

JAMES TAYLOR QUARTET: 'Soundtrack From Electric Black' (Audio Network)

Written by Charles Waring

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In the vanguard of the original acid jazz explosion of the late-'80s, the **James Taylor Quartet** are now rightly considered a British institution. They've undoubtedly been one of the hardest-working bands in the UK during the last thirty years, racking up hundreds (maybe even thousands) of gigs and releasing a whopping 27 albums (this calculation excludes numerous compilations, as well as three LPs under the name the New Jersey Kings, and six album-length forays into library music). There's no doubt, though, that 'Soundtrack From Electric Black' is a unique entry in their extensive discography and a major watermark in their storied history. That's because it's the first time that the group have recorded in tandem with a full orchestra (they recorded it in the iconic Abbey Road studio, no less). The end result is a glorious widescreen version of the group's signature meld of funk, soul, and jazz flavours.

From their inception way back in 1987, JTQ have shown an appreciation of vintage movie and TV soundtrack music. In fact, the focus of their debut album, 'Mission Impossible,' was film and small screen themes that included their acid jazz takes on Lalo Schifrin's classic title cut as well as John Barry's 'Goldfinger' and Herbie Hancock's 'Blow Up.' Now, though, 31 years later, Hammond hero Taylor and his cohorts have created their own soundtrack album and it proves to be a thrilling cache of cinematic grooves and moods.

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The opener, 'Electric Black,' is a tense piece with dramatic orchestral flourishes and replete with stylistic echoes of Lalo Schifrin during his 'Dirty Harry' phase in the early '70s. It's not derivative in any way, though - rather (and this goes for the album as a whole) it's more of a homage to American movie music of the '60s and '70s. More action-packed tracks come in the shape of the propulsive 'Black Belting' driven by wah-wah guitar, the more exotic 'Heidi's Revenge' - characterised by dancing flutes and legato strings - and the Latin-flavoured 'The Frug,' with its exquisite interplay of woodwind, horns, and strings over an energetic backbeat driven by the quartet. In contrast, Brazilian samba rhythms define the breezy 'Sunshine In Her Smile' and the more urgent 'Making Tracks,' the latter featuring a rangy solo flute. There are some delicious down-tempo moments, too, exemplified by 'Sweet Revival,' which begins with delicate harp arpeggios preceding a gorgeously mellow groove.

'Soundtrack From Electric Black' certainly takes the James Taylor Quartet's music to another level. Though the presence of a full orchestra imbues the album with a grandiose feel at times, it's never over-bearing and the symphonic enhancements don't diminish the down-to-earth directness of the band's unique brand of jazz-funk, which is still the sonic core of this album. Their best album yet? Quite possibly. Electrifying!

(CW) 4/5