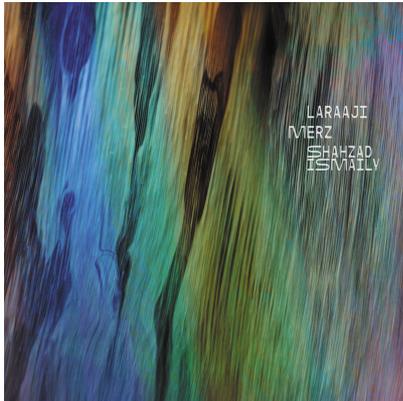




IRASCIBLE MUSIC



LARAAJI : MERZ : SHAHZAD ISMAILY (UK/US)

Album: Dreams Of Sleep And Wakes Of Sound

Label: Dampfzentrale Bern

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On «Dreams Of Sleep And Wakes Of Sound», British musician Merz collaborates with two US artists, Laraaji and Shahzad Ismaily. The record is released as a double LP by Dampfzentrale Bern, a venue for contemporary dance and music.

Starting as a studio project by Conrad Lambert (Merz), the album later evolved to incorporate collective recordings with Laraaji and Shahzad Ismaily. The result is a coherent and cleverly built record which fulfills Conrad's musical idea of something he describes himself as «industrial devotional».

«I had this semi-serious genre title of 'Industrial Devotional'. A kind of devotional music for the post-industrial age» says UK songwriter Merz of his latest album, a three-way collaborative record with ambient pioneer Laraaji and multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaily. He continues: «I was thinking of a type of music that could co-exist in sanctified temples and in city urbanism. To add some spirituality to the material life, getting in there like a Trojan horse.»

The genesis of the album was also rooted in a deep textural essence, not only to explore a new kind of genre but to do so with a very specific palate in mind. «I wanted to make an instrumental album featuring a variety of stringed instruments: harps, zither, guitars, santoor» says Merz. «I was going to call it 'Strung Out' - terrible title.» Thankfully the terrible title was axed but the tonal mood was largely kept intact as a basis for exploration and collaboration.

Merz and Ismaily had worked together previously and the sessions for those recordings led to some ideas that spilled over into this one. «We had a few recording sessions during which we both switched around various instruments including the Chinese guzheng, the Persian santoor, an old f-hole guitar,

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a tenor guitar. We recorded around twelve tracks in those sessions, three of which are on this album» Merz says.

Laraaji was brought in when Merz decided to perform a concert in Monastic conditions, which Merz describes as: «Creating a temple-like space and requesting the discipline of silence from the audience right from entering the space to leaving the space. This project was part of my Associated Artist residency at the music and contemporary dance venue Dampfzentrale Bern.» As an artist who radiates zen-like qualities in both his personality and work - as well as being a master of the zither - Laraaji was the first artist he thought of asking to be involved.

As a result, the tracks that feature Laraaji came from a live recording of this concert as well as the rehearsals. These are then blended together with some solo tracks of Merz's, along with the aforementioned collaborations with Ismaily. So whilst this record in many ways is a collection of three people never playing together in the same room picked from different sessions, the results are remarkably coherent and unified. The sonic palate has been extended a little more than the initial plan - including the use of the Moog Rogue synthesizer - but the immersive urbanism meets rural isolation combination that Merz sought to achieve has come together with flowing grace. Strings and chimes collide to create an engulfing and transfixing album that succeeds in having the impact of an ambient album in its pull-like quality but is also rich with instrumentation and possesses a busyness to the album that doesn't rely on singular long drones.

A big part of this free-yet-coherent feeling comes from the focused spontaneity the players encouraged in one another. «The attitude towards the playing was to try and compose in the moment» Merz says. «To think of the improvisations as in-the-moment melodic compositions as opposed to experimental adventuring.» When it comes to Merz's solo pieces, he even compares the approach more to how electronic music is made. «The three solo guitar pieces were selected from around 80 guitar recordings that I made during a year. *Broken Shield* is me making one adjustment every second or so to my guitar, effects pedals or amp settings as I play the piece. In the same way an electronic music performance might manipulate sounds, but this being entirely live playing.»

For Laraaji when he listens back to the finished record it sits neatly in line with Merz's intentions for his newly created genre Industrial Devotional. «Listening to this album takes me to visions of a modern dance theatre in rigorous performance. It brings up visually and emotionally the harsh ambient conditions of urban industrial factory worker life perhaps in Asia somewhere: relentless hurried longing for relief from paralyzing life work and an anxious longing for comfort and gentleness.»

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