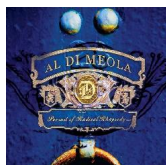


Al Di Meola – Pursuit of Radical Rhapsody (2011)

Written by bluesever

Monday, 06 June 2011 20:36 - Last Updated Sunday, 13 July 2014 21:42

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1 *Siberiana* 8:28 2 *Paramour's Lullaby* 7:45 3 *Mawazine, Pt. 1* 2:07 4 *Michelangelo's 7th Child* 7:30 5 *Gumbiero* 6:18 6 *Brave New World* 1:54 7 *Full Frontal Contrapuntal* 4:52 8 *That Way Before* 3:06 9 *Fireflies* 4:01 10 *Destination Gonzalo* 5:16 11 *Bona* 6:00 12 *Radical Rhapsody* 5:02 13 *Strawberry Fields* 4:09 14 *Mawazine, Pt. 2* 2:54 15 *Over the Rainbow Arlen* 3:04

Al di Meola (acoustic guitar, electric guitar, keyboards, percussion); Kevin Seddiki (guitar); Fausto Beccalossi (accordion); Barry Miles (keyboards); Peter Kaszós (drums, percussion); Gumbi Ortiz (percussion).

Following the much ballyhooed Return To Forever reunion tour of 2008, guitarist Al Di Meola began refocusing his energies on his World Sinfonia band. Live in Seattle and Elsewhere documented his tightly-knit chemistry in concert on a 2009 tour with his acoustic ensemble of accordionist Fausto Beccalossi, second guitarist Kevin Seddiki, bassist Victor Miranda, drummer Peter Kaszas and Di Meola's longtime collaborator Gumbi Ortiz on cajon and assorted hand percussion. Di Meola's rhythmically-charged flamenco and tango inspired originals revealed his knack for advanced harmonies along with his embracing of simple, beautiful, alluring melodies. And although he may be a romantic at heart, he showed that he is still very much capable of flashing those legendary chops that graced his '70s classics like *Elegant Gypsy* and *Casino*.

On Di Meola's latest outing, *Pursuit of Radical Rhapsody*, the guitar virtuoso and world music pioneer deals in more evocative and compelling sounds with his World Sinfonia ensemble, delivering hauntingly beautiful and deeply moving music from track to track. The collection kicks off with the entrancing, suite-like "Siberiana," which opens with some tender call-and-response between Beccalossi's accordion and Di Meola's nylon string acoustic guitar before building to a turbulent section with searing electric guitar lines on top. On the affecting "Paramour's Lullaby," Di Meola takes a more deliberate approach on electric guitar, spinning warm, lyrical lines over the beautiful harmonies before engaging in spirited call-and-response with Beccalossi near the end of the piece. The rhythmically charged "Mawazine" (featuring percussionist Mino Cinelu) is

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broken up into two parts on the album and showcases some typically tasty electric guitar work by the leader. The lushly cinematic "Michelangelo's 7th Child" (featuring Hungary's Sturcz String Quartet) has Di Meola utilizing subtle MIDI textures and colorations on his acoustic guitar while also showcasing some virtuosic runs. "Gumbiero" is a stirring Latin number underscored by Ortiz's churning conga work. Sparks fly between Di Meola's signature fretboard bravado on both acoustic and electric, Beccalossi's facile accordion playing and Gonzalo Rubalcaba's dazzling piano work on this spirited offering. "Full Frontal Contrapuntal" features some chops-busting unisons and intricate exchanges between Al's MIDI-tinged acoustic guitar and Beccalossi's accordion. The surging "This Way Before" and the evocative, flamenco inspired "Fireflies" both feature Di Meola alternating between acoustic and distortion-laced electric guitar licks. The stirring Latin flavored "Destination Gonzalo" and "Radical Rhapsody" both feature virtuosic contributions from pianist Rubalcaba and former Weather Report drummer Peter Erskine. The poignant "Bona" is a tender offering with the Sturcz String Quartet that features some of Di Meola's most lyrical playing on the record. The leader also turns in soothing interpretations of two classic pop tunes, the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields" and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," both of which feature the great jazz bassist Charlie Haden. --- Editorial Reviews

When I saw them in concert a couple of years ago, DiMeola's current band struck me as being between several stools. Accordion + loud electric guitar? Heavy drums + no bass or keyboards? It was a strange sound & combination, and I felt that their new material could do with some added band members & orchestration to bring the tunes to life. "Pursuit of Radical Rhapsody" does this...and more. I would call this an uncompromising, inventive & artistic record, coming after a five-year hiatus in DiMeola studio recordings. I will try and explain.

In common with Pat Metheny, DiMeola has done many fine records where, in addition to great instrumental skills, the music can sound like a pop or rock record in terms of its production. Call it 'mainstream' or 'commercial' if you wish. That has a plus & a downside, the plus being its great musicality (to a higher level than pop/rock guys can offer), the downside being the music or melodies can sound a little too familiar or 'eager to please', even if they avoid the blandness of so-called 'smooth jazz'. Some of DiMeola's best records in the last 20 years have been 'World Sinfonia' albums, as is this one, but those records, while not 'mainstream', also had an easily recognisable, or 'feel at home', sound, due to their heavy reliance on Astor Piazzolla material. By contrast, there are no Piazzolla tunes on this album. Instead, along with two cover versions, there are 13 original compositions all of which throw a 'curve ball' at the listener in the sense that they feature compositional turns, improvisations & orchestrations that will not remind you of anything else. I say this as someone who has heard all DiMeola's albums and much else besides. If this record reminds me in any way of any other recording, it might be Chick Corea's "Ultimate Adventure", if only due to its very free-spirited, imaginative & open-ended approach,

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but I think "Pursuit of Radical Rhapsody" actually far outshines that album in terms of compositional depth and inventive, while never repetitive, musical development. There is not a single lazy moment on this album in terms of content or style.

The album is recorded, mixed & produced brilliantly. There is an equal amount of electric & acoustic guitar playing on this album, and it is strictly a pure nylon-string acoustic & clean-toned electric sound (which pleases me, for one, as DiMeola sometimes relies a little too heavily for my tastes on MIDI effects). I think this album represents the ever-growing maturity & development of DiMeola as a musician in more ways than one. For one thing, I would consider this as the most jazzy of DiMeola's solo albums to date and yet it is also characterised by longstanding (if not very jazzy) DiMeola styles, such as sensitive nylon string playing (evident since the mid-80s) and highly rhythmic, not exactly 'swinging', twists & turns involving heavy snare drums & solid-body electric guitar (evident since the mid-70s). Not until track 10 does a tune in 4-4 appear! The combination of all three factors actually works, however, to such a degree that this is constantly a musically stimulating, challenging and at the same time warm & richly harmonic sounding record. The latter point is worth stressing, because with all these contrasting elements the music could have ended up cacophonous, which it is not, or so tight that jazz improvisations are missing, which they are not.

To conclude, I would say this is DiMeola's best album since 'The Grande Passion' while in terms of its melodic content it actually outshines that album in at least one sense, namely its non-reliance on the use of a single 'traditional' & 'familiar' musical phrase, from start to finish. If the key to artistic brilliance is to create something that will never remind you of anything or anybody else, maybe one could say that DiMeola has truly realised his artistic potential with this album, which provides very fresh listening. ---Owen McGee

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