

MELODY PARKER – *Archipelago* (2016 / no label cited)

If you are, as I am, a fan of The Quirky Female Jazz Cotillion (Carla Bley, Annette Peacock, Lorraine Feather, Laurie Anderson, Flora Purim, Joan LaBarbara, Ursula Dudziak, Lene Lovich, Meredith Monk, Dagmar, etc.), and offbeat groups like Penguin Café Orchestra, then you're gonna love the hell out of Melody Parker 'cause the singer marries a number of modes so semi-orthodox oddly and so fetchingly that she may well have invented a new sub-category, one I'm damned if I can lay a name to. *Archipelago* is simultaneously daring and faithful to several templates, not to mention very striking as a debut, and seemingly the work of a veteran, road-worked, cabaret chanteuse with a pronounced taste for slyly stretching boundaries in perky, decorously twisted, inventive, and energetic ways.

There's a ton of pop here as well, but not of a sort you'll ever hear on moribund radio dial positions, as well as Swingle Singery Betty Crocker vibes with Phil Glassian inflections, not to mention pre- and post-bop kinetic jazz. From the git-go, the listener is infected by the snappy melodics (so put away the coffee, Bobo, y'ain't gonna need it today!), and I detect some Meryn Cadell as well, esp. in "Upon the Dune", with its way cool goofy lyrics - ALL Parker's lyrics are puzzling, thought-provoking, oft surreal (the sort you encounter when reading J.G. Ballard's *Vermillion Sands* cycle), and fodder for a million-and-one Critical Analysis classes - but the jazz intrusion is serious while grin-inducing, and I'd go so far as to venture there are hues of neoclassicism, of the sort which rose when the more cabaretic Nonesuch electronicists and avant-gardists were treading Earthly terrain in the tempestuous 60s.

Much of what goes on in *Archipelago* is actually pyrotechnic, especially in the first cut, "Love", but so classily contextualized and embroidered that you almost don't quite catch the fact, too busy dancing the electronic cha-cha right from the first bars and measures, or perhaps a caffeinated conga line as the inner pulse gets ever more torso oriented. The session musicians are professorially prim, precise, and percolating, as is Ms. Parker. The main catz are Mark Allen-Piccolo (gtr., bass, bells), Jordan Glenn (drums, perc.), and Cory Wright (clarinet, flute, sax), flanking Parker's accordion (!), piano, and bells, one and all pinning the rhythms and marvelously off-kilter melodics to the floorboards. Then an array of well-chosen sessioneers beef up the quartet, making the structures all the more artful while spindizzy.

The singer's never-failing, after-school. girlfriend-next-door vocals frequently masque the true text and suntext of the aforementioned poetry ("I built my house upon the dune, to watch it fall", Time will get bamboozled and baffled", "I won't poison your song with the noise in my mind", etc.), always amusing, existentially abstruse, and sometimes creepy, as though Pippi Longstocking and Dorothy from Oz were Tin Pan Alley lyricists, but Tim Burton somehow got to 'em. Regardless, trust me, anyone who can show up for the cosmic audition with this much talent and all that sweetly cheeky bravado is very swiftly going to be a *force majeure*.
