

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

With Zsa Zsa, The Mystery Plan Shows Range and Taste

John Amen · Wednesday, April 8th, 2020

Steering through the eerily empty streets two weeks ago, I played The Mystery Plan's new album *Zsa Zsa*, a fluid navigation of dreampop, trip-hop, and folktronic templates, tunes that I now regard – after hearing the project numerous times – as part and parcel of my “C-19” soundtrack.

On the album's sprawling opener, “those stars,” Micah Gaugh contributes a moody sax part, Jason Herring's breathy voice bringing to mind various vocal takes from David Gilmour, notably *Dark Side*'s “Us and Them” and “Breathe.” Mid-song, the instrumentation intensifies, waxing centrifugal (as in improvisational jazz) rather than centripetal (as in prototypical pop), the sonic welter soon corralled, a lone and echoey vocal wafting into silence. With “we all get down,” the band segues into ambient pop territory, Amy Herring's hypnotic voice reminiscent of Broadcast's Trish Keenan. Backup vocals by Patty McLaughlin bob in a current of synth-y accents.

With “al gore rhythms,” the band and guest singer/rapper Snap Nation offer a notably “chill” take on Tricky's/Martina Topley-Bird's mid-90's work. Otis Hughes on bass and Jeff Chester on drums forge a swing-y groove. “ballad of JC Quinn” is a textural and hook-y pearl, including Peter McCranie's catchy lap-steel refrain. Amy Herring's vocal vacillates between whimsy and wistfulness. The accompanying video is a lo-fi plunge into kaleidoscopia and Photoshop surrealism. “lolaphone” features a rollicky soundscape over which a young girl, Lola Cooper, speaks seemingly random yet engaging phrases, an avant-pop take reminiscent of Kim Gordon's narration on Sonic Youth's “Kool Thing.” “bonny” is a synth-y and refreshing cover of the 1985 tune by Prefab Sprout.

“sweet tart” is another pop coup, carried by Patty McLaughlin’s crystalline vocal and hummable flute part, a brush-off to an unwanted pursuer: “It would make my day / if you walked away / I’ve got no time / for your next line.” “electric love,” drenched in reverb, is two parts Portishead circa *Dummy* meets one part Beach House. Amy Herring nails a seductive vocal: “Love me long / slow and deep.” Otis Hughes’s bass part is buoyant *and* sludgy. An effect-laden/sitar-sounding guitar coils exotically around the verses. The album closes with the piano-and-flute sketch “distant sirens,” an aptly etheric coda to an ambitiously eclectic yet cohesive album.

While *Zsa Zsa* will certainly enroll casual listeners, offering a plethora of enticing sounds and melodies, it may in fact hold greater intrigue for those who approach music historically or in terms of aesthetic lineage, referencing and reconfiguring, as it does, an array of approaches and styles. Kudos to Jason Herring, John Fryer, and Rob Tavaglione for their production treatments, facilitating balances between minimalism and complexity, pop and experimentalism, derivation and originality.

Zsa Zsa is available on CD as well as through [Bandcamp](#), [Amazon](#), and other digital platforms – a set that will appeal long after the pandemic of 2020 passes.

(Featured image: cover art of *Zsa Zsa* by Chris DeLange)

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