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Azteca

From The Ruins

Review by Bill Knispel

Back in the early 1970's brothers Pete and Coke Escovedo finished stints with Carlos Santana's band. Taking what they picked up working with Santana, they created a group that they called "Azteca," an attempt to fuse more of Latin music with the energy of rock and roll in a larger band context. On stage, anywhere from 15 to 25 people would create walls of horn and percussion laden music, with lyrics pleading for peace in a time of war. They'd release two albums on Columbia Records before disbanding, with members (who included Lenny White, Neal Schon, Paul Jackson, and Sheila Escovedo, later to be known to the world at large as Sheila E.) moving on to a variety of other projects.

The music of Azteca apparently was never far from Pete Escovedo's mind, and in a turbulent time where a message of peace and harmony is needed as much as it was over 30 years ago, he felt it was time to bring together as many members of Azteca as possible for a reunion show in Los Angeles. Serving as much as a celebration of the band's music as a remembrance of Coke's musical contributions (Coke Escovedo passed away in 1986), *From the Ruins* is a document of one special, incredibly hot musical night at the Key Club on Sunset Strip in September of 2007.

Track by Track Review

Mamita Linda

The concert and album open with a tremendous fanfare of horns and drums, slipping into an infectious Latin groove. I dare you to not get up and dance to this. For people who miss the old 1970's Carlos Santana, songs like this will get the blood pumping as they move and groove. I can't pick out a single highlight here...trumpet solos, flute solos, funky guitar, and ever present deep, soulful grooves...this song has it all.

Someday We'll Get By

This track reminds me of early Chicago for some reason. The horn arrangements just feel very much like Pankow/Loughlane/Parazaider, while the vocals have a very definitive Robert Lamm sound. But the shuffling groove is entirely Latin. A lovely guitar solo from Bill Courtial really sets this song apart. Lenny White's drumming is rock solid, yet it flows and grooves without any apparent effort. This is just a bright, happy mid-tempo track that can't help but bring a smile to the listener's face.

Find Love Today

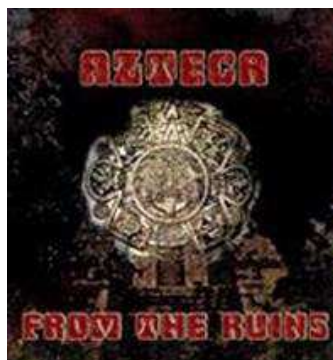
Based on the title one might not be blamed for thinking this would be a slow ballad. Instead the track opens with a burst of percussion and flute, with slightly chant-like vocals acting almost as an instrument. It slows down drastically after this opening salvo, with Wendy Haas offering up some fantastically soulful vocals.

Ain't Got No Special Woman

A blues title without really sounding totally bluesy, "Ain't Got No Special Woman" offers up tasty, jaunty grooves, sprightly vocals and funky guitar. Murray Low's organ solo, with choppy guitar cutting things up, is a particular highlight, sounding like it was lifted wholesale from 1973.

Azteca

A title track? A statement of purpose? It's hard to say. Filled with tasty organ, loads of percussion, and plenty of room for every instrumental section to get a moment to shine, this composition shows that Azteca has been far too long ignored as one of the foundation blocks of Latin Rock.



[Return](#)



Pete Introduces the Band

This track pretty much does what it says in the title, as founder member Pete Escovedo introduces the dozen people making up the 2007 iteration of Azteca. Expect a little humour as well, as Pete introduces himself as Desi Arnaz Sr., "Ricky Ricardo."

New Day is on the Rise

I love the syncopation on this track, as the band shifts the groove with every measure. The percussion accents are excellent, and layers of vocals just add more nuances and subtlety here. This is a song that just goes from strength to strength without ever letting up.

Non Pacem

This bit arises out of "New Day is on the Rise," and shares much of the same groove. The lyrics seem a bit more political in tone, and at times I pick up a bit of a Zappa vibe in how the song builds. Make no mistake, however; this is not an amalgamation of influences from the era as such. The song is wholly and fully Azteca, Latin Rock at its finest, and points of comparison are being used (as they nearly always are at MSJ) only to try and describe elements, not inferring that they were copied.

Pete Talks To Crowd

Pete Escovedo takes some time out to bring the audience up to date, explaining that the music of Azteca was intended to protest the Vietnam War (current and active in 1972/1973), and how similar things are happening today. He explains that "Non Pacem," the previous track, was all about peace and love, and that the next track is about the same thing.

Peace Everybody

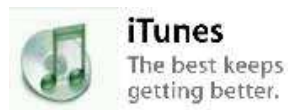
The title says it all. Lenny White brushes out a rhythm on hi-hat, Paul Jackson plays a quick musical figure on bass, the horns kick in, and suddenly we are grooving along. The lyrics are pretty clear-cut in their message; we don't need fighting, dying or war, it's peace we're living for.

Whatcha Gonna Do

The grooves, infectious hooks and melodies just keep coming, even on the album's final track. This nearly 12-minute jam asks the audience how they're going to make changes to make the world a better place, and it's filled with everything the listener has hopefully come to expect on this release. Bill Courtial wails on a guitar solo that is among the most intense individual musical performances on an album filled with them. Percussion lovers will go ga-ga over the extended group "solo" with what sounds like dozens of hands coaxing out an incredibly melodious cacophony of timbales, congas, and more. All in all this is a great way to close out the show and release.



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