

TRADEMARK OF QUALITY

THE REV. KEITH A. GORDON STUMBLES MINDLESSLY THROUGH THE SORDID FLOTSAM AND JETSAM OF ALTERNATIVE CULTURE TO FIND SUBJECTS TO WRITE ABOUT THAT POSSESS THE ELUSIVE "TRADEMARK OF QUALITY." MP3 FILES ARE POSTED HERE STRICTLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF MUSIC CRITICISM AND THEREFORE FALL UNDER THE "FAIR USE" GUIDELINES OF U.S. COPYRIGHT LAW.

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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 26, 2007

Refugee: Lost Band Of The '70s

Although their groundbreaking work with proto-prog band the Nice circa 1968-70 was often overshadowed by star-in-the-making Keith Emerson, bassist Lee Jackson and drummer Brian Davison were well-regarded instrumental virtuosos in their own right. The Nice were arguably the first true progressive rock band, the trio blending psychedelic rock and pop with elements of classical, soul and jazz music – the band's freewheeling jams were typically dominated by cascades of Emerson's staccato keyboard fretwork. The bottom end, however, was held down by Jackson and Davison, superb musicians with an uncanny chemistry and the ability to weave enchanting rhythms behind Emerson's pyrotechnics.

In spite of their notoriety, the Nice never sold many records during its glorious heyday, with the band releasing only four critically acclaimed albums (three as a trio) during its brief lifespan. However, the ground that was broken by the Nice's hybrid sound threw the doors open to all sorts of musical possibilities, from jazz-rock fusion to prog-rock, for which the band virtually created a blueprint for bands like Yes and King Crimson to follow. However, Emerson became disenchanted with the band (particularly Lee Jackson's rough-hewn vocals) and he jumped ship to form a similar (but inevitably more successful) trio – Emerson, Lake & Palmer – with Greg Lake from King Crimson and Carl Palmer from Atomic Rooster.



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TMQ REVIEW INDEX

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After the Nice broke up, Jackson and Davison pursued other musical directions for several years as the prog-rock beast that they, in part, helped create made wealthy men out of the members of other bands. When they discovered Swiss keyboard prodigy Patrick Moraz playing with the experimental band Mainhorse, they recruited him for the formation of Refugee, a second coming, of sorts, of the Nice. Moraz proved to be Emerson's equal at the keyboard, and with a background in jazz and early training in some of the finest classical music schools in Europe, Moraz brought a different edge and perspective to the trio's sound than that enjoyed by the Nice.

After a few weeks of rehearsals spent pounding out material, Refugee performed its first show in December 1973, playing a mix of new songs and a couple of old tunes from the Nice. Signed to the Charisma Records label formed by the Nice's manager Tony Stratton-Smith, Refugee recorded its self-titled debut album, which was subsequently released in the early months of 1974. Jackson and Davison found themselves reinvigorated, musically, in playing with an instrumentalist of Moraz's talent, and the album was selling well enough that plans were made for recording a second release.

Lightning would strike twice, however, as Jackson and Davison would once again be on the outside looking in when Moraz left Refugee to join the more commercially-successful band Yes. Replacing the recently-departed Rick Wakeman, Moraz would perform on the band's acclaimed *Relayer* album, and toured with Yes until the band went on hiatus in 1976, at which time he launched a varied, critically-acclaimed solo career that continues to this day. Moraz would also tour with the Moody Blues in the wake of their successful 1978 comeback album *Octave*, and would contribute to the recording of that band's 1981 album *Long Distance Voyager*.

As for Jackson and Davison, they performed with other bands, most notably Davison with Gong. The two would never again be a part of a major band, though, but it is a testimony to their talent that the lone Refugee album has become a sort of "Holy Grail" among collectors and prog-rock fans, and not only for representing some of Moraz's earliest recordings. The band's debut has withstood a rigorous test of time, as the trio's talents melded together in the creation of a vigorous and electric new direction for prog-rock. Although they were only together nine months or so, Refugee played steadily on the British university circuit, and *Live In Concert 1974* is the sole known document of the band's live prowess.

Rescued from obscurity by one of those odd happenstances that are part of the magic of rock & roll, *Live In Concert 1974* was taken from an old cassette recording that was in the possession

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of Refugee drummer Brian Davison. During a conversation with Davison, writer Martyn Hanson asked if the drummer had any old live recordings of the Nice lying about. As recounted by Hanson's excellent and informative liner notes, Davison said no, but he had a Refugee tape, which he proceeded to dig out of an old box. Despite its age and vintage, the recording had suffered little through the years, and after being cleaned up a bit, was released on CD by Britain's Voiceprint Records and distributed in the US by MVD Audio.

First off, let's address the album's sound quality, shall we? Keep in mind that the recording had sat in a box for nigh unto thirty years before being "rediscovered," dusted off and cleaned up for proper CD release. For an album sourced by a three-decade-old cassette tape, the transfer is remarkably spry, with very little tape hiss or rumbling. There is a bit of distortion, particularly on the high end and mostly during the early tracks, and some overwhelming brightness and vibration buzzes across some of the passages. Overall, though, the sound is better than just about any bootleg of the era that you'll find, less impressive, sonically, than a digitally-recorded modern performance but engaging and entertaining nevertheless. There is good separation on the instruments and vocals (the original tape was a soundboard recording), and each musician's performance is quite clear and distinctive.

That being said, the performances of Moraz, Jackson and Davison here are nothing short of remarkable. Running through a setlist comprised, basically, of four of the six songs from Refugee's studio album, with the Nice's "The Diamond Hard Blues Apples Of The Moon" and an unusual cover of Dylan's "She Belongs To Me" thrown in, *Live In Concert 1974* is a good measure of the band's live sound. Moraz's battery of weapons – keyboards and Moog synthesizers, piano and Mellotron – is used to deadly effect, the keyboard maestro injecting each song with a majestic crescendo of crystal sound and powerful rhythms. Jackson and Davison do much more than back up Moraz, with both musicians playing in tandem to create a strong underlying soundtrack, but each adding individual flourishes that showcase their own unique and undeniable talents.

Jackson's vocals, usually described as a "croak," are unpolished and strained – an acquired taste, to be sure. But they also convey a great deal of emotion through Jackson's unique phrasing and projection. His bass fretwork is impressive, just a notch below contemporary Jack Bruce's in my mind, which makes one wonder why another early-70s band didn't pick up on Jackson's skills. Davison's drumming is equally world class, a virtual maelstrom of rapid-fire beats and imaginative fills. One can hear the jazz influences when Davison takes center stage, his powerful, staggering downstrokes reminding this listener of

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Buddy Rich. As for Patrick Moraz, the best-known of the trio, his work has been showcased behind more successful bands, but the notes and chords that he coaxes out of his gear onstage for **Live In Concert 1974** are simply astounding.

One of those bands that has been lost to time, Refugee is worth rediscovering for any fan of early-70s prog-rock. There's a lot going on in these grooves, and if you enjoy ELP, or maybe even the Nice, you owe it to yourself to dig up both Refugee's sole studio album as well as **Live In Concert 1974** for the full picture of this talented, albeit unheralded band. (**Voiceprint Records/MVD Audio**)

(Click on the CD cover to buy **Live In Concert 1974** from Amazon.com)

MP3:
Refuge - "The Diamond Hard Blues Apples Of The Moon" (big! 14mb)

Labels: prog-rock, Refugee

POSTED BY REV. KEITH A. GORDON AT 5:06 PM 

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