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Double Negative

 The Muffins | [Cuneiform Records](#)

When the Muffins, with their own take on music influenced by the British Canterbury Scene and Rock In Opposition bands like Henry Cow, reformed after nearly twenty years and released *Bandwidth* (Cuneiform, '02), expectations were high. But in the truly progressive tradition, they proved you can't go home again, nor should you want to.

Sure, the broad textures were there, thanks mainly to the multi-instrumental

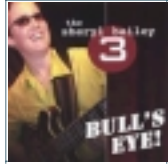


Track Listing: The Highlands; Writing Blind; Choombachang; The Ugly Buttling; The Man in the Skin-Painted Suit; Childhood's End; Exquisite Corpse; They Come on Unknown Nights; Cat's Game; Stethorus Punctum; Dawning Star; 5:00 Shadow; Meteropolis; Angel from Lebanon; Frozen Charlotte; Maya; The Two Georges

Personnel: Thomas Frasier Scott (alto and soprano sax, flute, clarinet, alto clarinet, keyboards, percussion, programming), Dave Newhouse (keyboards, baritone and tenor sax, bass clarinet, flute, flarinette), Billy



The Jigsaw
Stan Sulzmann



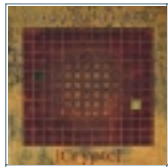
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Sheryl Bailey



Vis-a-Vis
Siora



B-3 Organic Grooves
Ron Levy



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wizardry of Thomas Frasier Scott and Dave Newhouse, who both play a wide variety of woodwind instruments and keyboards, but gone was the more avant edge, replaced instead by a more approachable sound that was still no less challenging or complex. The reunited Muffins, also including founding member Billy Swann on bass and drummer Paul Sears who, while not an original member was part of the lineup that recorded their classic albums *Manna/Mirage* and *<185>*, may be less quirky, but their influences run as wide as ever on the captivating *Double Negative*.

Over the course of seventeen compositions, the Muffins, augmented by guests including Sun Ra Arkestra members Marshall Allen and Knoel Scott on saxophones, as well as trombonist Doug Elliott

Swann (bass, acoustic guitar), Paul Sears (drums, electric guitar)

With Sun Ra Arkestra guests: Marshall Allen (alto sax on "5:00 Shadow," "Metropolis"), Knoel Scott (alto sax on "Choombachang," "5:00 Shadow," "Metropolis," "Dawning Star," baritone sax on "5:00 Shadow")

and: Doug Elliott (trombone on "Writing Blind,"

"Choombachang," "Exquisite Corpse," "5:00 Shadow,"

"Metropolis," "Angel From Lebanon," "Frozen Charlotte,"

"The Two Georges"), Amy Taylor (violin on "The Ugly

Buttling," "Childhood's End," "Exquisite Corpse," "They

Come on Unknown Nights," "Dawning Star," "Frozen

Charlotte"), Kristin Snyder (viola on "The Ugly Buttling,"

"Childhood's End," "They Come on Unknown Nights,"

"Dawning Star," "Frozen Charlotte"), Laura Dent (cello on "The Ugly Buttling,"

"Childhood's End," "They Come on Unknown Nights,"

"Dawning Star"), Okorie Johnson (cello on "The Ugly

Buttling," "Childhood's End," "They Come on Unknown


Nights," "Dawning Star," "Frozen Charlotte"), Janusch

(Czech speaking voice on "Exquisite Corpse")

Style: Fringes of Jazz

Review Published: October 2004

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and a string section that includes violinist Amy Taylor, violist Kristin Snyder and cellists Laura Dent and Okorie Johnson, create a sound that draws from Henry Cow on “Writing Blind,” skewed soul on “Choombachang,” Emerson, Lake and Palmer on “The Ugly Buttlings” and Van Der Graaf Generator on the anthemic “The Man in the Skin Painted Suit,” without being directly imitative. The Muffins lack the bombast and melodrama of some of the progressive groups that are their progenitors and favour a more relaxed approach.

That's not to say there aren't moments of chaos and rapid shifts in time and feel. “Angel from Lebanon” starts lyrically enough, but soon segues into a section that revolves around a foreboding bass ostinato over which dissonant piano chords and outré

horns build to a dark intensity before moving into a keyboard solo that harkens back to Soft Machine and, to some extent, National Health.

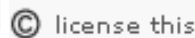
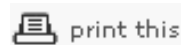
Tracks including “5:00 Shadow,” featuring some fine improvisation by Allen, Scott and Elliott, show a looser improvisational approach, as does the free jazz of “Metropolis.” “Dawning Star” feels like a more assertive play on Brian Eno's ambient music, while “They Come on Unknown Nights” represents a skewed chamber music.

The question, after 78 minutes of varying moods, colours, rhythms and harmonies that range from the melodious to the oblique is this: does it hang together as a focused piece of music? The answer is an undeniable yes. Stylistically

schizophrenic though the Muffins may be, they have devoted a significant amount of time sequencing the compositions, painting a broader picture; there's a clear arc here that, when taken as whole, tells its story through its very diversity. *Double Negative* lays waste to claims that progressive rock is inherently anachronistic. With a wealth of ideas executed with a large palette the Muffins show that it is not only alive, but moving forward.

Visit [the Muffins](#) on the web.

~ [John Kelman](#)



When not writing feverishly for AAJ, John Kelman contributes to the Canadian magazines Planet Jazz and The Jazz

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