

Selected album reviews: **Mames Babegenush With Strings(2017)**

fRoots

View From A Drifting Room is a fixated and fascinating exposition of drifting ennui – a microcosm of this album's wide, deliberately sedate layering of frantic and frenetic Central European traditions and "Nordic soundscapes". This makes for a rare, assimilated take on klezmer and other itinerant traditional music, and an unwaveringly beautiful marriage of apparently disparate worlds. The visionary sound of what might have been, and of journeys and migrations that almost were. Traditional dances here are dazed and slowed and intensely focused into sharp near- unfamiliarity. Tense and intimate against a huge landscape, they are sublimity achieved through a sublimated knowledge of the migrant musician.

Honed across many years of recordings and blistering live shows, the resultant assurance and confidence – in playing and composition – is in full flower here. But where once the group's instinct was to dazzle with their undoubted virtuosity, this new project smoulders with reflection, thoughtfulness and meditative space. On this album the group are aided and expanded by the subtle embroideries of the LiveStrings string quartet. A small live audience is imported into the studio, though the chamber is played into such a sacred and vulnerable space that the crowd's presence is consistently surprising.

The musicians describe their achievement as both 'authentic' and 'pure'. But this is also the sound of a new Nordic authenticity and milieu, in which composition and interpretation reach for the ecstatic within even the most functional of everyday rites, in a construction of nagging pulses, alive and squirming under thrilling but compact brass and woodwind. Muted trumpet, plaintive and mellifluous clarinet, saxophones, flugelhorn, languid string codas, and wonderful stabs and staggers of accordeon, create a heady slew of emotions. Stark soloing and a minimum of fuss. Emptiness, and a fanfare of loss. Severe and painstaking beauty. In penultimate track, Strannik, this icy and elegiac ambition shines as a slow, stately wash of klezmer flows gently and unhurriedly into mantra.

John Pheby (fRoots, UK)

Songlines

A klezmer outfit and a jazzy string quartet truly swing. This fifth helping of Babegenush is as joyous, sorrowful and deftly produced as the group's previous albums, and this time it comes with a side serving of strings. This truly is high-end klezmer, which accurately locates the beating heart of the tradition while simultaneously transcending it with inflections from other genres. This instrumentation of the Danish ensemble combines the usual suspects of clarinet, upright bass and accordion with the less predictable flugelhorn, sax and drums. The result is a sound that conjures up the old scene of klezmer; learning whatever instruments were available to them in the shtetls yet melding their individual voices into a life-affirming whole.

That said, while the band have one foot firmly in the past, the other is thrust fervently into the future. The string quartet accompanying them here provide the perfect voicings for close jazz harmonies and bolster the horn improvisations on tracks such as 'Mountain Dance' to bring the wild music of Eastern Europe and the sounds of the New York cellar bar ever closer together. Party tune 'Tornado Albastru' and the thoughtful 'View from a Drifting Room' are just two notable points on an invigorating journey packed with enjoyable diversions to a carousing close.

★★★★

Tom Newell (Songlines, UK)

One World Music Radio

With Strings by Mames Babegenush has a colourful vibrancy all of its own, its rhythmic full flowing and multi instrumental nature, creates an energy that is totally irresistible. Its lush and passionate tapestry of effervescent music will manifest itself into one of the most addictive albums you have heard for a long time.

Steve Sheppard (One World Music Radio)

All About Jazz

It's Eastern Europe meets Scandinavia. It's impossible to listen to their exciting energy without feeling the urge to dance, move some part of one's body, or simply feel better about the world in general. The band is crisp, with top players, intriguing originals, tight arrangements, and delightful wit. While it isn't strictly the jazz we're used to, it shares the same ideals of joy, mastery, inventiveness, and soul. Recommended!

Dr. Judith Schlesinger, Senior reviewer and columnist (AllAboutJazz.com)

Blogfoolk

A roaring sextet, with added strings for the Occasion, Mames Babegenush has defined a very organized creative space, in which "Nordic atmospheres" are layered with passion for Eastern European melodies. When listening to the rich and articulated album you hear six musician's passion, but also their unity and solid competences... The band can build anything on its elements, without hesitating on traditional parts and projecting a flow in new non-dogmatic directions. Basically, the sound is perfect, impeccable.

Daniele Cestellini (Blogfoolk, Italy)

JazzQuad

Fifth album by Mames Babegenush was my first introduction to Klezmer made in Denmark - a great surprise for me. A delicate encounter between traditional Jewish melodies of Southeastern Europe and the deep and thorough mentality of highly skillful Scandinavian musicians. The results are impressive and extends our understanding of Klezmer's possibilities. And simply provide great music.

Leonid Auskern (JazzQuad, Russia)