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Oblivion Sun - Oblivion Sun



Country of Origin:	USA
Format:	CD
Record Label:	Prophase Music
Catalogue #:	B000TV4R18
Year of Release:	2007
Time:	44:35
Info:	Oblivion Sun
Samples:	Click here

Tracklist: *Fanfare (4:41), The Ride (5:07), Noodlepoint (3:51), Catwalk (7:40), No Surprises (3:36), Re:Bootsy (3:28), Chapter 7.1 (3:35), Tales Of Young Whales (5:53), Golden Feast (6:45)*

Oblivion Sun is a new band formed by Stanley Whitaker (guitars and vocals) and Frank Wyatt (keyboards and sax), the founding members of Happy the Man (HtM), who after 25 years of silence released *The Muse Awakens* in 2004. Whitaker and Wyatt were still full of inspiration after the release of that album and they had more ideas for new songs. However it proved to be very difficult to get all the HtM members together because of personal schedules and proximity. So they decided to record them themselves. The project was called 'Pedal Giant Animals'. They were accompanied on this project that was released early this year by guest musicians Chris Mack and Pete Princiotto. Pedal Giant Animal' proved to be the birth of 'Oblivion Sun'. Next to Stanley Whitaker and Frank Wyatt the band members are Chris Mack (drums; also in *Iluvatar* and *Puppet Show*), Dave DeMarco (bass) and Bill Plummer (keyboards, engineering and production; HtM sound man).

What sort of music can you expect from a band that consists of two of the main songwriters of HtM (together with Kit Watkins of course)? As Frank Wyatt said in an interview at the end of 2005; *"it's a bit like HtM, but the songs are more loose and there is room for improv"*. There is no denying that Oblivion Sun sounds a lot like HtM. There are some differences as well. Jazzy progrock is the main ingredient on the album but the songs are a little more jazz rock orientated than HtM. The songs are shorter with less room for extended excursions. And with Dave DeMarco, Bill Plummer and Chris Mack, Wyatt and Whitaker took some very talented musicians on board.

Bill Plummer, as the engineering and production man, did a great job (as I had to do this review without a CD booklet I don't know which keyboard parts were played by him). He gave the songs a very dynamic sound and that's just what they need. It directly becomes apparent on the very strong opening song of the album *Fanfare*. It's a very exciting jazz rock song that alternates between a very up tempo part with lots of moog fills and a quieter and moving part with Fender Rhodes and a beautiful guitar part. Bass player DeMarco has a short solo spot before a beautiful Moog solo takes over. Next up is the more straightforward rock song *The Ride* which is dominated by heavy riffing from Mr Whitaker and the saxophone of Mr Wyatt. It has a very strong chorus as well. It's the most commercial song of the album. It's also the first of two songs that feature the vocals of Stan Whitaker. Now, I always found that the vocals on HtM albums sounded a bit shaky as if they were hesitant to include them on the albums but on this album Whitaker really sounds self assured, especially on this song.

Next up is one of best songs of the album. *Noodlepoint* is a very complicated song but they make it sound so easy. That is mainly down to the rhythm section. They give the song a very nice flow and make all the different up tempo and fast sections sound very natural and easy. They make the song a perfect environment for Wyatt's sax and keys work and Whitaker's guitar. Especially the part with the **King Crimsonesque/VdGG** sax solo is great with some brilliant percussion work by Mack. But also DeMarco shows some excellent bass work throughout the song. And all of that in less than four minutes. Wow! *Catwalk* is the last 'vocal' song of the album. A song about an imaginary journey of a man. He meets the Cheshire cat (the imaginary, highly philosophical cat of Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland'?) that wants to walk with him ('*excuse me he said. Can I walk in your head?*'). The man notices that the cat feels a bit low and decides to cheer him up by writing a song together. It's the longest song on the album and again features some strong, but short and to-the-point solos. It's one of the quieter songs on the album.

There's a really beautiful instrumental passage near the end of the song that has a moving melody. I wonder if that is the song they wrote together because after that part the cat feels much better and leaves ('*excuse me he said, for using your head*'). The three songs that follow show us the versatility of this band and their efficiency. The rocky *No Surprises*, the funky *Re:Bootsy* and the progressive rock of *Chapter 7.1* (an alternative version of *Chapter Seven* from the *Pedal Giant Animals* album) are all around three and a half minutes and show what this band is capable of. Especially *Chapter 7.1* has a lot to offer in that short time. Moog solos, Hammond chords, exciting guitar playing and some great breaks. *Tales Of young Whales* seems to be a very nice and quiet song until Stan Whitaker gives the song an enormous kick in the butt with a truly amazing guitar solo! Closing track *Golden Feast* is one of my personal favourites of the album because it reminds me of *At The Edge Of This Thought* and *While Chrome Yellow Shine* off the *Better Late* third HtM album. It's not that the song is an exact copy but the it's more the feel and the atmosphere of the song with its prominent Fender Rhodes and its typical Wyatt chord progressions. It's laid back at the start but slowly builds up. The build up is introduced by bass player DeMarco and then Wyatt kicks in with a Fender Rhodes solo followed by a beautiful Moog solo. Whitaker closes things with a short but heavy guitar solo before ending the album with an up tempo version of the main theme. It's a brilliant song.

This album was a great surprise. Especially the fun and pleasure these guys must have had during the recording process really comes across. Also, Oblivion Sun is more than HtM minus Rick Kennel (the other original HtM member who's still part of the band). DeMarco, Mack and Plummer also shine on the album and deliver some great performances. If you are a HtM fan or simply like jazz rock orientated progressive rock you will really enjoy this album. Highly recommended!

Conclusion: 9 out of 10

LEO KOPERDRAAT

Sunya Beat - Comin' Soon



Country of Origin:	Germany
Format:	CD
Record Label:	Phonokultur
Catalogue #:	v-hb-003
Year of Release:	2006
Time:	76:41
Info:	Sunya Beat
Samples:	Click here

Tracklist: *Am Anfang* (4:08), *Bond's Off* (6:21), *Lys Trois* (9:41), *Sierra Nostra* (10:36), *Landmarke 3* (14:57), *Skies Unlimited* (9:44), *Delhi Slide* (12:30), *Gamma Weg* (8:41)

"Guitar solo, do you take electronica as your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, through good times and bad times, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?" Guitar solo: "I do." "Electronica, do you take guitar solo as your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, through good times and bad times, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?" Electronica: "I do". This marriage of styles may not bring tears to your eyes, but it will bring some sonic pleasure to your ears from the first to the seventy-sixth minute of **Sunya Beat's** 2006 live compilation, *Comin' Soon*.

Sunya Beat has three studio releases under their belt, and this latest release compiles live tracks harvested from various festivals in Poland and Germany. The band is comprised of Axel Manrico Heilhecker on guitar and loops, Harald Grosskopf on "trashdrum" (whatever this means, programming maybe?) and drum kit, and German rave luminary Steve Baltes on keys, sequence mix, and loops.

Sunya Beat plays long, electronica flavoured improv-based original jam pieces generously seasoned with some excellent guitar soloing from Heilhecker, who often sounds like **David Gilmour**. The utilization of electronica in an improv-based format is reminiscent of what **King Crimson** was doing when they "fractalized" into the four different *Projeckts* ten years ago (with the exception of *Projeckt One*, which had Bill Bruford on drums and was more acoustic). So what do you call Sunya Beat as a genre? Techno-jam? Improvitronica?

You may not know what to call it. You may not like guitar solos, and you may not like electronica, but marry the two together and, bam, you may just like it. This marriage is evident on *Lys Trois*, which starts off as a slow guitar grooved flavoured with ocean sound effects that could have been fired up by **Pete Sinfield** on the VCS3 during Crimson's Islands tour. After a brief trip-hop excursion, the drumming picks up with intensity from Grosskopf. The mix of electronic and heavy drums is similar to what is found on **The Orb's** 1995 release, *Orbus Terrarum*.

The heavy drumming is also found on *Sierra Nostra*, which showcases some hard guitar, crazy soloing, and an industrial groove.

The band "breaks it down" on the up-tempo, jungle-flavoured *Delhi Slide* for, ladies and gentlemen, what could be the world's first sequenced live drum loop solo from Baltes. Baltes creates a variety of sequenced drum loops and programming on these live tracks without sounding laborious.

The above mentioned tracks are a good representation of the CD as a whole. *Comin' Soon* offers a lot of variety and little repetition between the clear-quality live tunes. Although a compilation live CD, it nonetheless serves as a cohesive body of work and these talented guys are clearly at the top of their game. It's an addictive CD I know I will be listening to again and again. The only area of improvement I see is for the band to release a live DVD. This I would love to adorn my DVD player with.

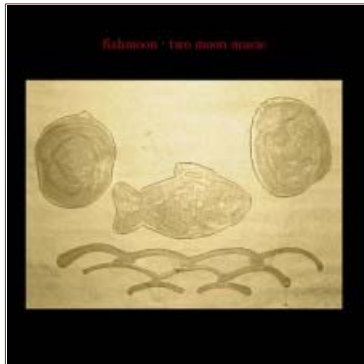
The CD packaging is minimal, in gatefold style with no booklet and the artist, title, and catalogue number printed upside down on the CD case's spine. The cover depicts a pastoral,

outdoors countryside scene. Very pretty until you see the fire in the hills in the background. Is the title *Comin' Soon* a reference to apocalypse? Until it gets here, we have Sunya Beat to enjoy.

Conclusion: 8 out of 10

JIM CORCORAN

Fishmoon - Two Moon Music



Country of Origin:	Germany
Format:	CD
Record Label:	Phonokultur
Catalogue #:	v-hb-008
Year of Release:	2006
Time:	65:16
Info:	Fishmoon
Samples:	Click here

Tracklist: *Twomoon* (9:18), *Western Electric Suite* (9:28), *Lys Primeur* (12:52), *Als Der König Die Schönheit Vergaß* (3:07), *Sniff* (10:40), *Sternraucher* (11:42), *Wo-man* (7:54)

A man with a guitar walks the Sahara, or maybe the Martian, deserts. His guitar wails plaintively, the desertscape, unable to resist, creating a vibrating and rumbling natural drum pattern that shakes the ground for miles. Well, maybe that was just a dream **Fishmoon** guitarist Axel Manrico Heilhecker had in the middle of the night, but as a journey it is evoked on the 2006 sophomore **Fishmoon** release *Two Moon Music*.

Fishmoon got its start when noted German musician and producer Heilhecker released the simply titled *Fishmoon - Music by Axel Manrico Heilhecker*, a compilation of reworked material from some of his production sessions in the late nineties, described on the Fishmoon website as "collected relics of his guitar-laboratories". In addition to Heilhecker, Fishmoon is made up of Sunya Beat collaborators Harald Grosskopf on "trashdrums" on two of the CD's seven tracks and Steve Baltes on programming on two tracks, Shawn Berid on bass (two tracks), the Tirana Stringensemble on, you guessed it, strings (three tracks), Orin Elyan and Latha Vegantha on drums (a track each), H.P. Salentin on trumpet (one track), and Nippy Noya on sheng and percussion (one track).

Fishmoon plays longform, experimental rock at times in the vein of seventies Krautrock. The Kraut droning influence is evident on *Twomoon*, which features a tribal jungle beat and some lively string accents from the Tirana Stringensemble. At many times on this CD the droning Kraut sound is similar to the sound of Russian neo-Kraut band **Vespero**.

The seventies feel is also apparent on *Sternraucher*, which has a **Tangerine Dreamy** ambient intro, and features synths, electric piano and organ melodies which could have come right from the fingertips of Pink Floyd keyboardist **Rick Wright**.

Another interesting song is the self-descriptive *Western Electric Suite*, with Berid's liquid bass holding down the conventional rock sound and the later western, country oriented guitars. Vegantha's drumming keeps the track strong, yet at the same time the track is loose, the improvisational nature sounding like teenagers jamming in a garage back in the day. Old school jazz gets in on the picture on *Sniff*, with English spoken word, jazzy trumpet from Salentin, melodic guitar from the talented Heilhecker and some groovy programming from Baltes taking you back to a coffee house in Greenwich Village in the sixties.

While certainly Heilhecker is an accomplished musician and producer I did not like this

project as much as his other project Sunya Beat, which has more of an electronica groove to it.

The CD packaging is simple, gatefold with no booklet and a stark picture of what appears to be two moons and, you guessed it again, a fish. As is in the case with the Sunya Beat CD *Comin' Soon*, the artist, title, and catalogue number are printed upside down on the CD case's spine. I could not tell by looking at the CD case if it was a retail or promotional version. I only mention this minor flaw for the purists and critics out there. For me, it is all about the music, not the image or packaging.

The CD's crystal clear tracks are well produced and composed, but there is always room for improvement. With future releases, Fishmoon could perhaps feature the strings more prominently and cycle the tracks together in the form of a concept album. That is just a couple of ideas that come to mind. In the meantime, enjoy.

Conclusion: 7 out of 10

JIM CORCORAN

Chest Rockwell - Chest Rockwell Vs The World



Country of Origin:	USA
Format:	CD
Record Label:	Independent
Catalogue #:	-
Year of Release:	2007
Time:	41:59
Info:	Chest Rockwell
Samples:	Click here

Tracklist: *What Atrocities Are These (1:23)*, *La Fin Absolute Du Monde (8:18)*, *Inconsistencies In Inanimate Objects (4:44)*, *Warm Towels For E (3:19)*, *On The Edge Of Intensity (7:13)*, *Mayhems Leap Of Faith (4:05)*, *Leeloo Dallas (4:19)*, *Multi-Pass (8:36)*

I cannot help it - I really have to start in this way: this cover out-performs all candidates I had in mind for worst cover of the year. The rest of the artwork is not inviting either, but definitely not as bad (how could it be after all?) and invokes some Ozric Tentacles-like graffiti. But the music in here doesn't have anything to do with the psych gurus. Also, **Chest Rockwell** is not the man behind the band: it's the name the band chose to represent them. Chest Rockwell is Josh Hines on vocals and guitar, Nick Rouse on drums, Nick Stewart on bass and keys and Seth Wilson on guitars. They hail from Kentucky and this is their second independent release.

It's one of the few bands I've seen out there selling themselves as progressive, without giving away any influences. They claim they only sound like themselves, which is actually quite true, since I found it particularly tough to find any pointers. Clearly the band combines several musical styles, mainly indie and acoustic rock, with a lot of progressive patterns leaving their stigma here and there. The main and distinctive characteristic is that the refrain-based approach to songwriting is cleverly and efficiently avoided. Tracks consist of nicely connected bits and pieces, as surprise is always lurking around the corner. Luckily they manage to obtain good results in following such a line: usually such an approach leads to sad results. Their most impressive achievement actually is that the new tune that will pop up at a given moment is driving the song to a whole new style, without being disconnected from the previous ideas. I'll dare to give as pointers **Porcupine Tree's** *Stupid Dream/Lightbulb Sun* era or even a bit of **Anathema** (removing most of the melancholic veneer and keeping the guitar style).

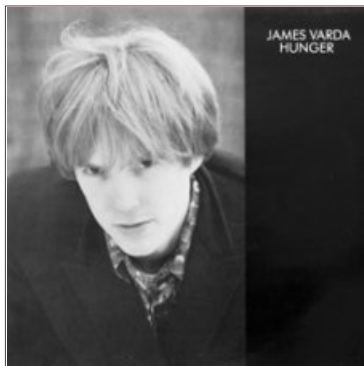
The album starts in a terrific way. The amount of ideas in the second and third track is quite breathtaking: built in an indie-rock way and yet demanding your whole lot of attention! Hippy **Floyd** flavoured acoustic instrumental *Warm Towels For E* will give way to *On The Edge Of Intensity*, the album highlight, due to the incredibly memorable vocal lines and melodies. This track could have been a masterpiece if the production here was better: the sound of the guitars could have been neater. The next track suffers from the same problem, only enhanced by the drum sound which is a bit "can-like". Some first clues that things start to get harder come with *Leloo Dallas* and we see the whole picture with *Multi-Pass*, which kicks off in a purely post-rock way but unfortunately finishes in a quite harsh way (noise + shouting) that doesn't fit much to the rest of the product. A pity, because the album left me with mixed feelings.

The production and sound is a bit of a problem, because it leaves the listener with the "demo-feeling" - not always, but often enough. With a better production, a more careful and attentive approach to the vocals which are a bit careless at times, these guys can produce something really really big. Their creativity and ability to transform swarming ideas into concrete and solid pieces of music is impressive. Bear this name in mind! Spring 2008 will see the release of their next effort. Who knows? Meanwhile, if you are into experimental music scoring high on creativity you definitely should check this out!

Conclusion: 7.5 out of 10

CHRISTOS AMPATZIS

James Varda - Hunger



Country of Origin:	UK
Format:	CD
Record Label:	Small Things
Catalogue #:	SMALLTR0701
Year of Release:	1988/2007
Time:	40:24
Info:	James Varda
Samples:	Click here

Tracklist: *Just A Beginning* (4:02), *From The Bellevue Hotel* (5:10), *Sunday Before The War* (4:37), *I Can't Stand It* (3:00), *Strange Weather* (4:32), *This Train Is Lost* (4:01), *Crawl In The Pen* (4:05), *Trust The Rain* (3:36), *In My House* (3:40), *Black On Black* (3:37)

Cast your mind back twenty years, if your age allows you to do so! I was living in the midlands of England, earning my first proper salary after years of gaining degrees and fraternal scorn for 'living off the state' and thoroughly enjoying the vibrant local music scene. Every year one could guarantee a tour by such great acts as John Martyn and Fairport Convention. Heck even Loudon Wainwright III and Ted Hawkins made it over to these shores once in a while. But the most hotly anticipated on the circuit was Roy Harper. Sometimes alone, sometimes with another acoustic guitarist, but always engaging, one man and an acoustic guitar putting on a complete show. Complete in those days meant a support act, and for a brief period in 1988 that act was one **James Varda**. An aggressive and acerbic songwriter, an energetic performer with songs to match. Hard to define, progressive folk comes close, but then again is still so far away. An album, *Hunger*, recorded at Harper's home studio, was released on the independent Murmur label to great critical acclaim and then... Nothing.

Skip forward 15 years and I was transferring some vinyl albums to CD, stuff that was unlikely to ever be released on digital format, forgotten albums by forgotten bands and I

came to '*Hunger*'. Piqued by curiosity as to what had happened to such a promising artist I attempted another web search, such as I had done several times in the past with no tangible results. Lo and behold, out of nowhere there had appeared a James Varda website set up by the man himself with a new album to boot (2004's *In The Valley*). Slip forward another few years to the present day and rather unexpectedly a brand new, freshly remastered, digitalised version of *Hunger* comes through the letter box, all hail!

Even after nearly twenty years, the album sounds deliciously fresh, thanks in no small part to the great production by none other than John Leckie. As Varda had principally only played solo with an acoustic guitar and harmonica as musical accompaniment to his vocals, there were no arrangements for a band and no time for rehearsals either so everything was done spontaneously in the studio, another factor why the album stands up today and does not sound at all dated. As mentioned above, the music is hard to really define; original reviews from 1988 evoked comparisons with **Labi Siffre**, **The Jesus And Mary Chain**, **Bob Dylan** and **Joy Division**. Others claimed Varda "evokes memories of the creative majesty of **Roy Harper**" or could be considered an "in-tune **Billy Bragg**". Varda is all this and a lot more. The melodic melancholy of *Sunday Before The War*, the intensive fury of *I Can't Stand It* and the poetic madness of "If all the beauty of the world, was just a page in history, and all the women came and prayed, at the altar of mystery. *Strange Weather*". This latter song features Nick Harper on lead guitar and I would be bold enough to suggest that Harper Junior's exposure to Varda had an influence on the way that he attacks his acoustic guitar. Indeed, songs like *This Train Is Lost* would slot easily into a Nick Harper solo performance.

Crawl In The Pen is Dylanish in its lyrical delivery and although intense and rather uncompromising, still maintains an oblique optimism. Much could be said about the album as a whole, even the bleakest lyrical song, *In My House*, is countered with an upbeat arrangement complete with jaunty harmonica line. Okay, so not a typical progressive rock album by any definition, but in the words of Lynne Robinson of New York's X-Poseur magazine "This is a cool record". Recommended to anyone who admires great songwriting.

Conclusion: Not Rated

MARK HUGHES

SEND FEEDBACK

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