

Rabih Abou-Khalil - Blue Camel (1992)

Written by bluesever
Sunday, 07 July 2013 14:04 -

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1. Sahara 2. Tsarka 3. Ziriab 4. Blue Camel 5. On Time 6. A Night In The Mountains 7. Rabou-Abou-Kabou 8. Beirut Musicians: Rabih Abou-Khalil - oud Charlie Mariano - alto saxophone Kenny Wheeler - flugelhorn, trumpet Steve Swallow - bass Nabil Khaiat - frame drums Milton Cardona - congas Ramesh Shotham - South Indian drums, percussion

Blue Camel is the pinnacle to date of Lebanese oud player Rabih Abou-Khalil's achievement as a jazzman. In both mood and scope, it can almost be characterized as a new Kind of Blue. Both tense and reflective, it is perfect for listening after midnight. Abou-Khalil brings back Charlie Mariano on alto sax and Kenny Wheeler on flügelhorn and trumpet, and they generally alternate solos with Abou-Khalil himself. Rounding out the roster is Steve Swallow on bass, Milton Cardona on congos, Nabil Khaiat on frame drums, and Ramesh Shotham on South Indian drums and percussion. They form a tight ensemble and play comfortably with each other. The album opens with "Sahara," which contains both one of Abou-Khalil's tunes, a mesmerizing melody that could be either Arabic or jazz, and one of Abou-Khalil's best solos, a well-defined interlude that delightfully features the unique timbre of the oud. "Tsarka" begins with a fast break on the oud that turns out to be one of the two motifs on which everything is built. After it is elaborated for a few bars, the oud comes back with another building block. Then we get some stunning improvisations, especially from Abou-Khalil. "Ziriab" opens with a trumpet solo in which Kenny Wheeler tests the compass of his instrument, backed up with some atmospheric sounds from the udu drum; then Abou-Khalil enters with another great tune for everyone to build on. The title track is nothing but fun. Seductive percussion ushers in Wheeler and Mariano playing in unison for a tune that is somewhere between Duke Ellington and the court of Baghdad. As the percussion bubbles along, Milton Cardona's congos adding a Latin flavor to the proceedings, Abou-Khalil steps up with a very fast and rhythmic, if not very tuneful, solo. Midway through the track, Mariano blisters the paint with a screeching sax workout that bridges the Arabic and the Latin, while remaining all the while pure jazz. Even Steve Swallow gets a chance to feature his bass after which the ensemble brings it together and takes it home. Some of the other tracks are not as good as the ones mentioned above, but they are all listenable and very atmospheric. The aptly named "A Night in the Mountains" is a slow, thoughtful walk, perfect for silent contemplation. The album ends with "Beirut," named for the Lebanese city torn by civil

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war from which Abou-Khalil had to flee many years ago. The track begins with a quiet oud solo and then builds to something more chaotic and striving. Blue Camel may not be a perfect album, but it demonstrates better than any other that a fusion between jazz and a musical form from another culture is possible and can work to the advantage of both. Plus, it's just great listening. ---Kurt Keefner, Rovi

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