

Past: The Del-Byzanteens - Lies to Live By

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I remember putting this record on a while ago and my roommate said “they sound hysterical”. They do. Lies to Live By is a deeply anxious album. Plenty of discomfort exists within these seven songs. What makes them interesting, besides the oftentimes panic-inducing noises and cryptic lyrics, is what the musicians became later. Speculating whether or not this strange uncomfortable album helped them to fully realize their artistic visions is something I don’t feel like doing. Sure I could talk about Jim Jarmusch and Phil Kline, but even without that illustrious pedigree the Del-Byzanteens were something special.

First of all there is that name which is beyond bizarre. Next there is the sound itself whose oftentimes unconventional percussion seems to recall that of a proto Cop Shoot Cop. Interesting too is how many of the songs hint at the maniac energy of mid-80s Sonic Youth. Of course neither one of these should be that surprisingly. Sonic Youth started out in the No Wave scene before gradually smoothing out their sound in the late 80s/early 90s. Cop Shoot Cop was interested an unconventional approach and may or may not have been at least mildly aware of their aesthetics. Both bands were in New York City so the chances of at least some exposure to the Del-Byzanteens is not beyond the realm of possibility.

Classification of what they do is quite difficult. They are not quite No Wave, they are more conventional than that. Nor are they exactly dance, their rhythms are always a little too off, frustrating attempts at a danceable groove (though their bassist is pretty damn incredible). Post Punk is probably the best description but even this sort of fails to accurately capture what they do. There are moments where they almost move into the kind of territory that fuels roughly 80% of all of DFA’s current roster of artists. Yes they do a little bit of everything and they do it in under 35 minutes.

Opening up with the hyperactivity of the title track the sound is overwhelming. The listener hears a band sounding like it is a few seconds away from completely losing it. Such a delicate balance to maintain and they manage quite nicely. Draft Riot is a mad rush of sound with samples filtering their way into the mix adding to the sense of confusion that the lyrics highlight. Sounding akin to the Slits with a New Wave edge on Sally Go Around the Roses serves as a nice relatively subdued break from the indignant shouts, questions without answers, and endlessly shifting rhythms. By far the best piece is the eerie Welcome Machines, complete with a churning sensibility and skeletal metallic percussion. Ensuring that they give a glimpse of what could have been explored on later releases they end the album off with whatever Apartment 13 could be categorized as: noise, jazz, classical, or a particularly nimble industrial groove.

With a raw aesthetic and primal energy, too normal for the experimentation of DNA too weird for any kind of Liquid Liquid style revival, they remain aloof a lone transmission from a surreal world.