

Orchestre National De Jazz - Around Robert Wyatt (2009)

Written by bluesever

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CD1 1. *The Song* 2. *Alifib* 3. *Just As You Are* 4. *Caroline* 5. *Kew Rhone* 6. *Shipbuilding* 7. *Line* 8. *Alliance* 9. *Vandalusia* 10. *Del Mondo* 11. *Te Recuerdo Amanda* Bonus CD
1. *P L A* 2. *Gegenstand* 3. *Rangers In The Night* 4. *Just As You Are*

Orchestre National de Jazz: - Daniel Yvinec / artistic direction - Vincent Artaud / arrangements - Eve Risser / piano, prepared piano, flutes, sound objects - Vincent Lafont / keyboards and electronics - Antonin-Tri Hoang / alto saxophone, clarinets, piano - Matthieu Metzger / saxophones, systalk-box, electronic treatments - Joce Mienniel / flutes, electronics - Remi Dumoulin / saxophones, clarinets - Guillaume Poncelet / trumpet, piano, synthesizers, electronics - Pierre Perchaud / guitar, banjo - Sylvain Daniel / electric bass, French horn, electronic effects - Yoann Serra / drums + - Robert Wyatt / vocals (CD1: 1, 5, 9, 11; CD2: 2, 3) - Rokia Traoré / vocals (CD1: 2; CD2: 1) - Yael Naïm / vocals (CD1: 3,6; CD2: 4) - Arno / vocals (3) - Daniel Darc / vocals (4) - Camille / vocals (8) - Irene Jacob / vocals (10)

Hearing that France's National Jazz Orchestra has prepared a program of music by Robert Wyatt, the venerable sage of English rock and roll, is intriguing, but not necessarily shocking. After all, the legendary Soft Machine, for which Wyatt served as drummer and vocalist in the late 1960s and early 1970s, pushed prog rock far into the direction of jazz-inspired improvisation. But *Around Robert Wyatt* borrows almost nothing from the Soft Machine songbook and points instead toward Wyatt's solo career, dominated by political singer-songwriter fare. Wyatt's thin, angelic voice is featured on several tracks, and a raft of French (or Francophone) singers interpret the remainder.

It's a quirky bet by the orchestra's new director, Daniel Yvinec, and it's a rousing success. The record is first of all a gorgeous piece of exquisitely orchestrated pop music, a modern variant of the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (Capitol, 1966); indeed, some of Wyatt's best work, with its multi-layered vocal sweetness, sounded like a distant cousin to the Californian group.

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It's also remarkably hip. Yvinec's predecessor Franck Tortiller released an ONJ tribute to Led Zeppelin, the solid *Close To Heaven* (Le Chant du Monde, 2006); that was clever, but the Wyatt record seems to be really upping the ante. In comparison, the Zep disc sounds endearingly square. Now, pursuing hip runs the risk of sacrificing depth for flash. As if to stave off that danger, Yvinec includes a splendid and rigorous reading of the title track of the lovely long-lost prog-classical-jazz hybrid *Kew Rhone*. (Virgin, 1977) by John Greaves, Peter Blegvad and Lisa Herman (a rumination on the exhumation of a mastodon that includes the following palindrome in its dense lyric: "Peel's foe, not a set animal, laminates a tone of sleep"). No record featuring such a track could be accused of being crassly fashionable.

Yvinec generally enhances rather than radically reconfigures the source material—the original "Just As You Are" also featured a French singer's heavily-accented English, for example. Wyatt's 1980s records often featured him exclusively on overdubbed vocals and synthesizers. Wyatt, who has been confined to a wheelchair since he fell from a third-story window at a party in 1973, recently remarked in a British music magazine that this reflected a sort of "paraplegic politics"—trying to demonstrate that he could do anything and everything. The orchestral fleshing-out (for example, Elvis Costello's bitter "Shipbuilding," or "Del Mondo," intoned by actress Irene Jacob) remains true to the originals' spirit but sounds appreciably more lush.

Nowhere is this more clear than on "Alliance," Wyatt's vituperative, venom-dripping screed against the British upper class from his *Old Rottenhat* (Rough Trade, 1985)—the lyrics obliquely refer the devastating UK coal miners' strike. Here, "Alliance" is sung by Camille, vocalist of the group *Nouvelle Vague*, known for their charmingly low-key, acoustic covers of 1980s new wave classics. For "Alliance," arranger Vincent Artaud finds some brief horn harmonies in Wyatt's chords; the result sounds like a Todd Sicksafoose composition as scored by Guillermo Klein for his *Filtros* (Sunnyside, 2008). The song is ushered out by Vincent Lafont's exquisitely idiomatic Fender Rhodes solo.

Where's the jazz in all this? Well, laying bare for all the world to see the hidden connection between Klein and Sicksafoose, with funky keyboards to boot, should be enough. If not, there are excellent solos throughout. And then there are the arrangements. There is plenty of praise to go around, but a special share should accrue to arranger Artaud. Victor Jara's tribute to his parents falling in love ("Te Recuerdo Amanda") is given a tender, minimal touch, while "Kew Rhone" is unabashedly orchestral; his treatment of "O Caroline," meanwhile, might have been a Gil Evans chart for Claude Thornhill.

Pretty, witty, accomplished and fun; a fitting tribute to Wyatt, with not a whiff of the stodgy museum piece, and destined to be one of 2009's best releases. ---Jee Dayton-Johnson,

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