

Joe McPhee, Dominic Duval, Jay Rosen, Mikołaj Trzaska "Magic"

The story goes that Mikolaj Trzaska, a longtime fan of McPhee, sought out Trio X at a performance in Krakow in 2006 to ask if he could play with the group. With that meeting, a plan evolved for a 2007 tour with the support of Not Two Records owner, Marek Winiarski. Trzaska and Trio X together became the group Magic. The two-disc set, *Magic*, documents the 2007 tour in Poland.

Given the improvisational expertise of McPhee on alto sax, clarinet and pocket trumpet, of Trzaska on alto sax and bass clarinet, Duval on bass, and Jay Rosen on drums, this recording imparts more than anyone could expect. The musicians inspire and interact with one another in exceptionally intricate and subtle ways. The smallest details of the playing fill volumes of space with intelligent musical conversation, no matter whether one, two, three or all four are involved in the improvisation. The instrumental layering is so clear and unique that listening is an extraordinarily fulfilling challenge. There is bubbling and boiling, but absolutely no mayhem.

Duval and Rosen transcend their rhythm-section-ness. Their responsiveness to the horns is stunning. Duval's infusion of his beautifully shaped arco and pizzicato technique at befitting junctures in the music is particularly noteworthy. His solo, "Contra-ception," displays how his relaxed fingers feather the bass strings, catch one or two in a twang to spring further into new, softly expressive patterns. Rosen's essential timing ensures that the actions of any other instruments are not so much ornamented as logically enhanced. Rosen's drumming is never syrupy; it is dry, clean and rhythmically acute, even when he opens up on cymbals. His solo, "I Remember Max," ends the first disc.

McPhee and Trzaska are a musical marriage made in heaven. Their exchanges extend and complement what each is doing. Their instruments can assume one direction, even though, for example, McPhee might be playing a pocket trumpet and Trzaska, the alto, or McPhee is barely singing through the reed of his sax while Trzaska is restraining his arpeggios. In the opening "The Magician," their solo lines overlap; their artfulness, distinguishable. In the closing "Transaction," their phrasing is so interlocked and focused that they sing together as in a choir--in unison or contrapuntally; or one blows high and the other low, their contrasting tonalities, a means to suffuse their sound with unaffected sincerity.

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After the excellent "Intimate Conversations", Joe McPhee and Mikołaj Trzaska release a new album together, again with Jay Rosen on drums, but now also with Dominic Duval on bass. You might say it's Trio X + Mikołaj Trzaska, and that's correct if you look at the names, but not when you listen to the music. This band does not even touch on the "traditional" Trio X repertoire. McPhee plays sax and pocket trumpet, Trzaska alto sax and bass clarinet.

The album starts with "The Magician", with tribal sounding tones from Trzaska, full of primitive incantations, slowly being joined by trumpet, bass and drums, and developing into a slow, smooth and warm open lyrical exploration. The fit between Trzaska and McPhee is almost perfect, since they have the same attitude to music, one of freedom, respect and authentic warmth. That doesn't mean they don't go wild at times, but the dominant element is careful and reverent. The first track immediately illustrates this range, from tribal over sensitive dialogues to more boppish uptempo steaming improvisations. The second piece is more free form in nature, with Duval playing arco, McPhee delving into the deeper regions of his tenor, Rosen accentuating, and Trzaska's alto adding layers of sensitivity on top. "Sex Toys" is more minimalist and subdued, with the musicians scarcely breaching through the silence, and I think rarely a track has received such an inappropriate name (there isn't even an orgasm of sound to conclude). The first CD ends with "I Remember Max", a luckily not too long drum solo by Jay Rosen, dedicated to Max Roach.

The second CD continues with the minimalist approach, with a long dialogue between the two saxes, interlocking and interweaving calm yet urgent phrases, with McPhee doing some quiet singing while blowing his sax, bursting open into a screaming duel, waking the sleeping dogs of drums and bass in the process. "Contra-ception" is a bass solo track by Duval, nothing wild, nothing too smooth either, and when he starts using his bow, some shouting brings back the sax for one of the most intense pieces of the album, that shifts mood a little over half-way when McPhee picks up his pocket trumpet: for almost spiritual gospel-like lyricism. One of the most beautiful tracks is the long and slow "Turtles Crossing", a tune that was already on McPhee's Jumala Quintet release with the same name. As the title suggests, there is no need to hurry (from the turtle's perspective of ignorance), but the deep tension of the menace of being crushed is omnipresent, and this horror of course gets articulated musically near the end of the track, but it ends happily.

Again, Trzaska is a perfect fit for this band, who deliver a strong, balanced and varied album of great instrumental power and coherent musical expression, full of emotional depth and moments of fun. Enjoy!

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