

REVIEW**Music Review: Billy Cobham - *Flight Time***

October 13, 2006

Realist

Back when I was a professional musician, I was a Billy Cobham fan. I considered Cobham to be a "monster", someone who had enough chops in any two limbs to be able to simultaneously outplay any two of his contemporaries as you might care to name. But despite abilities far beyond those of mere mortals, he was secure enough in his exceptional abilities as a musician to ride behind someone else's time in the spotlight.

After playing six sets of Top 40 and pop dance tunes for inebriated dancing revelers, it was good to be able to put on Cobham's music. He was able to stretch out musically in ways we were denied due to the nature of our engagements. Listening to music that required some thought to follow, and which would require improvement in our technique to play ourselves, kept us from imploding due to disco overload.

Flight Time, a release of fusion jazz tracks recorded live during his 1980 European tour, is a fine showcase of Cobham's abilities as both a drummer and a band leader. For his recordings, leader Cobham always selected musicians whose musical abilities challenged his own as a drummer as the lineup for *Flight Time* demonstrates. Each of the tracks offers plenty of vintage Cobham to go along with their musical expertise.

Not to be missed movements include bassist Tim Landers be-bop flavored solo on the title track, keyboardist Don Grolnick's lush open grand piano voicing echoing McCoy Tyner at his most melodic on "6 Persimmons", and guitarist Barry Finnerty's traditional jazz guitar techniques displayed in an unconventional style, emulating a two-handed keyboard performance without accompaniment as the introduction to "Princess".

But the center of the attention is always Cobham, setting the pace, driving the dynamics, and establishing the mood. It doesn't matter if it's traditional-style brushed snare as on "6 Persimmons", a ethereal touch as on "Princess", or a more dynamic syncopation as on "The Whisperer", where the band at one point plays the accompaniment to Cobham's out-front solo.

But *Flight Time* isn't just a recital of instrumental show-off technique. The compositions themselves rate attention, especially "Antares", a roaring whitewater river of melody flowing across unorthodox rocky cadences before cascading into the delta of Finnerty's hyper-drive ocean of jazzed-up rock licks, one of Cobham's favorite environments to

display how he can push a soloist to greater heights with his powerful drumming without dominating the journey. My personal favorite track of the CD.

But no Cobham compilation is complete without an exhausting display of high-energy. "JackHammer", a Finnerty composition, allows Cobham to demonstrate his almost-mechanical pulse drumming, taking such chances with his cadences one is sure he will miss the downbeat, and yet he always lands on his musical feet without missing a note, bassist Landers hard on his heels.

Finnerty himself soars higher on "JackHammer" than at any other time on this CD, as if his thoroughbred Les Paul guitar knows that the band is headed toward the barn and a full feed bag, racing ahead to the finish line completely unrestrained with the rest of the band in tow. It leaves me breathless every time I hear it, and I want to cheer along with the audience as it ends.

For me, *Flight Time* is a return to my forever, a time when even creative excess had potential for greatness as one soared with eagles after a night of mingling with dancing turkeys.

Highly recommended.

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