

Melvin Jackson - Funky Skull (1969)

Written by bluesever

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01 Funky Skull (Parts 1 & 2) 4:53 [play](#) 02 Ma She's Makin Eyes At Me 0:51 03 Bold & Black 7:21 04 Dance Of The Dervish 6:39 05 Everybody Loves My Baby 2:20 06 Cold Duck Time (Parts 1 & 2) 5:03 07 Say What 4:49 08 Funky Doo 4:53 09 Silver Cycles 9:26

Personnel: Melvin Jackson - acoustic bass Maurice Miller - vocals Pete Cosey - guitar Byron Bowie - flute Roscoe Mitchell - alto saxophone Bobby Pittman, James Tatu - tenor saxophone Tobie Wynn - baritone saxophone Doinald Towns, Tom Hall - trumpet Leo Smith, Lester Bowie - flugelhorn Steve Galloway - trombone Phil Upchurch - Fender Rhodes piano Jodie Christian - Hammond b-3 organ Billy Hart, Morris Jennings – drums

Bassist Melvin Jackson has exactly one album in his catalog as a leader (he spent most of his time playing with Eddie Harris). But man, that's all he needed. Pumping his upright through a Maestro G-2 filter box, a Boomerang, an Echoplex, and an Am peg amp, he made that thing sound like something from outer space while keeping it firmly in the groove of the corner bar on Front Street. Gimmicky? That's what they once said about Roland Kirk playing multiple horns at once, too. As for the naysayers who think of this as a novelty, consider the heavies in his band: Roscoe Mitchell, Leo Smith, Lester Bowie, Phil Upchurch, Pete Cosey, Morris Jennings, Jodie Christian, Billy Hart, Byron Bowie, Steve Galloway, and a whole lot of others. All of these cats were heavyweights in their own right. What does Funky Skull sound like? Psychedelic, funky soul-jazz and a whole lot more. Jackson bowed his bass as well as plucked it depending on what the tune needed. Produced in Chicago by Robin McBride and originally released on the Limelight label, it marked an era of exploration and Jackson was on the ground floor of the space station. There was only one requirement: the groove had to be in the pocket and the beat had to be on the one. There are nine tunes here; Jackson wrote or co-wrote four, including the two-part title cut. He took pages from both Harris' serious soul-jazz book and James Brown's funky one. There are vocals on these tracks, but they amount to little more than accents on the repetitive rhythmic lines being laid down. It's all backbone-slipping, hard, electric jazz funk from the pre-fusion era. "Funky Skull, Pts 1 & 2" and Eddie Harris' "Cold Duck Time, Pts. 1 & 2" were actually spun on jukeboxes throughout the Midwest and in New York in beer gardens, at lunch counters, in bowling alleys, etc. In other words, these jams got heard and grooved to by ordinary folks, not just jazz heads. The nickels got pumped for a reason. Some cuts here, such

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as "Dance of the Dervish," have pretty sophisticated arrangements and fell more firmly in the jazz camp, but were outside it, too -- especially the Echoplexed bass solo.

Elsewhere, "Everybody Loves My Baby," which is a workout for hand percussion, hi hat, and bowed electronically affected bass, was out there on the launching pad in terms of classification. It gets brought back in from the cold by Jackson's "Say What," with the horns playing as a section with striated harmony and a subtle B-3 played by some uncredited genius who kept the funk lines clipped and tight; it was Jackson's cue for wrapping himself all over the groove while never leaving the pocket entirely. The bleating saxophone solo tells you that something else is being aspired to and delivered: it pushes the melody line way out the window, but the rhythm section never loses it for a second. "Funky Doo," written by Jackson and producer Robin McBride, rocks it up while being a dance tune for a sweaty after-hours party. The set ends with "Silver Cycles," written by Jackson and Harris. Clocking in at over nine minutes, it begins with a small piano vamp and Jackson playing glissando bowed bass before flutes, a trap kit, and other horns wind their way in. Jackson's bass gets double-tracked, finding the expansive groove being laid down and extrapolated into harmonic wonderland. Textures by the horn section, and the lower edges of the bass and piano registers are expounded upon, with the horn playing in high, tinny fashion, creating a huge space in the middle for anything to happen. But it stays on the subtle side with all sorts of interaction going on between the instruments crisscrossing channels and parts before fading into the night. Funky Skull is a one of a kind listening experience. It's fun, wildly inventive, freewheeling and complex all at the same time. This is one of those records that one has to hear to believe, and once heard, has to have as a permanent part in your collection. ---Thom Jurek, Rovi

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