magnificent "Siren" release the following year). Manzanera's strongest band-member quality was subordinating himself to the structure of each song adding impeccable technique, texture, versatility and super crisp inventive soloing. His ability to add just what was needed by the hugely varying sonic landscapes of Roxy was the definition of perfection. Here he surrounds himself with Roxy cohorts and the cream of Brit musicians.

OK - to the music itself. It starts off with "Frontera", a composition to which is added Spanish gibberish vocals by Robert Wyatt. I like to think this a playful jibe at Bryan Ferry since the lyrics are foreign and have no particular meaning. It does, however, feature PM's astounding guitar atmospheric support throughout with a crunching solo. Take that, Bryan (kiddingly).

The title track instrumental follows. A titanic guitar exercise around a pretty melody. The sounds emanating through PM's amp often sound strangely foreign or otherworldly. As though they'd been fiddled with or strangled & choked at times. This introduces Brian Eno's concept of guitar treatments. It also shows up later on "East of Echo", where you have to listen really hard to determine just what is guitar and what is not. Aerspaced stuff outta somewhere...



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"Big Day" is next up featuring Eno on vocals. A playful catchy tune dedicated to Peru. Just a sublimely realized and played number.

The next two tracks are why I don't give this the full five-star rave. They are very fine performances, but not quite up to the level of the rest. Andy McKay adds searing saxes to the Brit-funk of "The Flex", which also features Eddie Jobson's well-played electric clavinet. "Same Time Next Week" brings back vocals shared by John Wetton and Doreen Chanter. Admittedly, it is a clever take on scheduled forbidden lovemaking and exceedingly well performed.

Next, things just explode with "Miss Shapiro". Eno again delivers the vocals based on his oh-so weird lyrics. Manzanera's guitar underpinnings are just massive, topped off by a completely superlative solo - one that deserves entrance into the axe hall of fame. This track more than anything demonstrates PM's majesty and talent for somehow coming up with the most sublimely correct performances available within the context of a tune. Just staggering!

"East of Echo" follows, with the aforementioned guitar treatments for this lengthy instrumental. It was actually recorded on the same days as the formal sessions by Manzanera's former band Quiet Sun. Their sound structure was not unlike "Diamond Head" itself - very adventurously exploring experimental sound structures with Eno joining in for his singular additions. This track throws everything but the kitchen sink into the mix and succeeds famously.

Next is a gorgeous change of pace with beautiful acoustic art delivered by PM on guitar and Andy McKay on oboe. Titled "Lagrima", it is a nice relaxation spot with perfect interaction.

The original issue of this supreme statement ended with "Alma" - a colossal, even more multi-tracked feature allowing Manzanera to pull out any remaining stops. It is magnificent - the type of artistry showcase very few could ever dream of delivering. A pronouncement of the state of progressive rock. Their restatement of purpose that has been pronounced throughout the course of this album. The combination of experimenting and the perfection of its accomplishment is monumentally concluded.

This re-issue includes two bonus tracks. "Carhumba" involving other musicians who collaborate nicely on a tune dedicated to PM's Spanish heritage. The second bonus is an earlier demo of "Corazon Y" from Quiet Sun, segued into "Alma". This 10:14 selection is nice to have as it reveals the germination of the finalized tracks. (Also, unlike the horrible decision by Roxy Music to select the vastly inferior version of "2HB" for their release - instead of the sublime one to be found on Ferry's "Let's Stick Together" - they obviously correctly realized that this number needed further fleshing out).

All in all, "Diamond Head" is a group realization produced by perhaps the most massively under-appreciated guitarist of his generation. Besides Roxy Music, he put his sonic stamp on acclaimed solo releases by John Cale (at his height), Bryan Ferry, Nico, Brian Eno's pop rock heyday in the mid 70s, Robert Wyatt (ex Soft Machine), John Wetton (ex King Crimson), the legendary 801 and associations with David Gilmour. He also produced Split Eno's "Mental Notes", in addition to releasing a handful of solo releases as late as last year. But this one remains his most fully realized effort. His taste in many ways is clearly shown by the names of those he asked to participate. And the remastering quality raises this "still sounds fresh 36 years later" album to the loftiest heights imaginable. One final shout-out to Paul Thompson (TGPT) for his masterful drumming. Plus one more shout-out or the fabulous expanded booklet. Do not miss this one again!

TrackList: Frontera, Diamond Head, Big Day, The Flex, Same Day Next Week, Miss Shapiro, East of Echo, Lagrima, Alma, Carhumba, Corazon Y Alma.

-- Birney K. Brown

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