

Lee Morgan - The Rajah (1966)

Written by bluesever

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01 - *A Pilgrim's Funny Farm* 02 - *The Rajah* 03 - *Is That So* 04 - *Davisamba* 05 - *What Not My Love* 06 - *Once In A Lifetime* Lee Morgan - trumpet Hank Mobley - tenor sax Cedar Walton - piano Paul Chambers - bass Billy Higgins – drums

This long-lost Lee Morgan session was not released for the first time until it was discovered in the Blue Note vaults by Michael Cuscuna in 1984; it has still not been reissued on CD. Originals by Cal Massey, Duke Pearson ("Is That So") and Walter Davis, in addition to a couple of surprising pop tunes ("What Not My Love" and "Once in My Lifetime") and Morgan's title cut, are well-played by the quintet (which includes the trumpeter/leader, Hank Mobley on tenor, pianist Cedar Walton, bassist Paul Chambers and drummer Billy Higgins). Much of the music is reminiscent of The Jazz Messengers and that may have been the reason that it was lost in the shuffle for Morgan was soon investigating modal-oriented tunes. Despite its neglect, this is a fine session that Lee Morgan and hard bop fans will want. ---Scott Yanow, AllMusic Review

On Nov. 19, 1966, Lee Morgan headed out to Englewood Cliffs, N.J., and Rudy Van Gelder's recording studio with tenor saxophonist Hank Mobley, pianist Cedar Walton, bassist Paul Chambers and drummer Billy Higgins. When they arrived, the quintet recorded what I consider to be a perfect album. The songs were beautifully selected, the material was well rehearsed and the playing was pure bliss by all five musicians. Once they were done, Blue Note decided to shelve the album.

Why the album wasn't released in '66 remains a mystery. The good news for us is that re-issue

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producer Michael Cuscuna discovered the tape reels in the Blue Note vaults in 1984 and released the album the following year. Possible reasons why Blue Note would put the brakes on such a wonderful album include too many Blue Note albums coming out at the same time, a desire to release a different Morgan album instead, a conflict with one of Blue Note's other artists releasing an album, the group's inability to tour to promote the album, a failure to get rights clearance on one of the standards or a sonic flaw in a track that needed a re-take that the group didn't have time to correct at a later date. Or it was planned, delayed and then forgotten. And there are probably another 10 reasons that haven't been mentioned here.

What we do know is that The Rajah was released 12 years after Morgan was gunned down in 1972 by his common-law wife Helen at Slug's Saloon on East 3rd St. in New York. A blizzard had prevented the ambulance from arriving quickly, and Morgan bled to death. He was 33.

The Rajah features a relaxed, sophisticated sound with a laid-back, pulse-paced feel. Many of the songs have a light Latin rhythm that was in sync with the bossa nova craze of the day. The song lineup was Calvin Massey's A Pilgrim's Funny Farm, Morgan's The Rajah, Duke Pearson's Is That So?, Walter Davis's Davisamba and two standards—What Now My Love and Once In a Lifetime. Mobley is particularly sensual here, sailing through these calm waters like an early-morning tug while Morgan's horn is lyrical, bright and embracing. Walton on piano is exceptional, particularly with Chambers' thick bass and Higgins' gentle hard-bop rhythms.

I never tire of hearing this album. Michael Cuscuna tells me the following: "I have no idea why this album wasn't released. Lee was prolific, and a lot got left in the can, including a number of titles even better than this one. Alfred [Lion] never had a clear memory of why some things came out and some got left behind." ---Marc Myers, jazzwax.com

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