

music

this week's essential reading

{ 'Warrior Petraeus' by Thomas Powers, *The New York Review of Books*

} Interesting essay on the former US army general David Petraeus's career from Vietnam to Afghanistan. The ideas that shaped him, and how he shaped Washington's strategy

Freaky & fried-out

An album by the Stark Reality, recorded for a children's show on American public television, is one of the most memorable examples of jazz fusion from the 1970s, writes Andy Battaglia

"Wouldn't you like to be a whale and sail serenely by - an 80-foot whale, from your tip to your tail, and a tiny, briny eye?" It's a good question, and one likely to lead to an answer in the affirmative.

It is not, however, a question on any prospective lists of likely subject matter for jazz songs. But there it is in "The Whale", a peculiar bit of brilliance by a supremely odd jazz fusion band known as the Stark Reality.

Formed in the late 1960s in the United States, in Boston, the Stark Reality made just a few records before being cast off and forgotten in the annals of music history. There they remained, forgotten for decades, until some of their stirring sounds found new life in samples for modern-day hip-hop beats and many-textured backing tracks.

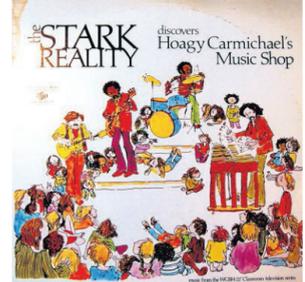
It's a common story, visited upon thousands of strange records collecting dust in consignment stores and speciality shops all across the world. They're numerous enough - and rediscovered so constantly and consistently - to make one wonder if in the archives of time lurk hidden depths that may never, ever, be fully understood.

Not unlike the oceans called home by the whale, a curious creature that comes under observation by the Stark Reality in phantasmagorical musical mode.

The song *The Whale* is winningly weird in its own right, but it also happens to reside on an album with an even weirder distinction: its singular status as a freaky, fried-out remake of a children's record by the early 20th-century pop whiz Hoagy Carmichael.

Carmichael wrote the music for a store of classic pop songs that became standards of the form, including *Stardust*, *Georgia on My Mind*, *Heart and Soul*, and many more. He was a distinguished artist, a debonair gentleman in smartly tailored suits, who composed stately melodies and sophisticated musical charts. He also

wrote a clutch of charming, cheery



Hoagy Carmichael's Music Shop
The Stark Reality
Now Again Records
Dh33

tunes for children gathered on an album titled *Hoagy Carmichael's Havin' a Party*.

It was endearing but a little hokely, with an innocent sort of gee-whiz 1950s air about it, but the songs changed shape considerably when the Stark Reality gave them another pass. The band did so in 1970 for a public television series to educate kids in America, at the behest of Carmichael's son. When they got their re-recorded versions to Carmichael himself, the composer, then 70 years old, wrote, "Out came the damndest music [I] ever heard. This is children's music? I say, 'Stark mad!'"

He went on to describe the effect of bandleader Monty Stark's singing voice as "somewhere between the filings on the edge of a pie pan and the singing voice of a guru during one of his most exalted moments".

Again Records, which grew out of the popular Los Angeles label Stones Throw.

The set comes decorated with psychedelic cover art and photographs of a band full of hippie jazz-bos in zoned-out states, entranced by the music they're playing and maybe certain other tools of art at work in their systems (smokable tools, it seems safe to infer from the liner notes). All of that signals that the realm of children's music has been left far, far behind.

But the Stark Reality were strange even in the realm of jazz fusion, which made strangeness and experimentalism a high priority. Few genres have been as excessive in their zeal for both as fusion was in its late-1960s and 1970s heyday, when jazz reached out to incorporate the electrified sounds of funk and rock.

The Stark Reality were proficient with all the disparate sounds at their disposal, as exemplified by an early song of their own called *The New Generation*. It starts out slow, with bleary notes from an electrified vibraphone, before bolting upright with a funky walking bass line and rhythmic sounds from horns. They carry on in a familiar sort of jazz-funk vamp before layered multi-part vocals wander in, with signs of the times in tow. "We're the new world generation, full of war, strife, and hate," the band sings. "The status quo has got to go - we hope it's not too late."

A similar tone plays out on *The Stark Reality Discovers Hoagy Carmichael's Music Shop*, which marries elements of the original children's tunes with surprise digressions like a call-out to notorious cult leader and convicted mass murderer Charles Manson. What might have been meant by such a disorienting invocation is hard to divine, but fusion was nothing if not unrestrained in its indulgences - and overindulgences.

It was also, almost uniformly, nothing if not wowing for its musicianship. For all of their exploratory

looseness, the Stark Reality were an improbably tight band that locked into grooves and spacey excursions fortified enough to maintain their striking shapes as they travel forward through time. It's that quality of fusion that makes the genre a treasure trove for sample-hunters and aficionados of mind-bending beats in the present day.

But all sorts of other fusion aspects are as otherworldly in their effects. For a wealth of those, attention is well-rewarded by a new archival set featuring jazz legend Miles Davis in the quintet with which he first launched forth into fusion in earnest. With three CDs and a DVD of performance footage, *Live in Europe 1969: The Bootleg Series Vol. 2* captures a fleeting time of transition, after Davis's adventurous but still recognisably "jazz"-minded run in the mid-'60s and right before the release of his radical electric-storm of an album *Bitches Brew*.

The sounds are electrified but not yet completely, signalling a change still in the early real-time stages of being conceived. In *Directions*, the first song in a fierce live set from Antibes, a resort town in south-east France, the band launches into a sort of free-form jam that leans forward into the future without foregoing its ties to the past. Saxophonist Wayne Shorter remains from Davis's famous mid-60s quintet, but other than the bandleader, he is the only player not new to the enterprise.

Drummer Jack DeJohnette sounds like he has a lot to prove, pounding out flurries of rhythm with momentous energy and force. Bassist Dave Holland lays out fat, round, robust lines that bob and float around, subtly but significantly. On electric piano, Chick Corea sounds curious about the new instrument beneath his fingers, excited by its potential but maybe not yet fully convinced of its promise. ("Chick wasn't sure about playing it when he started playing with me," Davis wrote later, "but I made him play it.")

Then there's Davis himself,



The Stark Reality, left to right: Phil Morrison, John Abercrombie, Vinnie Johnson and Monty Stark. Courtesy of Score Press

whose presence is felt even when he's laying back and not blowing a note. On the DVD, featuring a concert in Berlin filmed for German television, Davis is every bit the manly minx, exuding mystery

and mystique while handling a trumpet painted cherry red (and half black) to offer a new look for the new age.

There's no mistaking his horn for the brassy gold instrument with

with changes in tone while trying things out on new tunes (like *Miles Runs the Voodoo Down*, released in recorded form the next year on the epochal *Bitches Brew*) and old favourites (among them *Milestones*, dating back to an album in 1958, and *Round Midnight*, from a little earlier).

It's fusion in the truest sense, in that you can hear the fusing actually going on. Much that came to follow in the wide-reaching name of "fusion" suggests a wonky pageant of excess guided by noble but often ultimately misbegotten ideas. Indeed, short of prog-rock in the 1970s (that graveyard of bloated double-albums and "rock-operas" about space), it's hard to think of a musical movement more maligned.

But fusion offers the true thrill of searching out to find moments of magic in music that is by no means magic all the time. Those moments are there, though, and the best of them are wowing enough to make a whale wonder what exactly is going on with all those weird humans up above.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire*, *Spin* and more.

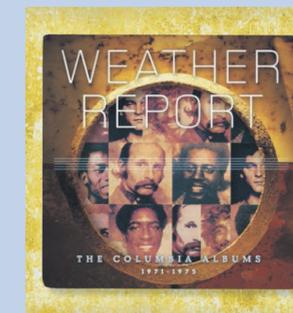
playlist

Four significant jazz fusion albums by Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea

Weather Report

The Columbia Albums 1971-1975 (2012)

This recent box set gathers six albums by a group featuring members of Miles Davis's fitful fusion bands (Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul among them). See the title of one for a taste: *Sing the Body Elect*.



Herbie Hancock

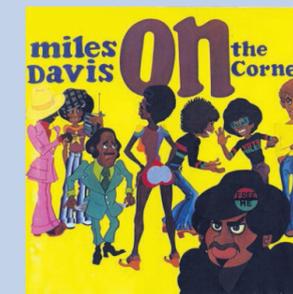
Sextant (1973)

In 1973, this classic introduced fusion to great spacey sounds from the pioneering Arp 2600 synthesizer (played by Patrick Gleeson) and sweeping ideas of a kind that seemed to rush out of Herbie Hancock's head.

Miles Davis

On the Corner (1972)

For a sense of where Davis would go when he delved most fully into funk, this 1972 manifesto carries a resonant message more than 40 years on.



Return to Forever

The Anthology (2008)

This tidy two-CD set compiles highlights from Chick Corea's wildly kinetic fusion band from the 70s, with an endearing excess of energy in action on every track.