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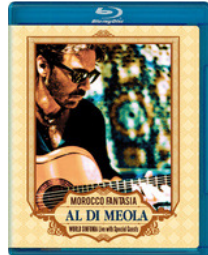
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Al Di Meola: Morocco Fantasia Blu-ray

in-akustik | 2009 | 136 min | Not rated | Jan 24, 2012



Large: Front

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Video
Video codec: MPEG-4 AVC
Video resolution: 1080i
Aspect ratio: 1.78:1
Original aspect ratio: 1.78:1

Audio
English: DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1
English: DTS-HD Master Audio 2.0

Subtitles
None

Discs
25GB Blu-ray Disc
Single disc (1 BD)

Playback
Region A (B, C untested)

Price
List price: \$24.95
Amazon: \$19.49 (Save 22%)
Third party: \$15.18 (Save 39%)
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Movie rating 7.8 / 10

Blu-ray review
Movie 4.0
Video 2.0
Audio 4.5
Extras 2.0
Overall 3.0

Movie appeal
Music 100%

0% popularity 4 collections 2 fans

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Al Di Meola: Morocco Fantasia Blu-ray Review
Sounds fantastic, looks hideous.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Kauffman, January 25, 2012

Al Di Meola is kind of scary. Not necessarily bad scary, mind you, but definitely intense scary. There is one moment early on in this Morocco Fantasia concert Blu-ray where Di Meola, whether intentionally or unintentionally, stares directly at one of the cameras while he's coaxing one his manically convoluted lines from his acoustic guitar, and his gaze might be something out of a low rent horror movie. Head down, slightly in the shadows, eyes turned up, he's like the Norman Bates of guitarists, ready to strike any unsuspecting person who might have the temerity to wander on stage at that given moment. Despite his long and storied career, which began with Chick Corea and Return to Forever shortly after Di Meola left Berklee, and then continued on with a series of groundbreaking albums as both a solo artist and is series of highly acclaimed collaborations with such luminaries as John McLaughlin, Paco de Lucia, and many others, Di Meola doesn't seem to have entered the mainstream consciousness in quite the same way as, say, Pat Metheny has. Di Meola might not quite have the populist touch that Metheny has, preferring a more arcane compositional style, but Di Meola has also shown himself willing to at least flirt with the Metheny style in such releases as Orange and Blue (a really gorgeous album, and one that comes highly recommended if you've never heard it, especially if you're a Metheny fan). Here, visiting Morocco for the third time, Di Meola hews a perhaps more obtuse path through polyrhythms and ethnic instruments, managing to bring a North African flair to the idiom of jazz fusion. Sticking mostly to an amplified acoustic guitar for the bulk of this concert, Di Meola wafts through a rather short playlist (at least in terms of the actual number of songs) which instead offers long, extended solos and some fascinating interplay with a number of unexpected instruments, including accordion and oud.

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Di Meola is an inquisitive player, one who consistently finds the nooks and crannies of his already complex compositions and arrangements, and that proclivity is certainly on display here. What's especially notable, though, is how he blends Middle Eastern and African modes into his solos, typically using unusual motifs like a flatted second going to a major third to give that very expressive regional sound. Di Meola's technique is simply staggering, as any fan of his will tell you, and that also is on full display throughout the concert. His ability to quickly navigate huge scalar passages is matched probably only by his frequent collaborator John McLaughlin, and Di Meola's acoustic playing may actually have a slight edge on McLaughlin's in terms of clarity and expressiveness.

Di Meola performs with his "world music" group (for want of a better term) World Sinfonia, which includes Fausto Beccalossi on accordion, Peo Alfonsi on second guitar, Gumbi Ortiz on percussion, Peter Kaszas on drums and Victor Miranda on bass. For the final two songs, Di Meola and the band are joined by some native Moroccans, including Said Chraïbi on oud, Abdellah Meri on violin and Tarik Ben Ali on percussion. The instrumentation here is really interesting and lends all of these pieces incredible color. I was especially struck by Beccalossi's incredible accordion player. If you think the accordion is only suitable for polka bands or old *Lawrence Welk Show* reruns, you're in for a major reappraisal of this much maligned instrument. (One of my favorite "instrument" jokes is, "What's the range of an accordion?" Answer: "Twenty to thirty feet if you have a good arm.")

Though several (if not most) of these tunes tend to be meandering, introspective pieces, they're made rather visceral by the propulsive rhythms brought to bear not just by Di Meola's always active guitar, but by the battery of fantastic percussion instruments utilized throughout the concert. Anyone who has been a fan of Di Meola from the earliest days of *Return to Forever* on (I was lucky enough to see Al in concert with Chick at one of his first performances back in the day), it should come as no surprise that the virtuosity on display here is simply awesome. Al's setlist includes:

- Misterio
- Siberiana
- Double Concerto
- Michaelangelo's 7th Child
- Gumbiero
- Torquoise
- Encore
- Egyptian Danza

Al Di Meola: Morocco Fantasia Blu-ray, Video Quality **818 81818**



What a difference a few hundred pixels make! *Al Di Meola Morocco Fantasia* is the first in-akustik release I can recall that's not at least in 1080i, and this AVC encoded 720p transfer (mostly in 1.78:1) doesn't even have the look of decent 720p and instead more resembles a pretty poor upconversion. As you will plainly see in many of the screenshots, midrange shots are just kind of like



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blobs of color more than anything else, and even close-ups are fuzzy and ragged looking. Colors are decent enough and a couple of times, usually on close-ups of Di Meola's guitar, things look moderately better, but this is a fairly shoddy looking Blu-ray by any standards. I have to wonder if perhaps the Moroccan location had something to do with equipment availability. It's especially sad because the concert also features some very colorful shots of Rabat and other Moroccan locations, and those would have benefitted from a better video presentation.

Al Di Meola: Morocco Fantasia Blu-ray, Audio Quality **B B B B B**



Luckily, both of the lossless audio options, DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 and DTS-HD Master Audio 2.0, are a good sight (so to speak) better than the image quality. Fidelity is excellent throughout the concert, and dynamic range is really amazing at times, as the tunes tend to vary from hushed moments to all out assaults as Di Meola strums madly (in almost a quasi-Flamenco style, as per his work with Paco de Lucia) and the battery of drums and percussion also chimes in. The 5.1 mix is nicely spacious, though it also is just a tad diffused when compared to the 2.0 option, so fans are encouraged to try both to find what suits them best. There's some really nice modulation here between frequencies, with low end percussion and bass never overpowering the crystalline tones of Di Meola in his upper register. If you shut your eyes to ignore the horrible video quality, there's a lot to enjoy on this release.

Al Di Meola: Morocco Fantasia Blu-ray, Special Features and Extras **B B B B B**



- **Rehearsals** (720p; 7:37) finds Di Meola offering advice to the native Moroccan musicians who join him in the concert.
- **Soundcheck** (720p; 5:25) has Di Meola and the band setting levels and the like. Notice his advice to violinist Abdellah Meri, and how "fast and loose" elements of this concert must have been put together, something quite remarkable considering the complexity of the music.
- **Bazar 1** (720p; 4:21) has Di Meola buying various items in a Moroccan open air market.
- **Bazar 2** (720p; 5:02) features Di Meola jamming with some street folks.
- **Roof Solo** (720p; 2:47) is a nice evocative piece, with lots of shots of Rabat (including some really cool pelicans), and Di Meola jamming on top of a cupola.
- **Mawazine Suite: Part 1 - 4** (720p; 18:14) is a deleted song of sorts. Interestingly, it's in 1:33:1, perhaps the reason for it not being included in the actual concert footage.
- **Morocco** (720p; 3:09) is another deleted song, again in 1.33:1.
- **Photo Gallery** (720p; 4:21) features portraits of Di Meola by Francesco Cabras.
- **Teaser** (720p; 3:14)

Al Di Meola: Morocco Fantasia Blu-ray, Overall Score and Recommendation **B B B B B**

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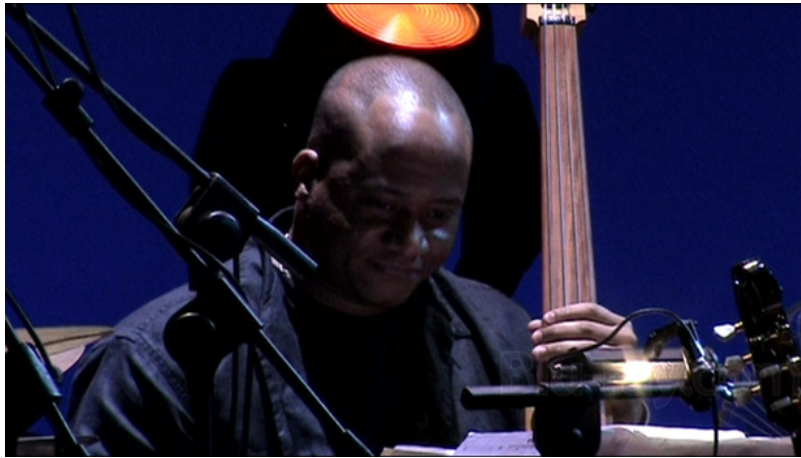
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Al Di Meola Morocco Fantasia leaves me in a bit of a quandary. If this had been an audio only Blu-ray release, it would have received my highest recommendation, for the music on display here is unique, colorful and really unusual. But, alas, this is *not* an audio only Blu-ray release, and there's the rub. What is to blame for this release's spectacularly bad image quality? Did they not have decent equipment to film the concert? Is this indeed upconverted, which it certainly looks like? If so, why stop at 720p? Of course, some would argue even upping that to the 1080 range might only make it look worse, considering the raggedness of the source imagery. And so we're left with this muddle: if you love Al's music, you'll probably be willing to overlook the stupendously bad video. And truth be told, the music is so expressive, that's not really that much of a trade off. On the other hand, if you expect your high definition *video* releases to actually sport high definition video (imagine!), *Al Di Meola Morocco Fantasia* is a shambles. I'm going to err on the side of charitableness with the understanding that I've made the drawbacks of the video presentation more than clear in this review. With that in mind, and focusing squarely on the music only, this release receives a somewhat halting **Recommended**.

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