Matthew Halsall & The Gondwana Orchestra - Into Forever (2015)

01. Only A Woman (ft Josephine Oniyama) 02. As I Walk (ft Josephine Oniyama) 03. Dawn Horizon 04. Badder Weather (ft Josephine Oniyama) 05. These Goodbyes 06. The Land Of 07. Longshan Temple 08. Cushendun 09. Into Forever (ft Josephine Oniyama) 10. Daan Park 11. Jamais Vu (ft Bryony Jarman-Pinto) Matthew Halsall: trumpet; Lisa Mallett: flute; Rachael Gladwin: harp; Keiko Kitamura: koto; Taz Modi: piano; Gavin Barras: bass; Luke Flowers: drums; Sam Bell: percussion; Chris Cruiks: percussion (track 7), additional percussion (tracks 4 & 6); Margit Van Der Zwan: cello; Natalie Purton: viola & violin; John Purton: violin (tracks 1,2 & 11); Jote Osahn: violin (tracks 3, 5, 6 and 7); Ollie Izod: violin (track 5); Josephine Oniyama: vocals (tracks 1-10); Bryony Jarman-Pinto: vocals (track 11).

Some artists epitomise the times they live in, while others go their own way, standing apart from the herd, ploughing their own furrow. As the self-aggrandising, dishonest and downright greedy seem to gain ever greater prominence in our world, those whose work can provide a few moments of respite, refuge and reflection become more and more important—artists like Manchester's Matthew Halsall, who here releases his sixth album since 2008. On Into Forever Halsall shares the billing with the Gondwana Orchestra for a second time, indicating some continuity from 2014's superb When the World Was One and signalling a clear sense of his having found a pool of trusted musicians and collaborators for him to draw upon.

That continuity of line up is reflected in the minimal changes for these sessions, the main one being that Nat Birchall amicably sits this one out, in Halsall's words, to go in "a darker, out-there, late-Coltrane direction...." Conceptually this makes sense since the focus of the material of 'When the World Was One' was the legacy of Alice Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders, the material requiring a saxophonist of Birchall's talent and melodic fire far more than the more cerebal and relaxed compositions of 'Into Forever.' That said the likes of Rachel Gladwin on harp, Taz Modi on piano, Luke Flowers on drums, Lisa Mallet on flute, Keiko Kitamura on koto and Gavin Barras on bass all re-appear and all bar Kitamura have appeared on at least three Halsall

collections to date. Barras, whose fluid soulful bass playing is the foundation of many compositions on Into Forever, now has the distinction of being the only musician, other than the band leader himself, to contribute to every Halsall album to date.

While the musicians are largely constant, this is not the same as saying that Halsall is treading water. The sound here is substantially developed and it is possible that this is what prompted Halsall to keep this group of trusted collaborators around him. The headline change is the inclusion of lead vocalists Josephine Oniyama on four tracks and Bryony Jarman-Pinto on album closer "Jamais Vu" and could have mis-fired badly yet actually works well taking the music in a different direction to past albums. First impression is of a jazz take on 'Talkin' Loud' records mainstays 4Hero's stellar mid-1990s work with Ursula Rucker, but also suggests critical touchstones like Rotary Connection with Minnie Ripperton, and perhaps in its funkier moments the Art Ensemble Of Chicago with Fontella Bass on "Theme de Yoyo." You can hear the latter on the killer vocal cut "Badder Weather" where Oniyama's soulful vocal is lifted by Barras' deep bass pulse—the kick of the bass complementing the sass in the vocal. Halsall and Oniyama met while recording a commission for BBC Radio 3's "The Verb" show, which eventually became this album's title track, that felt so natural it shaped the direction of the collection. While the Oniyama pieces were collaborations for which Halsall provided either the lyrics or melodies, on "Jamais Vu" Jarman-Pinto added her lyric and vocal over the top of an instrumental piece Halsall had sent her without direction, much to the latter's apparent delight, and more than justifying her place in the line-up.

In fact the collection works so well that it takes Halsall's gorgeous trumpet on the album's penultimate track, the masterful "Daan Park," to highlight that he only plays on two of the 11 compositions. Halsall has explained this by saying that for him "every note has to serve the music I hear in my head and ...I found that the voices that best expressed my intentions, were those of my friends and colleagues..." However much we might want to hear his beautiful expressive playing, the ends displayed here more than justify the means -as an artist Halsall may have earned the trust of his audience but he knows better than to abuse it. As ever it is the whole package that is important and provides clues to the artistic intention—the sleeve of Into Forever continues the progressive absence of the band leader from the sleeves of his records that began with the shift from monochrome portraits of the first three collections to the sunset colour of the 'Fletcher Moss Park' sleeve on which he appeared in the middle distance, to one side. Since then Halsall has not appeared at all on the sleeve of 'When the World Was One' or now where the sleeve features 20 straight, block coloured, lines converging on a single central point on the horizon at infinity. If you need a visual metaphor for Halsall's step back into the collective identity of the Gondwana Orchestra and general lack of ego then this is surely it.

It is that care and attention to the music that makes Halsall stand out—he clearly thinks hard about how best to present his work to the world, what pieces will work best together for the

home listener, how best to capture the sound he wants—and he does this consistently to a higher level than just about any of his contemporaries. To sustain this level of creative excellence and control over a few years would be hard to achieve, yet six albums and eight years in Halsall shows no signs of stopping with this absolutely wonderful record. Another unequivocal triumph. ---Phil Barnes, allaboutjazz.com

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