

Billboard

The Sicilian Jazz Project

Released: October, 27, 2008

Record Label: True North

Album Review

Considering his roots, the Sicilian Jazz Project is a logical step for Toronto, Ontario, Canada based electric guitarist Michael Occhipinti, whose father, Giorgio Occhipinti, was a member of a late-'40s group based in Modica, Italy. Using vocalists, a string quartet, and horn complement from the Neufeld-Occhipinti Jazz Orchestra, the synthesis of modern jazz charts, folk, popular, and chamber music folded into traditional songs from his original homeland makes for a stunning amalgam where old musics agreeably meet new styles halfway. Brother Roberto Occhipinti plays bass and produced the session, some stirring crooning vocals from Dominic Mancuso are featured, while the accordion of Luis Simão is as present as Michael Occhipinti's silver threaded amplified and processed sound. Strains from the Middle East, latter period multi-cultural Duke Ellington, Latin America, and urban Canada are slipped in. There's a range of emotional content that is hard to dismiss or deny, as the players deeply feel this music, bringing it to joyous highs and sub-strata lows, positioned in a hopeful and richly rendered framework. Dance music is an undeniable component, starting with a signature song "The Almond Sorters," a fast, string heavy waltz flavored by the wise oud of Levon Ichkhanian, pungent electric violin of Hugh Marsh, and sky high vocals of Egyptian born Maryem Hassan Tollar. In a tarantella style, "Jolla" presents itself in two and seven beats as opposed to a 12/8 meter, with Simão leading, while Occhipinti's guitar and the soprano of Ernie Tollar collectively leap and lope, then go into a rock & roll break. "The Ribbon Dancers" is most traditional, a harvest celebration in caroming straight 4/4, morphed into 3/4 under a bamboo wood flute seam from Ernie Tollar. Mancuso could easily be Caruso on his features; the hot hand clapping triple ethnic fusion "Vitti 'Na Crozza" representing a skull speaking, the string quartet waltz paeon to commitment "Nun Ti Lassu," the Bill Frisell type country and eastern wheat harvest common work song "Cantu Ri Li Schuggiatura," and "The Sulphur Miner" mixing dour and dainty chordal tonalities with spaciness and ultra-high drama. Of the pieces that stand apart from the others, "Ciuri Ciuri" is a joyous, modern big-band tune about giving and returning love from the perspective of a beautiful flower, while "Nnuena" mixes somewhat deviously premeditated Sicilian and reggae or ska elements in a swing jazz broth, accented by Simão's basil leaf accordion. This is not just a mere spicy meatball of tomato sauced music as it is a full seven courses of international cuisine, a triumphant recording on many levels, and one that should be given full due diligence for satisfying audio digestion. It's highly recommended, no matter where your palliate and taste levels lie. ~ Michael G. Nastos, All Music Guide