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# Taj Mahal

*Henry Saint Clair Fredericks, world traveller*

For a New York boy to take a moniker like Taj Mahal certainly indicates a broad vision and openness to more than the usual range of music. This has not always worked to the interest of his listeners, as Taj turned out albums that didn't quite pull together their diverse influences. But starting with *Dancing the Blues* in 1993, Taj has been doing some of his best work ever. His two latest albums are distinctly different, but each is wholly consistent within itself.

## Phantom Blues

*Private Music CD 0100582139-2, 1995 (48:03)*

*Phantom Blues* is a curious name for this album. Only a couple of songs ("Here in the Dark" and "Love Her with a Feeling") are what you'd call the blues, and there is nothing of the phantom, the fleeting, the fugitive about it. What you've got here is party music, with the good-time feelings of the Caribbean (Taj's own "Lovin' in My Baby's Eyes"), New Orleans (Fats Domino's "Let the Four Winds Blow" and Jesse Hill's "Ooh Poo Pah Doo") and parts East ("Cheatin' on You" and the Stevie-Wonderish "The Car of Your Dreams").

The album starts with the acoustic Taj playing dobro and harmonica, but the rest of the album is dead on the soul side, with Taj in fine, emphatic voice throughout. Most of the cuts have a several backing musicians and singers settling comfortably into the grooves. Eric Clapton contributes tasty solos to "Here in the Dark" and "Love Her with a Feeling," although producer John Porter does just fine on his own, thank you, on several cuts. Bonnie Raitt joins in on "I Need Your Loving," a predictable tune that neither of them lift above the expected. If the song selection were a bit more adventurous, if both drummer Tony Branagle and the recording had a bit more snap, it could be a stone classic. As it is, it's still a heck of a lot of fun.

## Mumtaz Mahal

*Water Lily Acoustics CD WLA-CS-46-CD, 1995 (44:10)*

Well, it had to happen, right? How could Kavi Alexander, who paired Ry Cooder with Bhatt to produce the classic *A Meeting by the River*, resist Ry's old bandmate Taj Mahal -- with his perfect "aptonym" -- in a similar setting? Shall we call this genre "ragatime"? This is another in Alexander's fine series of all analog, no compression, no equalization, no limiting, no noise reduction, no nonsense recordings. Taj plays his National guitar, Bhatt his modified lap steel, and Ravikiran backs them up on the chitra vina, a more traditional instrument that is an ancestor of the sitar, but played with a slide.

Nothing here is rushed. Everything is serene, with a sense of

elegance and beauty appropriate to the Taj Mahal, the tomb built by

Mogul emperor Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century to memorialize his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal.

The album starts with a modal tune by Taj, "Coming of the Mandinka," that would have fooled me, so Indian does it feel. Robert Johnson's blues, "Come On in My Kitchen," slides along for a wonderful eleven and a half minutes, with the three musicians tracking each other perfectly. The Indian microtones are completely at home here. Taj's "Rolling on the Sea" is almost like a lullaby, a simple line repeated gently and slowly, with wordless vocals by Taj. It leads smoothly to the classic gospel tune "Mary Don't You Weep," where Taj improvises gospel calls and Bhatt and Ravikiran are right there with the responses. Ben E. King's hit "Stand by Me," is taken very slowly, with lots of ornamentation by everyone around the Leiber/Stoller tune. Penultimately, a wonderful version of "Johnny Too Bad" gets the rhythm up a bit, with Taj's guitar keeping the reggae beat going, and his voice dropping into his trademark froggy growl on lines like "you run to the rock for rescue, there will be no rock," while Bhatt and Ravikiran take some very fine solos. The album ends with some studio chatter as Taj talks about the affinity he feels with these musicians and reminisces about his first encounter with curry, while the instruments comment in the background.

Wonderful stuff, beautifully recorded. Water Lily Acoustics has a whole bunch of terrific music, from gospel, to traditional Indian and Turkish music, to marvelous hybrids like this. A couple of my favorites are The Mevlevi Ensemble of Turkey, *Wherever You Turn Is the Face of God* (WLA-CS-50-CD) and Hanza El Din's wonderful *Lily of the Nile* (WLA-CS-11-CD). These fall outside of the scope of Jelly, but don't let that stop you from exploring them. --  
*Glenn Brooks*

### **production notes & song titles**

#### **Phantom Blues**

Taj Mahal, vocals (dobro and harmonica on one cut); Tony Branagel, drums; Larry Fulcher or James "Hutch" Hutchinson, bass; Jon Cleary, keyboards; Mick Weaver, organ; Johnnie Lee Schell and John Porter, guitars; various others. Guests: Eric Clapton, Mike Campbell, guitars; Bonnie Raitt, vocals.

Produced by John Porter, recorded and mixed by Joe McGrath.

Lovin' in My Baby's Eyes | Cheatin' on You | The Hustle Is On | Here in the Dark | Fanning the Flames | I Need Your Loving | Ooh Poo Pah Doo | Lonely Avenue | Don't Tell me | What Am I Living For? | We're Gonna Make It | Let the Four Winds Blow | Love Her with a Feeling | The Car of Your Dreams

#### **Mumtaz Mahal**

Taj Mahal vocals guitar: Vishwa Mohan Bhatt mohan vina: N

Coming of the Mandinka | Come On in My Kitchen | Rolling on the Sea | Mary, Don't You Weep | Stand by Me | Johnny Too Bad | Curry and Quartertones

<http://www.jellyroll.com/03/taj.html>