



WISE MEN CAN BE WRONG
Nils Wogram Root 70
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Nils Wogram – Trombone

Hayden Chisholm – Sax

Matt Penman – Bass

Jochen Rückert – Drums

NILS WOGRAM ROOT 70 // WISE MEN CAN BE WRONG

Between these covers lies the collective musical travelogue of the now staunchly middle-aged jazz gentlemen of "Root 70."

Their journey has been one in which beauty and darkness, sweat and blood, pleasure and sorrow have all been gleaned along the way. For these minds constitute a strange land: a land lit by the rays of genius yet beset by all the trials and tribulations that life on the eternal jazz road brings. This is a road which these lads have been roaming for more than two decades.

Root 70's career has been an erratic one, months of gregariousness playing in the likes of Cave 61 in Heilbronn or the "Caipi Bar" in Bedburg-Hau and a plethora of other faceless German towns, alternating with lonely Goethe Institute tours of almost every country ending with the suffix "stan". For all the inconsistency of their march to fame, they've managed to earn the unanimous admiration of their contemporaries and to forge an ineradicable place for themselves in the international microtonal and odd-meter jazz hall of fame. With four marriages, eight children, and two mortgages under their belt, the lads are still firing, and their decision to cut an album of standards in these times of the hyper-inflation of musical complexity is nothing less than bold.

It has been several years since I last had the pleasure to write about this band. This time an ailing kidney (I kid thee not) has kept the author on this side of the Atlantic, and the studio sides, along with a black and white photo of the band, are all the author has to work from. The faces are still recognizable, though I can clearly discern the marks left by a life dedicated to jazz. Rückert strikes me as whimsical and reflective, and I can almost see the title of one of his masterpieces, "Sadness Surrounds Us", etched into his pupils. Penman comes over as quietly confident, a man who knows his bass inside out from spike to tuning pegs. Wogram is serenely relaxed as ever, and alto man Chisholm could easily pass for an IRA hitman or a coiled python ready to strike.

The premise for these sides was a simple one: each member of the combo brought his favorite standards and the selections were to be honed on some club dates in Berlin, one of which bassist Penman had to miss due to NYC traffic. Immediately after two smoking-hot nights in the A-trane Club, the band hit the Funkhaus Studio at Nalepastrasse Berlin and cut the songs into the tapes, once again giving us the pleasure of enjoying almost exclusively first takes. That's always how these men roll in the studio.

The album "Wise Men Can Be Wrong" (a titled gleaned from the gorgeous lyrics of "I Concentrate On You") is a wonderful take on one of the American songbook greats. With every song, the deep love and respect that these musicians share for the tradition shines through and dare I say, fills me with hope. Having taken their jazz to such daring extremes on past albums such as "Fahrvergnuegen" and "Root 70 on 52nd 1/4 St" it is delightful and deeply satisfying to hear them return to some of the music that surely first inspired them as young jazz cubs.

There is no irony here; simply profound and nuanced musicianship returning to simple song forms and breathing new life into them. If my notes for this gem are more brief than others, it is because I believe the band has made a statement with these sides that needs little if any justification or explanation, and I for one will have this baby spinning for a good while to come.

Many of us set out on life-long journeys and never return. It is a joy to hear some wayfarers arriving back home.

Ahmet Shabo
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