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THE MUSIC NEVER STOPS.....THANK GOD!!!

by Mark S. Tucker

PEARLY CLOUDS – S/T (Trapeze Music)

No one very often can accuse Gary Lucas of playing things safe. I mean, when you were tight with one of rock's archetypal madmen, Capt. Beefheart, you're not exactly slated to play third oboe in the Los Angeles Philharmonic, are you?...though, well, maybe so, as Lucas wielded an electric lead axe in a performance of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, after which Lennie himself congratulated the gent for "really wailing!". Quite a contrast: from genius lunatic Don van Vliet, a psycho-spiritual fascist, to one of the 20th century's most prominent classical music conductor-composers...and then, of course, there's the panoply of highly impressive other individuals and groups he's worked under, over, beside, and within, catching just about every configuration possible to a musician. And be warned: if you travel to his website, pack a lunch; his bio is actually a novelette. Fascinating as hell, but, as I said, bring snacks, drinks, maybe a lobster dinner: you're going to be there a while.

This time out, though, after many ventures into a constantly shifting landscape, Lucas dovetailed a trio delivering chamber music of a most unusual stripe: trad Hungarian tunes dispatched to the hinterlands, sometimes peripherally or fully psychedelized, other times wending transdimensional paths to what we might call a brand of Harold Budd's understated rhapsodics, and in the evening setting up for the wolves and hills folk to howl at, along with, and between. Singer Eniko Szabo, encanting in her home tongue, is highly mindful of Les Voix Bulgares, Shelleyan Orphan, the Cocteau Twins, and those rare gatherings of too few others dedicated to keeping the sort of melodies alive that prodded Bartok to take quill in hand, inditing that which would travel well beyond his lifetime, to the ears of Jan Garbarek, Chick Corea, and myriad creatives in non-classical halls.

Lucas, interestingly, is here frequently satisfied to comp chords and then step out *a la* John Fahey or Peter Lang in the sanctified old Takoma wont, underscoring Szabo's lines and passions, keeping things pastoral in fundament, rustic, even-keeled (except when he goes a bit crazy, dragging in Beefhearty stuff, distortion, phased wanderings, and so on), but I have to say the heart of the ensemble for me is sax player Toni Deszo, who invokes some of the most gloriously tart lines, plangent notes, and gloomily luminous atmospheric. As the disc progressed, more than once I was sitting amidst Roger Eno, the aforementioned St. Garbarek, and, in a few places, a Terje Rypdal who decided to toss his guitar in the river, take up the horn he once founded upon (a trumpet in his case, but what the hell, close enough), and coax plutonic gulfs down to Earth once more, this time via acoustics and sparsely applied, almost eerie, gestures. "Dream Has Fallen", if you're feeling you've not been sufficiently unhinged lately, is the most sidereal occupation thuswise.

Deszo also brings back from memory a number of ECM's most melancholy reedsmeisters of the 70s in his spare but extremely well chosen chops, literally in every note, mood uppermost in consideration, more than a few times helping Lucas burrow beneath the earth, soar into the clouds, flap alongside ravens on the wing, cry with the rain. And the ancient poetics here will not, trust me, bear comparison to the Bangles, B52s, or any of the sweetness-and-light cotillion...what Barbara Ehrenreich might've called the 'brightsiders' of dip-pop muzak. Szabo is much too urgent and often artfully crestfallen, sometimes wrenching, so, nope, no Suzee Smiles and The Lollipop Squad here. Instead, the fare of Lucas & Co., lyrically and otherwise, is metaphorically and literally on the other side of the globe. I know there are many - classicalists, neoclassicalists, folkies, proggedz - who will readily absorb this through epidermis and marrow, a gloriously dreary Ophelian potion of dolor and melancholy, dazed, soporific, and deliciously enervated, falling back in Kafkan delirium just before asking for more, much more, thirsting ever anew for the prickly balm of the rose's thorns.