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CD Review of Martin Moeh by The New Whole Usuals

The New Whole Usuals: Martin Moeh

Pop/Rock | 2007 | Buy the CD

Reviewed by Jason Thompson
(jthompson@bullz-eye.com)



★★★★★

**RECOMMENDED
IF YOU LIKE**

Frank Zappa, Fiery Furnaces,
The Residents

LABEL

Me and the Machine Records

When you think of music and Nashville, Tennessee, what comes to mind? The genre known as country, probably, no? Or is that a dying myth in this day and age of country music being produced out in California and buffed up to a high commercial sheen so that people who would not necessarily gravitate towards such a thing might purchase it? It's hard to say. But is Nashville known for its burgeoning indie pop scene? It should be. Hell, there's been one there for the longest time. But you know how things go. Sometimes the bigger picture gets in the way.

Nevertheless, the New Whole Usuals are one of those Nashville-based indie label groups that have come to rescue the city from some of its more well-known tendencies. Their new album, *Martin Moeh*, is a strange assortment of styles, easily even breaking the mold for the usual "indie" norm, hence the band's name having that sweet touch of irony going for it. For thine tastes shall be placed most appropriately forward upon listening to the first track here, entitled "Jones" – it sounds like a lost Residents ditty. You'll say to yourself, "Oh, I know where this is going." But then the next tune, "No Name Sally," starts to play and you get a quick taste of '67 Beatles in your mouth. The first twist has been uncovered.

But don't get settled in there, either. For the McCartney-esque melodies soon give way to vintage Kinks, when Ray Davies was making the most British art on the UK pop charts in the late '60s. How better to explain the eerily moving "Wake Up," that moves from sweet acoustics to brilliant chamber pop in a bat of an eye? Other groups, like Fiery Furnaces, touch on such recipes as well, but for the New Whole Usuals it sounds like it's more about the entire performance rather than just the experimentation. Not so many musical cul de sacs here, in other words.

Yet there is the humorously schizo "You Will Blown" that does gravitate more towards the Furnaces' eccentric side of the street with excellent results. There's also "The Ballad of Richie Cash," which plays it rather straight and pretty before diving deep into "Late Night w/Bob Lennel," which careens along loopy pathways similar to Zappa and the Mothers at their experimental best. Strangely, there's even a taste of the Sandpipers and Os Mutantes mingling around in the mix. I swear I hear it. You may as well.

The duo of "Big" and "Small" ventures back into that Residents territory, the former being all-instrumental and somewhat seeming like a Plunderphonics piece whilst being wholly original (a double shot of originality, in essence). These then give way to "You Will Become," which sounds like the Usuals doing *Smiley Smile*-era Beach Boys but with far greater results. Must be an absence of a "genius" suffering on LSD or something like that. Yet "Microscopic Pete vs. The Angry Duck" may also be one of the finest tunes Zappa never wrote himself. Brilliant.

All this adds up to one big album that isn't afraid to take chances. Kudos to the band for making such a recording. After all, in this day and age of everything under the sun coming from the indie camps, sometimes it can be hard to separate the treasure from the crap. Yet it is undoubtedly true that all of this good artistic messing about and having fun will alienate some listeners. It's not that the New Whole Usuals are doing a niche thing, it's just that some honest appreciation for the esoteric comes with the turf here, and if you aren't willing to sit down and listen, then this might not be your thing. Nevertheless, *Martin Moeh* is a grand success for everything it does. Do you know how hard it is to do the Zappa thing? Insanely. These guys make it sound easy.

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