

Michael Occhipinti - The Sicilian Jazz Project (True North)

This is an extremely intriguing record: one that I'd class both eclectic and adventurous, musically speaking and concept-wise, and genuinely multi-layered in all senses of the term. It takes its title from the name of the band which 2008 JUNO Award nominee Michael Occhipinti originally put together in 2004 as a special project to reshape the traditional folk music of Sicily in a modern jazz context, from the point of view of a Canadian musician born of Italian (Sicilian) immigrants and living in a multicultural environment (Toronto). The individual musical elements (and indeed, the very genres of Sicilian and jazz) might on the face of it seem illogical, if not uneasy bedfellows, but the resultant compositions prove both stimulating and inspiring, embracing a freewheeling and open-minded spirit of exploration within a sufficiently (and satisfyingly) disciplined overall framework. The original sources Michael uses (field recordings made by Alan Lomax on his 1954 tour of Sicily) cover an overwhelming variety of styles, and each of the album's nine tracks is built around – or arises out of – one of the Lomax recordings. Similarly, the musicians comprising the Sicilian Jazz Project all have expertise in global rhythms and carry within them an impressive degree of experience that ranges from Arabic, Portuguese, Brazilian, Cuban and Indian musics to classical and new-classical as well as straight jazz. The basic band lineup is accordion, saxes, trumpet, bass and drums, but three tracks also employ a moody string section. Among the latter can be found the album's highlights; the ballad Nun Ti Lassu features the impassioned singing of Dominic Mancuso, who also appears on the extended standout Sulphur Miner's Lament, whereas the atmosphere-laden opening piece The Almond Sorters features guest singer Maryem Hassan Tollar and an oud player. Michael's own unabashed penchant for the sound of the electric guitar also surfaces from time to time with some really juicy solo passages on several of the pieces. Happy-go-lucky-sounding traditional Sicilian dance tunes or songs form the springboard for some delectable jazzy syncopated improvisations on Jolia and The Ribbon Dancers especially, whereas a spicy Moorish-Qawwali rhythm handclaps its way through Vitti 'Na Crozza and a Jamaican dub groove springs eternal from Nnuena. Even if you don't normally appreciate jazz, there'll be a lot for you to admire and enjoy in the music conjured by this brave and imaginative project from a musician whose previous venture, I discover from the liner notes, was an exploration of the songs of Bruce Cockburn from a jazz perspective (now that I must hear!). The digipack contains excellent background notes too. Integrity of vision, spirit and musicianship go hand in hand on this unique venture.

David Kidman March 2009