

The Free Jazz Collective

Reviews of Free Jazz and Improvised Music

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Carlos Bica - 11:11 (Clean Feed, 2024)



By [João Esteves da Silva](#)

Well into his sixties, Portuguese composer-bassist Carlos Bica has been on a roll lately, releasing a string of albums that are likely to cement his legacy as one of today's foremost European creative musicians. Remarkably, after leading the already legendary Azul trio for over two decades, Bica was able to totally reinvent himself with two of his most adventurous projects to date: the *I Am the Escaped One* (2019) trio and its no less intriguing *Playing with Beethoven* (2023) quartet extension, both of which featured strikingly original, unclassifiable music, notable for some largely unheard-of timbral combinations. More recently, he has assembled a new all Portuguese quartet, featuring three up-and-coming creative musicians about thirty years younger - alto saxophonist José Soares, vibraphonist Eduardo Cardinho and guitarist Gonçalo Neto. After the aforementioned couple of albums, its debut, *11:11*, may feel like going back to basics. And yet it is another distinctive chapter in Bica's trajectory: more than a reinvention, a *renewal*, perhaps, and a most fruitful one.

Exquisitely crafted on all levels, you can tell this is a Bica album straight away: a true artist, like few, he is able to leave his own personal imprint on everything he puts out. Here, he has been able to conjure up a world that is at once (profoundly) lyrical - somewhere in between minimalism and romanticism, with something of a pop-like sensibility as well - and (subtly) experimental, and, above all, where every single note - actually, every single sound (and silence) - matters. A world to which his young partners, while remaining fully themselves, seem thoroughly attuned. (In fact, far from mere interpreters of Bica's directives, they actively contribute to shape it.)

Soares is both technically flawless - notice, for instance, his remarkable tonal control, as he alternates between rougher and cleaner approaches depending on what the occasion demands - and scrupulously tasteful, his expositions being as compelling as his soloing. In contrast with his usually

more expansive playing, Cardinho here plays a primarily coloristic role, with extraordinary restraint, decisively adding to the group's unique sound. And Bica seems to have found a true soulmate in Neto: not only is his kind of post-Frisell approach ideally suited to Bica's soundworld, namely to its more folkish strands, he really does seem to have a special affinity for his broader compositional vision, even contributing with a couple of tunes of his own, which sit nicely alongside the rest. (In addition, there's also a lovely piece by composer-pianist Carsten Daerr.) As for Bica himself, he appears to be playing as well as ever, with his typically glorious bass tone (truly one of the finest around, either when plucking or bowing), as pensive as it is expressive.

Nobody here forces anything, and nobody ever hurries. Everyone listens deeply and lets the music float effortlessly, displaying an altogether rare patience and sensitivity. And although it does nonetheless have its climaxes, such music doesn't knock one out, but slowly takes one in, until one is totally hooked and has no choice but to let oneself go and float alongside it, too. All in all, deceptively simple tunes, haunting atmospheres and nuanced interplay make up for a statement of timeless beauty.