

Music

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(Compost)

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In the field of modern downtempo—what was once called acid-jazz, before the term assumed its current unpleasant connotations—it is almost impossible to regard the current status quo with anything less than a barely concealed disinterest. Considering the general malaise that has defined the electronic music scene for some time, downtempo's particularly demoralizing slide into disrepair can be understood both in relation to the medium's wider context and a more specific set of peculiar circumstances. To put it bluntly, while electronic music has—with a few notable exceptions—been less interesting during the past few years than at any other time in living memory, the course of downtempo has merely continued on a previously-established slide towards irrelevancy which began in the final years of the previous decade.

Which is not to say that good music is not being produced under the downtempo or “acid jazz” rubric. But, unfortunately, most of the momentum that could have once characterized the genre as a unified “scene” has dissipated, crushed under the weight of a thousand underperforming “nu-jazz” or “chill out” compilations, discs that traded on the genre's authentic potential as a modern corollary to traditional jazz in favor of its perception as a harmless and emaciated lifestyle accessory. What good work has been done in the field has been done in defiance of these prevailing, dispiriting trends, trends which have served for the most part either to push prominent producers away from the field (as with Greyboy and Nightmares on Wax) or to commercially marginalize those few compelling producers who remained. The Thievery Corporation and Tosca have both managed to retain the bulk of their dignity, but for much of the rest of the electronic music community downtempo is a dead issue.

Which is one reason why the advent of a disc such as Alif Tree's *French Cuisine* comes as such a breath of fresh air. Special appreciation must be given to the Compost label for its unstinting devotion to the notion of jazz-influenced electronic music. As the label's recent *Compost 200* compilation (which included this album's “I Feel Blue”) demonstrated, there is still a lot of currency in the notion that a sophisticated and cosmopolitan—but by no means pretentious—brand of electronic music can still produce dazzling results. That this notion seems to be almost entirely the province of European musicians is, while regrettable, entirely understandable.

French Cuisine is hardly a revolutionary statement. The well-heeled and distinctly Continental multiculturalism that appears throughout the album—as on the Turkish flavor on “L'Amor Nunca Muere”—could be mistaken, under different circumstances, for the kind of precious affectation that has long defined “World” music fandom in America. But it is essentially that rarest of artifacts — a splendid album that aspires to nothing more than creating a sustained mood through the application of superlative musicianship. As with the very best electronic music, fashion is irrelevant. *French Cuisine* would have sounded good ten years ago, and will sound good ten years in the future.

A great deal of attention has been paid throughout the album towards creating the mood and texture which compose the album's primary strengths. Anyone who has ever listened to Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* knows that a powerful degree of soul can be imparted through a particularly well-recorded

upright bassline; the ability to perceive the physical dimension and resonance of a sound create a depth of perception in music that cannot be trivialized. While it is true that a lot of bad music uses excessively sophisticated production to mask inadequacies of conception, it does not necessarily follow that exquisite production is an automatic sign of creative bankruptcy. Quite the contrary: the very idea of electronic music hinges on the notion that modern production can be as utilized in as expressive a fashion as any instrument. Certainly, from the very beginning of *French Cuisine*, when “Deadly Species” introduces the juxtaposition of deep and crisp analog jazz samples and a more abbreviated drum machine sound, the listener is very conscious of the fact that Alif Tree has placed every element with exacting specification. The results, when they gel, are superlative. “Deadly Species” ups the ante with a Nina Simone sample placed alongside sweeping orchestral gestures that add up to an expressive, evocative exercise in deftly selected samples mixed for optimum impact.

There’s something dark and brooding at the heart of the album. After the deep melancholy of the opening track, “Belle” introduces a slightly more spry but no less determined—in fact, slightly fatalistic—rhythmical sense. But the album is more diverse than that. “Enough” introduces a note of wistful romance reminiscent of DJ Shadow. “Forgotten Places” offers a degree of keenly-developed insouciance the likes of which remains almost solely the province of smart, sophisticated pop. The album finishes with “Mélismes Extatiques”, a unique composition built on a continually repeated refrain of bells, very much redolent of Steve Reich’s similar experiments in continually repeated tones. Like everything here, it sounds wonderful, and it also succeeds in conjuring up an emotional response unlike anything else on the album.

French Cuisine is, like its namesake, a rich and engrossing treat. It may, at times, err on the side of richness at the expense of the kind of lean nutrition favored by health-food advocates, but this is only a deficit for listeners of an overly puritan disposition. Sometimes it is enough merely to exult in the presence of well-constructed sound, and to appreciate that for some, the medium of their production merges so completely with their message as to render the two virtually indistinguishable.

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