

A New Generation for a Mad King

John Richards, 2006

Where as much has been said about the eclectic nature of Spunk, there is something seamless and holistic about their music. Spunk's albums are not a hotchpotch of borrowed musical references, disjointed arrangements and incongruous contrasts. Any ruminations on blurring the boundaries between composition and improvisation or high and low art make no sense. This is music from a new generation for a new generation. Listening to Spunk, one is flushed down the plughole of time into a dark dank drain to be eventually washed-up on some new musical shore. The contribution and combination of Kristin Andersen, Lene Grenager, Maja Solveig Kjelstrup Ratkje, and Hild Sofie Tafjord is in no way contrived. Spunk are musicians who are part of a zeitgeist who, in their very essence, are pluralistic, in and out of certain traditions, and belong only where they have arrived. Some strange and strong cultural phenomenon is abound and Spunk are part of it.

Take "Wilderbeast" from *The Very Top of a Blue-Painted Flagpole*, the dialogue between horn, trumpet, 'crumpled' cello and voice builds to a sound world more akin to *Woyzeck* by Anton Berg or Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. We are in serious contemporary music territory here. This type of 'crazed', yet extremely powerful vocalisation is part of Maja Ratkje's repertoire. In "Flagre" from the same album, a wailing melismatic sometimes gibberish voice is set against squeaks and burbles that have all gone through the mincing machine. Taught, tense and angular gestures throughout the instrumentation build to Lene Grenager's cello line that is pure grindcore. This is extreme and unnatural stuff of grunge, sophistication and cacophony.

Other strange and bizarre combinations are at work in "Twinkle Wrinkle" from *An Absolutely Terrible Disease*. The beautiful yet haunting 'sirens', those reminiscent of Debussy's *Nocturnes*, are cast in an alien landscape that is harsh and prickly. Such 'terrible diseases' can also be found breeding in the piece "Sans". These sorts of atmospheres and strange aural imagery are part of the Spunk discourse. Spunk is not scared of being radical, and this is evident from their debut album *The Only Thing I Know Is That It Isn't a Vacuum Cleaner*. As well as producing very intimate and acoustic musical settings, Spunk's music can also be very electronic. On the above album, "Akershus" opens in a heavily processed and confined resonant space. It is like being in a jar of Alvin Lucier's *Chambers*. In the following track, "Septemberunderlaget," the ghost really is in the machine, and the listener is washed in digital artefacts from processing set to ten.

Returning to *The Very Top of a Blue-Painted Flagpole*, there is much to find and be amazed at. "Home Party" is more an orgy of unbridled musical lust. It is not everyday that the ears are confronted with clattering metal objects that resemble the sound of a sword fight duelling with an out of tune banjo (actually Lene Grenager's guitar). Quite how one arises at the idea of sprechgesanglike voice and a percussive wok-lid is a mystery. But this is the magic of Spunk. The sound of the wok-lid is all Jonty Harrison's *Klang*, but with a twisted sense of humour as someone holding the wok-lid seemingly

runs around the studio. It is not just the weird and wacky that Spunk do. There is a feeling that at any point on any recording a beautiful melody might just find its way in there. So, as the grainy oompah and labyrinth of the musical world of Spunk eat away at the sub-conscious, long may this wickedness and alchemy continue.

John Richards (Sand and kREEPA) has recently worked with Maja Ratkje on the forthcoming Sand album to be released on Soul Jazz Records, 2006.
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