



EARTH PEOPLE

Waking the Living (Undivided Vision)

Reviewed by Chris Forbes



Growing up in the seventies seemed pretty boring to me while I was there. Compared with the exotic sixties, the seventies seemed to be a decade of cultural and musical conformity. With a few bright exceptions, I found it very difficult to connect with the dominant values of the decade, particularly disco, the "fusak" jazz groups like Spyro Gyra, and the rising arena rock genre as typified by REO Speedwagon. By the end of the 70's, the decade seemed to be dominated by the corporate take-over of popular music. However, after the vacuous music of the 80s, and the corporate co-opting of the grunge/alternative movement, and the growing fragmented US culture, I'm learning to appreciate the decade I have always loved to hate.

Many new groups on the fringes of jazz and rock, which are breathing new life into older moribund genres, fuel my growing appreciation of the "Me" decade. One of the most interesting groups is the Staten Island based collective, Earth People. Earth People's personnel roster is a who's who of New York free jazz names including, at times, Sabir Mateen, Karen Borca, the ubiquitous Daniel Carter, Cecil Taylor protege

Mark Hennen and many younger downtown musicians. But the nucleus of the group centers on guitarist Doug Principato, reedman Jason Candler and master percussionist Andre Martinez. The group's concept is communal, an updating of mega-funk groups like P-Funk and Earth, Wind, & Fire. But while funk is a significant element in the group's sound, it is mixed with deep world music grooves that are driven by Martinez' Afro-Cuban percussion mastery. Mix in a focus on hypnotic jams based on early electric Miles and Pharoah Sanders' Impulse albums and you have the essence of Earth People.

Waking the Living, the group's first CD, is a global free-jazz party. The disc consists of two extended tracks. "Earth People," which clocks in at over 40 minutes, is based on a hypnotic Cuban 6/8 groove. The track is driven by Martinez' Bata influenced congas in lockstep with inventive and rock solid bass lines from Francois Grillot. The large ensemble doesn't solo in conventional free-jazz form. Instead, like so many Miles influenced groups of the early 70's, the collective groove is of paramount importance. The rhythm section churns away polyrhythmically and the horns weave in and out, creating another background texture. Over this rich stew, vocalist M chants afro-blues influenced lines, which provide a focal point for the track.

"Don't Think About It" is more funk influenced, introduced by a slap-bass line from Gary Miles that is worthy of Larry Graham. The rhythm section shows genuine virtuosity, seamlessly modulating from tempo to tempo without losing a beat! Again, the mix is homogenous rather than the traditional horn solo/rhythm section hierarchy of jazz. Imagine Sly and the Family Stone inviting the horns of Sun Ra's band to play with them and then inviting June Tyson to sing over the top and you get an idea of the effect of this track. At Times the density of the group can get a bit overwhelming, especially when all the horns start to scream for long periods at the same time. But no matter how wild the free-jazz element gets, it's always anchored by the rhythm section's earthy funk.

The disc is not perfect. It would be hard for a group made up of so many strong and diverse voice to push the envelope without the danger of a misstep or two. Both tracks have moments where the free-jazz freak outs go on just a bit too long and are so dense to be overwhelming. The group's second disc addresses this weakness, concentrating on shorter, more diverse tracks, and a smaller ensemble. But the freshness of the group's concept more than compensates these weaknesses. Earth People recalls a time when it seemed that it was "so groovy now that people are finally getting together." By taking this 70s influenced ideal deep into the 21st century, groups like Earth People make me feel hopeful for the future of this country's culture. Fresh and original collective music that respects no arbitrary boundaries still lives!

[Pick this up at CDBaby and www.earthpeople.tv]

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