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ALBUM REVIEWS

3'AIN 'SEA OF STORIES' CD (CHOUX DE BRUXELLES) 4/5

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Sea of Stories is the first full album release by Brussels-based trio 3'AIN; they're purveyors of a hard-to-pin-down sound which they say 'blends Eastern and Western music across genres such as jazz, blues, oriental 'maqam', funk, Balkan, ska and rock'. The trio have an unconventional set-up in that trumpet and flugelhorn player Yamen Martini and bassist Otto Kint are joined by accordionist Piet Maris. Each band member has their own projects running in parallel to 3'AIN. Martini, originally from Syria has written music for theatre which 'strives to transcend borders and to challenge binary visions of identity and belonging', he's also played with accordionist Maris in his long-established band Jaune Toujours,

apparently named after a virulent bout of hepatitis. Maris' own playing style is heavily influenced by the musical heritage of the Slovakian Romani community, evident in the harmonic scales employed on the album. Bassist Otto Kint has his own quintet, the Otto Kintet, characterised by some 'quirky grooves and whacky time signatures'.

I was puzzled by the name 3'AIN, but it turns out that they're so named after the 18th letter of the Arabic alphabet, 'ain' in transliteration and frequently abbreviated to the number 3. The trio's album is issued on Chou de Bruxelles, Maris' management company and label set up with a krm emphasis on multiculturalism; it's taken Jaune Toujours all over Europe and to Womad and the Cambridge Folk Festival.

'Schuimkop' opens the record with a haunting drone which leaks out of Maris' accordion, its unexpected melancholy is incrementally lifted by the harmony of Martini's trumpet as his sound ebbs and flows from east to west. Simultaneously Kint's bass vibrations add a tension broken only by the rich and reedy notes now radiating from Maris' accordion. The instruments have equal weight and warmth, no single one dominating which makes focusing on the sound for its own sake an absolute sensual pleasure.

Any album incorporating a tune called 'Scrambled Ensor' is bound to pique the interest of fans of Belgian proto-surrealist and allegorical painter James Ensor. The meanderings of the accordion and the flugelhorn details emphasise the artist's almost supernatural exploration of identity, while the timbre of the instruments serves as a metaphor for the shifting shadow world created by the painter. Ensor himself was an improviser on the harmonium and devoted his later years to the instrument; the tune ends with the sound of waves washing around Ensor's native Ostend.

'Meeting Issues' shuffles into being with what sounds like padding footsteps but it's surely Kint's kn-gers as they pull at his instrument. The sound is rich, the trumpet and accordion moving around each other before knding unison. Flemish folk influences, krst cool and angular then soft and warm, rise up before falling as these contrasts are played out.

On the closing 'Perron 0' the album lives up to its maritime name; seagulls squawk as the trio's abrupt and rhythmical stomp evolves into a hooky tune. It's composed by Martini, a memorable dynamism mysteriously radiates as the accordion pumps, wheezes and grows its way through the track. Shadowy early cinema is evoked and there's a cutting brevity as the flugelhorn rides this swell.

There's an out-of-reach and enigmatic quality to Sea of Stories which keeps drawing me back into its music. A dream-like visual sensibility and the warmth of its harmonies give the music a physicality which virtually lives and breathes.