

Rock Guitar Daily with Tony Conley

Thoughts, recitations and meditations on the world of rock and roll guitar

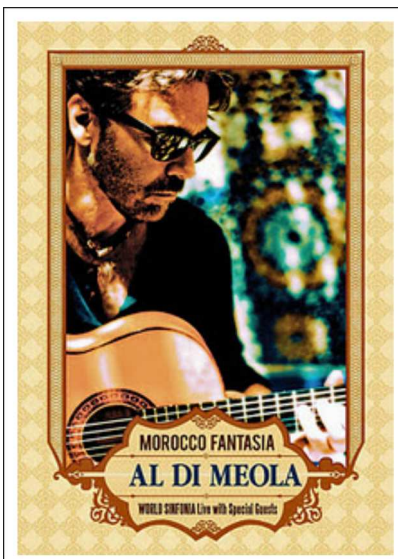
Thursday, December 29, 2011

Al Di Meola World Sinfonia - Morocco Fantasia DVD - Sublime Beauty

I couldn't ask for a better way to ring in 2012 than with a brilliant live performance DVD, beautifully shot in an exotic location, with two hours of brilliant guitar playing and musicianship. Al Di Meola's *World Sinfonia Morocco Fantasia* is stunning from beginning to end. Filmed by Italian filmmakers Francesco Cabras and Alberto Molinari (www.gangafilm.com) under the supervision of Claus Altwater, the film is as dazzling to watch as it is to hear, interspersing some incredible scenery in various settings throughout Rabat, Morocco. Still, the star of the show is Di Meola and his transcendent skills as a musician, band leader, and composer.

Altwater, president of the Songsurfer Corporation, emphasizes the importance of Al Di Meola as a composer of the highest order. "Most guitar and jazz enthusiasts recognize Al as one of the most influential guitarists this planet has ever produced, but his mastery of songwriting has often been overlooked."

This exceptional DVD should go a long way towards remedying this.



Al Di Meola took the world by surprise back in 1974 as a member of the jazz fusion supergroup Return To Forever. Armed with a Black Beauty Gibson Les Paul Custom, and a cranked Marshall amp, the 19 year old Berklee College of Music student set straight out of school and into perhaps the most powerful jazz rock band that ever graced a stage. Chick Corea's band had become louder, and more rock oriented as the keyboardist began

incorporating synthesizers into his bold compositions, and bassist Stanley Clarke began to incorporate fuzz tones, flangers, and other effects to form a voice that made him a star in his own right. Di Meola brought his dizzyingly fast and stunningly syncopated chops to the fore, and the band became a very rare beast - a jazz band that collected gold records and sold out theaters.

Eventually, having three composers in the same band created a dearth of opportunity for the trio, and Corea chose to change the lineup after their successful *Romantic Warrior* album. Nothing like going out on top, I suppose. The age of fusion gold came to an end.

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Tony Conley

Di Meola has certainly never chose to rest on his laurels, or even slow down. His first solo release, *Land of the Midnight Sun*, was a huge success, and was soon followed by *Elegant Gypsy*, the album that has perhaps best presented the skills of the young Di Meola, including such classics as the acoustic masterpiece *Mediterranean Sundance*, and *Race with Devil on Spanish Highway*. This album won Guitar Player Magazine's Guitar Album of the Year for 1977. This is the jazz guitar album most often found in the collection of serious rock guitarists.

Then in 1980, Di Meola teamed with flamenco legend Paco De Lucia, and jazz master John McLaughlin to tour and record together, culminating in the classic *Friday Night in San Francisco*, the platinum album that is still the gold standard for live acoustic guitar performances.



Years of high intensity, high volume stage work had damaged Di Meola's hearing, and in lieu of further damage, and with perhaps a view towards the long term goal of developing as a composer, the guitarist turned to the acoustic guitar as his main instrument of choice, and set off to conquer the world music scene.

Here we are in 2012, and indeed, Al Di Meola has succeeded beyond any reasonable measure. *Morocco Fantasia* is perhaps his finest documented performance. All the hallmarks of his legendary style remain intact, and incendiary as ever. More impressive though, may be his superior skills as a composer and band leader.

World Sinfonia is a project that the guitarist first unveiled to the world in 1990, and has continued until today. If you have missed out on this fantastic trip, it is time to rectify that.

Morocco Fantasia begins with some nice shots of Di Meola and band making their way through the Bazzar in Rabat, Morocco, beautifully shot throughout the week leading up to the band's performance at the Mawazine Musique Festival.



Misterio, the DVD's opening track, is from the 2000 release, *World Sinfonia III - The Grand Passion*. Immediately apparent are the musician's intense levels of concentration as they listen and respond to the conversation between Di Meola's tango dance-step syncopation and accordionist Fausto Beccalorri's romantic narration. They are joined by some sensuously arrpegiated chords by second guitarist Peo

Alfonsi that allows Di Meola to take a stunning flight of notes up the neck, and you experience the perfect marriage of gorgeous melodic fluidity and sheer shred. If you ever wondered why the guitarist avoided the world of hard rock, this may be a telling answer. He simply has more to say. Compositionally, every passage opens another avenue as the song opens up and the story unfolds. After the initial mystery has given way to mastery, and by the time Beccalorri starts singing, one gets the impression that this mission of mystique has turned into a joining; an understanding between lovers.

As the filmmakers take a scenic tour of the streets of Morocco that seems to fixate on closed doors and mystery, Di Meola kicks in the distortion that blends so beautifully the sound of his Conde Hermanos nylon string guitar and his Roland VG88's models of his



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classic fire breathing Les Paul/Marshall tones. It is apparent that Al suffers none for having the best of all possible worlds.

Poly-rhythmic masterpieces are the stock in trade of World Sinfonia, and *Siberiana* is a thrilling trip that began on a tour of Siberia, and ended on the streets of New York. Drummer Peter Kaszas leads the band using his drum sticks, his hands, cymbals, shakers, and an amazing sense of time. After Di Meola unleashes a fast and furious flurry of nylon notes, he turns and smiles broadly at the drummer. He is clearly enjoying



this as much as anyone, and it shows. This number pushes and pulls in every conceivable direction, but in a manner that reveals that the guitarist has achieved great mastery as a composer - it segues effortlessly and glides smoothly through every increasingly intense section. Over the length of the guitarist's career, so much attention has been paid to the mind boggling chops and technical skills that many have missed his escalation to the pinnacle of musical composition. Mind you, his technical skills show no loss of fire, and display the best sense of time to every make its way onto a guitar.

Di Meola's admiration of Brazilian tango master Astor Piazzolla is well known, and he tips his hat with one of Piazzolla's finest pieces, *Double Concerto*. Armed with his secret weapon - his rhythmically perfect foot tapping, Di Meola plays unaccompanied for several minutes. The guitarist is an uncompromising proponent of a constantly tapping foot, saying that without it, a guitarist's time will certainly falter, and if Al's efforts are any indication, look no further for proof.



This song is a beautiful journey, featuring incredibly emotional vocals courtesy of Beccalossi, and some of Di Meola's most lyrical playing. His lines always express an emotion and never sink to rote pattern play. The pair collaborate fabulously throughout the tune, with several improvised sections that show the two staring and listening intensely to one another. This will have you considering packing your bags, moving to Brazil, and taking up a life of dancing on the beach.

Written for his father, one child in a family of seventeen, *Michaelangelo's 7th Son* shows just how far Di Meola's compositional skills have come since I first saw him with Return To Forever on PBS's Sound Stage series almost 40 years ago.

This number sounds incredibly cinematic, a soundtrack looking for a film - if one can find a film as beautiful, or as romantic as we would like, or could imagine. The DVD's filmmakers, Francesco Cabras, and Alberto Molinari do a magnificent job of capturing the band, and also displaying a fine eye for the beauty and mystery of Rabat. This both sounds wonderful, and is a feast for the eyes - exotic and filled with gorgeous mystique. If this doesn't bring

out the romantic in you, check your pulse.

Gumbi Ortiz has been a Di Meola band mate for twenty two years, and percussionist leads the way, and picks up the pace on the next number, *Gumbiero*. The interplay between band members is especially amazing on this piece. It lives, it breathes, it leaps, and it dances. Granted, this band plays incredibly well on every cut, but this stands out - and when Di Meola and Ortiz duet on the solo section, it becomes impossible for me to write, I must stop and dance.



Bassist Victor Miranda moves things along with strength and subtly, providing a bottom end that provides the perfect blend of notes and rhythm. Sublimely beautiful.

Turquoise brings us back from the Mediterranean to a New York City vibe, a vibe that is reminiscent of perhaps a more sophisticated take on the lyrical loveliness that was Simon and Garfunkel back in the days of Scarborough Fare. The intro segues into an upbeat jaunt that sees Di Meola firing off salvos of notes that mix sheer fireworks with melodic passages that make you stop and listen again. The piece breaks down in the middle, and once again, it is fascinating to watch the band listen and look towards every note, every beat, and every slight change of tempo and rhythm. World Sinfonia, indeed.

Joined by a band of local Moroccan musicians, the untitled encore is hugely thrilling. Di Meola, Beccalossi, Ortiz, and Alfonsi are joined by oud master Said Chraïbi, violinist extraordinaire Abdellah Meri, and the percolating percussion of Tarik Ben Ali. The improvisational abilities are unbelievable as the musicians weave a tapestry that draws you in, again and again. This is world music at its very best. It is as memorable as a pop single, as technically challenging as one could imagine, and adventurous as the terrain outside the theater. This selection alone is well worth the price of the DVD.



Finally, Di Meola cracks out his signature multi-colored flame top Paul Reed Smith, plugs it into his Mesa Boogie amplifier, and the band rips through an instant education in heavy metal fusion, the classic *Egyptian Danza*. A minute and a half in, bassist Miranda takes over, and slows things down, as Di Meola plays some sitar-ish lines that get your hips

swaying, before upping the ante and unleashing a wonderful cacophany of rhythm and chops. What is amazing throughout the entirety of this disc is that it never gets boring, repetitive, and disinterest never surfaces. It is a tremendous testament to Di Meola's skill as a writer, his prodigious musical abilities, and his incredible band.

Morocco Fantasia shows Al Di Meola to be at the height of his skills as a composer, guitarist, and band leader. He has also never appeared to be happier onstage. He smiles throughout the performance and is obviously having the time of his life. This is a brilliant way to start off the new year, with a DVD that both highlights a tremendous career, and inspires new directions and possibilities.

This is one you will definitely want to own. It may be the guitarist's finest work since 1980's *Friday Night In San Francisco*. If this was the finest guitar recording of the year, I would not be disappointed, but it is only January 2nd. I think 2012 is going to be unbelievable.

Please don't skip the bonus features included on the DVD - they include band rehearsals, a romantic Di Meola roof solo, shots of the band at Bazzarr, and other cool extras. They are all fantastic, a relative rarity - Di Meola and the film's makers obviously went the extra miles to make this memorable, and they succeeded in a grand manner.

Thanks to Al Di Meola, Clint Walker at MVD, and Inakustik Music.

Morocco Fantasia is available via pre-order now on Amazon and will be released on January 24, 2012 on Inakustik Music and Video.

Posted by Tony Conley at 4:06 PM 

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