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Full page review – part two

So you think jazz is smooth, soothing and polite? This album will cure you, says **John L Walters**

CD
OF THE WEEK

Acoustic Ladyland

Last Chance Disco (Babel)

★★★★☆ £11.99

The second album by London four-piece Acoustic Ladyland is an all-out assault on the senses. It breaks with most ideas of what a jazz record sounds like, with smack-in-your-face post-punk production for drums and bass guitar: so 2005 that it could be 1978. Even the band photos – with wild hair, suits, ties and a bowler hat – look like New Wave “Walkerpunks” from the late 1970s. But Last Chance Disco is not rock and not even disco, and with its abrasive fuzz keyboards and breakneck tempos it is certainly not fusion.

The quartet’s sound is defined by the compositions and tenor saxophone of leader Peter Wareham. And what a noise – his sax playing is rough, squawky and vocalised, with a nod to the avant-garde of the 1960s and the pop-rock honkers of the 1950s and 70s. He may have been a Young Musician of the Year prizewinner in the late 1990s, but the sound Wareham gets here is miles away from the mature, muscular reed sound you associate with college-trained jazz saxophonists. It’s as if Wareham has not only learnt what he needs to know, he’s figured out what to edit out.

This is also a splendidly adolescent album, full of unreasonable rage, jazz is sometimes perceived as a mature taste, like fine wine or broadsheet papers – something you get into after putting away childish tastes for sugary cereals or crappy house compilations. Yet jazz has always been more than a style or generational genre – it’s a language. You can use it for ranting and swearing as well as poetry and conversation, and Acoustic Ladyland do all that by mixing the language of jazz with the rhetoric of instrumental rock.

One of the contenders for Album of the Year in the upcoming BBC Jazz Awards is Acoustic Ladyland’s *Cannoufflage*, which hid some of Jimi Hendrix’s melodic and structural ideas inside polite originals. But it’s a shame Last Chance Disco missed the cut-off point for entries in that category: the new album is another beast altogether; more uncompromising, more ambitious in compositional scope and more fun. Leggy, the opening track, sets out the band’s approach from the first seconds, with a honking call-and-response for sax and rhythm section. Wareham uses an “ugly” tone, while pianist Tom Cawley may be taking the piss out of rock keyboard solos. Or he may be serious: it doesn’t matter, the track is over in a flash and we’re into the outstanding Om Konz, with its jagged keyboard part, an audacious drum part and great echo effects. Seb Rochford’s drum solo against keys and random sax blasts is a treat. The strutting new-wave anthem of Deckchair manages to hint at both Madness and the Soft Machine, while Remember, even faster, contrasts an almost pretty bridge with aggressive rock gestures and a heart-stirring, four-to-the-bar snare part. Wareham sings Perfect Bitch, the album’s sole vocal track, in a punky whine that’s almost too ironic for its own good.

High Heel Blues shows what Acoustic Ladyland can do at fast tempos while *Of You* provides another opportunity for over-the-top drumming by Rochford. Bassist Tom Herbert is magnificent throughout this 11-track album, which rarely flags from beginning to end. It’s fascinating to hear Herbert, an inspired funk player in the context of Jade Fox, turn his hands to such rocking bass parts. Nico, the final track, is the closest Wareham gets to a ballad. He plays the touching melody over and over again against asymmetric rhythms that build in intensity – it’s like a thrash version of Wayne Shorter’s *Nefertiti*. Engineer and co-producer Philip Bagental does a great job in focusing the band’s visceral energy into a coherent album. The only song that outstays its welcome is the dubiously titled Ludwig Van Rammone.

Is it jazz? Yes – it’s an album that brings out the indie rock fan’s inner aesthete, and the jazz fan’s inner hooligan. The tunes are well conceived and to the point, the playing is terrific; they rarely play clichés (but when they do, they are unexpected clichés). Bagental’s production is sharp where it counts, and rough and ready enough to make its rebellious point: this is the least “smooth” jazz album in years. Last Chance Disco is headbangingly good.

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