



BLOG

CD Review

THE AVENGERS

On A Mission

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A person could be excused if at first glance of the cover of The Avengers' debut album, the humorously entitled *On A Mission*, they perceived it to be something other than an extraordinary progressive jazz-fusion album. Despite possessing an avid, consuming love for progressive jazz dating back almost four decades, I still cannot ever recall coming across a jazz band naming themselves after a group of comic superheroes and sporting an album cover depicting themselves in all their crime-fighting splendor.

Having once been a comic collector, myself, in a former life, the album held immediate intrigue. Before even removing the CD from its "marvel"-ous packaging and hearing the first note played, I had an inkling that this was not only going to be something different, but something very special, as well. (Alas, my "spidey senses" didn't fail me, as I was soon to discover.)

The Avengers are led by the dynamic duo of guitarist Bele Beledo -- its fearless leader, and composer of seven of the album's eight tracks -- and keyboardist Adam Holzman (his faithful "second-in-command," who contributed the album's great artwork), and supported solidly by renowned veterans, bassist Lincoln Goines and drummer Kim Plainfield.

[As many of you reading this might already be aware, Adam Holzman is well-known and -respected in jazz circles, being the former keyboardist and band leader for one of jazz's most enduring icons, the late Miles Davis (an association that spanned five years). He is also known for his work with the late Grover Washington, Jr, and, more recently, Adam has recorded and is touring with prog giant, Steve Wilson. Not unlike that of fellow band member Lincoln Goines, Holzman's resume reads like a "who's who" of modern jazz and progressive music. (Although not as extensive, both guitarist Beledo' and drummer Plainfield's respective bodies of work are quite impressive, as well.)]

... But enough of their past exploits; *On A Mission* provides more than ample evidence that these valiant preservers of truth and justice are nowhere near ready to hang up their capes. This record is 'something different,' indeed -- and in a very good way.

The album starts off with a bang; the title song is a lush, concise piece which immediately puts the group's sensitive dynamics and strong melodic sensibilities on display. It is a powerful opener: full of promise and adventure, and an accurate gauge of more to come.

Through this and everything that follows, the fretwork from Beledo is nothing less than spectacular and unquestionably world-class. His rhythm work is fresh and vivacious. His tones are full-bodied, as evidenced through his towering, emotion-drenched solos and the polished lead voicings by which he articulates themes and melody lines on numerous cuts. His compositions are intricate, inventive and masterfully plotted, producing songs that immediately render you captive.



Holzman's bold, courageous chord work serves as the perfect backdrop for Beledo's grandiose sonic excursions. Adam also proves himself to be an equally-capable lead voice, contributing some breathtaking solo work -- particularly evident on "Portia" and "Siddhartha's Return." While remaining poised, poignant and commanding in his supportive roles, the album features sparkling work throughout from Holzman on synth, organ and Fender Rhodes.

Propelled by Goines' lively, ultra-solid bass work and Plainfield's flowing, understated, complimentary grooves, The Avengers leave no doubt that they are a stellar team -- lean, imposing, and undeniably worthy of their heroic credentials. "Raulendo," "No Big Deal" and the album's closer, "Jimmy O'Donnell's Air," further evidence the group's penchant for rewing up commanding melodic themes while effortlessly hugging the tight, twisting turns with spectacular style and agility. Their light, joyous interplay and ESP-like collective continuity stands out over the disc's entirety.

Despite the most challenging and ambitious nature of the album's compositions, our heroes always sound like they are thoroughly enjoying their work. While remaining ever respectful of one another, their efforts never sound labored or anything less than tight, bubbling and razor-sharp. By all accounts, these four gentlemen are a truly potent legion, firmly committed to their cause. This is profound progressive jazz-fusion, unafraid to flex its muscles and unleash super-human feats whenever the circumstances warrant such bold displays of musical gallantry.

Given my being more akin to the status of an ordinary citizen than that of a jazz superhero, I can only speculate that the type of work The Avengers have commissioned themselves to is best left to seasoned, committed professionals such as themselves. Only the highest echelon of accomplished journeymen -- with comparably excessive levels of talent and skills -- would dare confront such daunting tasks. (... That's right: don't try this at home, kids.) Whatever the mission, this agile quartet is ready and able to spring into action.

Jazz, today, is a victimized genre: punch drunk from being continually beaten down by its "smooth" exploiters. Confused and staggering, it none-the-less trods on, however unsure of its destination; a sad state of current affairs for a proud, pedigreed art with its storied legacy. In such perilous times as these, where the fate of an entire genre hangs desperately in the balance, I can think of no better saviors to call upon than The Avengers.

On A Mission is a triumph. It is absolutely "the stuff of legends," embodying all of the superb, adventurous qualities that remind me of why I fell in love with progressive jazz so long ago. Do yourself a favor and buy a copy of this superlative work ... help support their noble cause!

If, indeed, jazz is to be saved from the lurking evil forces which plot its destruction, it will be as a result of such uncompromising, herculean efforts as this.