



CD Reviews

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The Muffins
"Double Negative" (2004)
 [Cuneiform Records]

I would venture to bet that virtually every genre or sub-genre of music has its "darlings." They are the bands that seem to have done everything right and yet still have not broken out to the mass market. Washington D.C.'s The Muffins strike me as that kind of band. I remember reading about The Muffins in a prog magazine years ago. It was a retrospective article proclaiming the glories of the band and bemoaning how they undeservedly never "cracked the big time", whatever that is. Well folks, with the release of Double Negative, in an age of the internet and prog music festivals, The Muffins are definitely on the right track to reaching that wider audience.

Their story is one of miraculous rebirth. Formed originally in 1974 they developed a loyal local following performing live and recording a couple of releases, which garnered positive reviews before splitting up and going their separate ways. It wasn't until 1998 that the four key members; Tom Scott, Dave Newhouse, Bill Swann and Paul Sears reunited and began working on new material. So much for the history lesson.

If you've never tasted The Muffins you're in for a real treat. Here's what you can expect...take a healthy chuck of Jazz, a smidgen symphonic, a little avant-garde, a hint of Canterbury, throw in a generous portion of RIO attitude and viola, you have a heady mixture of music that rocks one moment, swings the next, pushes you out into space, seduces you with haunting melodies and then rattles your brain with the most aggressive mixture of notes you're ever going to hear. What's more, the music on Double Negative is as complex as my previous run-on sentence. And yet what amazes me is how effortlessly The Muffins can go from one musical feel to the next. A song may start out lush and symphonic before morphing into a blistering woodwind solo, all the while charging ahead rhythmically although changing tempo a few times just for good measure. Each song is quite complex with lots going on instrumentally. It's like a roller coaster ride with lots of loops.

Double Negative is the band's second studio release on Cuneiform records and features 78 minutes of material spread out over 17 tracks ranging in length anywhere from three to seven minutes. As for a musical reference point think of Happy The Man on steroids. The Muffins' music tends to be much more aggressive than HTM but contains similar instrumentation and quirky-ness. With tracks called "Writing Blind", "The Ugly Buttling" and "Choombachang" you know these guys haven't lost their sense of humor.

Existing fans of The Muffins are going to love Double Negative and this is a great place for new fans to get a taste. But trust me it will take a number of listens for many of these songs to gel in your head. This is challenging music that needs some effort on the part of the listener. But with each repeated listen you'll discover some new aspect to the music. Overall I think The Muffins really got it right on Double Negative. It seems to my ears the perfect blend of ingredients to keep the listener coming back for more. A tasty treat indeed.

Review by Jerry Lucky
 January 22, 2005

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