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HAPPY THE MAN "The Muse Awakens" Inside Out THE MUFFINS "Double Negative" Cuneiform

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The only one of Washington's 1970s progressive-rock bands to sign to a major label, Happy the Man followed a familiar course: Its

dumped it after two albums, and the musicians soon went separate ways. They began to work together again about five years ago, ultimately yielding "The Muse Awakens," which features three of the '70s members. The band was always closely linked to British classical- and jazz-rock, although its lack of a singer distinguished it from such better-known fellow travelers as Genesis and Yes.



HTM's sort of prog was a steppingstone to New Age, so it's no surprise that the band's comeback album includes titles such as "Maui Sunset."

Although "The Muse Awakens" won't convert any of the band's previous detractors, it's not a snooze. Such tracks as "Stepping Through Time" and "Lunch at the Psychedelicatessen" are jaunty baroque-rock fanfares, characterized by harpsichord-like guitar and keyboards. "Maui Sunset" is as placid as its title promises, but "Barking Spiders" is lively and playful, and "Shadowlites" features an actual vocal. Both the latter songs were written by guitarist Stanley Whitaker, one of the band's 1972 founders, who hasn't gone easy-listening during the band's long layoff.

The Muffins formed during Washington's mid-'70s prog-rock boomlet and disbanded in 1981, only to return 17 years later. The reconstituted quartet has the original lineup, but there are so many guest players on the recent "Double Negative" that it might be credited to "the Muffins Big Band." The effect of the expanded personnel is to play down the looser, spacier aspect of the Muffins' early work in favor of a more composed, more traditional jazz-oriented style. "Exquisite Corpse," for example, begins as a pastiche of Henry Mancini's 1960s soundtrack themes.

Yet there are passages when the group's original character surfaces. The string-driven "Dawning Star" is suitably intergalactic, and even "Exquisite Corpse" wanders into more abstract terrain, including a section in which someone chatters in Czech. (That's apt, since the Muffins are kindred spirits with the members of such once-underground Czech bands as the Plastic People of the Universe.) The only piece whose composition is credited to the entire band, "Metropolis," has a more extemporaneous feel, but only for a tight 3 1/2 minutes. "Double Negative" retains something of the '70s Muffins, but it's a lot tidier.

-- Mark Jenkins

Both appearing Thursday at the Birchmere.

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