Fusion REVIEWS

Wu Man and Son de San Diego

TRICK TO TRY Swimming in the Sky

Wu Man & Son de San Diego
Fingertip Carnival

The Chinese pipa takes a trip through Mexican folk

Wu Man is a remarkable lady. The best-known exponent of the pipa, the pear-shaped Chinese lute, she has used the instrument to play anything from Chinese folk songs to compositions by Terry Riley, and has worked with Kronos Quartet and the Silkroad Ensemble. Now she teams up with the US band Son de San Diego to show that she can treat Mexican songs with the same ease and expertise.

It may seem an unlikely new fusion but it makes perfect sense. After all, Wu Man lives in San Diego, and Son de San Diego play a variety of fretted, guitar-like instruments that include the guitarras de son, sonora and different types of jarana, that work well alongside the pipa. The band specialise in the son jarocha style from Veracruz, and this gently charming acoustic set is dominated by Mexican traditional songs and instruments, with the pipa joining in.

But the two most memorable tracks don’t feature Mexican songs but are instead new arrangements of Chinese folk songs with a Mexican-edged backing. ‘China Blues’, which includes vocals from Wu Man, is a slow, bluesy piece dominated by the pipa, while ‘Dance in the Sunshine’ is a delightful evocative work-out.

WU CHENGJIEU

TRICK TO TRY Chine Blues

Yom & The Wonder Rabbis
You Will Never Die

Dark carnival-esque klezmer

Clarinetist Yom’s second project with his band The Wonder Rabbis comes seven years after the first one. In between, he’s released a collaborative album with Chinese Jew’s harp player Wing Li, an attempt at American folk music, and even tried his hand at French electro-jazz. This discography gives you an idea of what kind of an artist he is.

On You Will Never Die, Yom retains the klezmer core that he knows so well and enhances it with a wealth of instrumentation. Each song rumbles with a primal energy created by the talented Wonder Rabbis: Sylvain Daniel on bass; Guillaume Magne on guitar; Leo Jassal on keyboards; Mathieu Perrot on drums; and Aurélien Nafrichoux also on guitar. They are carnival-like in energy, though with an unnerving darkness that unsettles that carnival spirit.

The album is strongest, however, in the peaks and troughs of the carnival roller-coaster ride. On the title-track, there is a raucous burst of electric guitar that surprises and lifts the whole song, while on ‘Kiss Me Goodbye’, the slower, more tentative style is a welcome relief from the intensity of the rest. Although captivating, the album could be better if Yom had imbued it with more moments like these.

ANDER BENDIX-LUNDH

TRICK TO TRY Swimming in the Sky

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Paris to Calcutta: Men and Music on the Desert Road
Sound Inluminated

The Sound of Deben Bhattacharya’s epic road trip

This handsome set matches a four-disc, unexpurgated record of Bengali ethnomusicologist Deben Bhattacharya’s 1985 epic field recording road trip, illustrated by a substantial 160-page book. Bhattacharya took off in his trusty converted milk van, funded by Argo and BMI, armed with Gaumont reel-to-reel tape gear, and a map that guided him from London to Calcutta. While his route didn’t take him through Spain to trace the flamenco element, he stopped off virtually everywhere else, including Belgrade, Istanbul, Damascus, Amman, Tehran, Baghdad, Kabul and eventually Calcutta, documenting Arabic, Persian and Hindu traditions along the way.

At the time, Bhattacharya was in his early 30s, and this was just the beginning of a prodigious lust to document music, remaining strong until his death in 2001. Considering the journey’s makobolish nature, these recordings are of reasonably high quality, the background talking, coughing and road noise adding to the sense of immediacy. This is an extensive collection, governed by a practical itinerary, and while the music is magical, an added dimension is provided by the book’s many evocative photographs (Bhattacharya’s own) and Bhattacharya’s text.

There’s a wide range of instrumentation on display – including a pair of percussive coffee grinders. There are two long Iranian pieces by Eskandar Ebrahim, one of which features an orchestra moving through multiple accordion, sarsa (flute) and vocal stages, like the perfect suite demonstration. Most of the players are named, but there are some ‘unknown performers’, such as the coughing Afghan shepherd nose-flute soloist. The collection finishes well, with a pair of devotionalis from Sai Chand Bhagat and Babi, Bombay street singers who also play tiny cymbals and the one-stringed ektara, segueing into a last snatch of Varnani temple bells and drums.

MARKING

TRICK TO TRY Humney by Eskandar Ebrahim

Saigon Supersound Vol 2
Western-influenced wartime sounds of South Vietnam

This compilation of vintage rock’n’roll from South Vietnam during the Vietnamese war is a follow-up to the first volume of Saigon Supersound released in 2017. Jan Hagnerkötter has again selected historic recordings by bands from the Saigonese pop scene, who were influenced by blues, rock and Latin styles. Carol Kim kicks off the album with the catchy ‘Tai Goi’, a carefree depiction of people enjoying the sights of beautiful Saigon to a relaxed Latin groove. The fun, exuberance and lyricism of the songs is balanced with sentimental, nostalgic lyrics about romance and love for the homeland. References to the war occasionally rise to the surface, but the playfulness of the music ultimately celebrates life in troubled times.

There’s a final track ‘Lo Thu To Lieu’ (The Whistling Willow), composed by the famous songwriter Pham Duy, takes a humorous look at courtship. It lightlydraws on traditional influences, from the soothing free-rhythm vocal line, which is inspired by traditional melodies, to heavily accented, jaunty singing over a Cuban-style piano vamp. This is an album that invites us to appreciate more fully some of the pioneers of Vietnamese popular music.

BARNIE HORTON

TRICK TO TRY Trang Mo Ben Suoi by Thanh Thuy