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The Muffins
Double Negative
Cuneiform

Format Reviewed: CD

Soundclip: "[The Highlands](#)"



After a near-twenty year break, instrumental prog quartet The **Muffins** returned to recording and performing in 2002. *Double Negative* is their second album since reforming, and their most inspired effort since their 1978 debut, *Manna/Mirage*, mixing elements of prog, avant jazz and psychedelic improv into a memorable musical brew.

Two important modern jazz musicians guest on *Double Negative*, and their presence is both point of major interest and a source of significant musical fireworks. Saxophonists Marshall Allen and Knoel Scott, both members of the Sun Ra **Arkestra**, add their considerable chops to a line-up that already includes two saxophonists (**Muffins** Thomas Scott and Dave Newhouse) and a guest trombonist (Doug Elliott). Round the additional membership out with a guest string quartet and you have a *lot* of available instrumentation -- it's not just full, but weighted towards jazz and classical instruments rather than amplified rock ones, creating an idiosyncratic soundworld, even by prog's generally thick standards.

Fortunately, The **Muffins** have enough sense, and their guest soloists enough taste, to avoid saturating their music to the bloating point. In fact, the intricacy of their arrangements is well balanced by discrete sections and memorable melodies. In addition, the extra heft given to saxophone-laden sections like those featured in "The Highlands" and "Writing Blind" is effective, and sometimes stirring. These are juxtaposed against intricate meters and an exciting heavy rock-inspired rhythm section. Drummer Paul Sears and bassist Billy Swann deserve credit for providing an intricate rhythmic underpinning that retains propulsive drive. Pieces like "Choombachang", a big band pastiche that simultaneously recalls Zappa and the *Batman* TV Theme, could easily get

swamped if mishandled, but here, clarity prevails.

More keyboard-heavy prog is present in the Pink Floyd-influenced "The Man in the Skin-painted Suit", on which David Newhouse creates a wall of Hammond organ chords. The **Muffins** and company also take a stab at further "out" improvisation on the skronk-versus-big-band track "Cat's Game", a highly effective and well-paced adventure.

Double Negative is big, sometimes brash, and always ambitious. There are many thrilling musical moments here, waiting to be heard.

-- Christian Carey

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