

Lester Bowie - The Great Pretender (1981)

Written by bluesever

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01. *The Great Pretender* 16:54 02. *It's Howdy Doody Time* 02:11 03. *When The Doom (Moon) Comes Over The Mountain* 03:42 04. *Rios Negroes* 07:19 05. *Rose Drop* 07:26 06. *Oh, How The Ghost Sings* 05:51 Musicians: * Lester Bowie - trumpet * Bluiett Hamiet - baritone saxophone * Donald Smith - piano, organ * Fred Williams - bass * Philip Wilson - drums * Fontella Bass - vocals * David Peaston - vocals

Lester Bowie's projects apart from the Art Ensemble of Chicago tread a high wire between challenging improvised music and R&B-pop. This seeming dichotomy purports a universally appealing sound close to selling out, but speaks more to the whimsy and farcical elements Bowie sees in the hypocrisy of life. *The Great Pretender* is a perfect title for this effort, a mix of funk and humor, gospel and jazz, with no small points of reference to Dizzy Gillespie, early doo wop, Mahalia Jackson, James Brown, and Sun Ra. The lengthy title track modernizes the Buck Ram hit on many levels, as Bowie's sly, ribald, and comedic trumpet playing hits every nerve over a head nodding church hued backbeat, accented by the ooh-ooh vocals of Fontella Bass and David Peaston. The band doubles the tempo in waltz time with Hamiet Bluiett's burly baritone sax leading a mellow charge, while Bowie takes more slapstick liberties, adding a vocal component directly copped from Daffy Duck. The other prime cut here is "Rios Negroes," an electrifying calypso where unending kinetic energy flows through the commanding trumpeter's part Don Juan caballero, part General George Patton lyricism -- his finest jam ever. The deep bass playing of Fred Williams and montuno piano of Donald Smith perfectly support the flashy Bowie in great depth and constraint with no bombs bursting. The band does a hilarious goofball version of "It's Howdy Doody Time" with bouncy bass and Phillip Wilson's New Orleans drumming. Bowie's not finished there, calling out spooky spirits with vocal hauntings through darkness and shadows on the foreboding "Oh, How the Ghost Sings," and questions "Doom?" in "When the Doom (Moon) Comes over the Mountain" by evoking wickedly fearsome growling and bleating through his horn over Smith's organ, the popping electric bass of Williams, and Wilson's pounding drumming. *The Great Pretender* falls just short of Bowie's magnum opus *The 5th Power*, but not by much in terms of sheer modernism. It's utterly enjoyable creative jazz, worthy of a space in your collection. --- Michael G. Nastos, Rovi

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