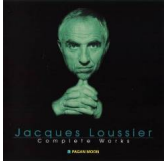


Jacques Loussier – Pagan Moon (1982)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Night Rider* 2. *Furies* 3. *Moonchild* 4. *Invaders* 5. *Phantom Lady* 6. *Nocturnal Sea* 7. *Enchantress* 8. *The Dawn* Jacques Loussier – piano Patrice Mazmanian – synthesizer Luc Heller – percussion

Pagan Moon is one of three "black sheep" of French pianist and composer Jacques Loussier (born 1934), released in 1982 on the CBS label and currently only available on vinyl, and for good reasons, at least according to the artist's will.

One cruddy second into the in medias res histrionics of the opener *Night Rider*, and I could as well leave my review at that and move on, for *Exotica* this is not, no matter how hard I try to stress, bend and permeate the genre boundaries: the pandemoniac staccato spiral of Jacques Loussier's glacial piano tones in tandem with the admixed frostiness of Patrice Mazmanian's synthesizer frostiness create a high-pressure chase into the blue-tinted abyss of a wasteland of one's choice, there seems no escape. Luc Heller's dry percussion and additional synthetic dark matter horns altogether merge into one of those archetypical 80's hymns, madness and despair are all over this implicit ode to *Blade Runner*, and *Exotica* is farther away than ever... that is until two short intersections are reached whose tone sequences suddenly lighten up and become the paradisiac contravention to the daemonic doom. For very short moments, capsules of insouciance and freedom reign over the arrangement, and it turns out that this quasi-yearning melancholia plays an important role in the endemic qualities of *Pagan Moon*. The following *Furies* shows this tendency by neglecting it at first: rising synthesizer billows of cold eeriness elbow their way through the atmosphere, dark and all the more staggering piano chords stab through the jinxed labyrinth, but soon enough, brighter counterparts illumine the darkness and lead to arabesques of glee whose spiraling physiognomy moves upwards into higher spheres where ethereal specters wait and transform *Furies* back into its frightening state. C'est dystopian Space-Age, mes dames et messieurs.

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Be that as it may, Loussier opens up the jagged roughness gradually and bit by bit. Moonchild reaches the syrupy clichés that are often found in vintage Jazz material of the late 50's as well, alloyed here with New Age-oid synthesizer riverbeds. The signature element of this beatless piece and masked piano arrangement is indeed the blissful devotion as delivered by the piano. Like a Rene Paulo interpretation, Moonchild puts the focus on the sequential piano gentleness. Somnolent and solemn, the good-natured spirit is transferred to Invaders, even though this exciting piece is much more akin to the duality of Space-Age and related space operas: golden-shimmering martelato tones interchange with ominous tendencies in minor, all the while Mazmanian's synthesizers waft in the background. The quirkiest passage is yet to come: star dust spirals, programmed bongos and dark matter pads join the piano prongs. The dichotomy between light and darkness, vivacity and fugacity, cyber-Exotica and cosmic Space-Age is never resolved, Invaders remains strangely fragmented, but probably succeeds for this very reason.

The second half of Pagan Moon continues to celebrate the shock-and-awe clash of Space-Age, New Age, the Age of Aquarius and classic piano arrangements of age. Phantom Lady is a cyberspace ballad of polygonal beauty. Downwards spiraling four-note chimes evaporate the crystalline scent of purity, whereas the legato synth strings boost the transfiguration into tramontane spheres. Everything feels overly polished and purified, the chintzy warmth of the Loussier's helical piano faces apocryphal orchestrations whose emaciated cornucopias are anything but mere shadowy devices; their galactic gentleness feels antediluvian and de trop. Again, this irresolvable state is intriguing for Moog fans and Space-Age aficionados alike, although nothing prepares the listener for the genuinely gorgeous Nocturnal Sea. What a corker this is! Luc Heller's splendid breakbeat erections (with programmed bongos!) accentuate Jacques Loussier's polymorphous sanguine-threnodic piano strata, and as if this change of pace was not enough already, an opalescent polar light radiance shimmers in the background. The beat structure is the signature element, stumbling along, but for once, the textures and surfaces fit together very well and make Nocturnal Sea a stringent artifact of cosmic cohesion. My top pick of the album: jazzy, electronic, electric. While Enchantress ventures back into the melodramatic worshipping procession of femme fatale figments and puts the focus on the alluvial piano soils instead of the warped synth propulsion, it turns out that the finale The Dawn is the second-best composition off Pagan Moon and enthralls with yellow-hued piano vestibules, four-note embellishments hinting at a partial turmoil, and Luc Heller's breakbeat encore. As if this tune were distilled from a Japanese role playing game, The Dawn tumbles, twirls and scintillates into the light. Paradise regained.

If you rushed to this last paragraph of the review, let me recapture the biggest – and eminently interesting – problem in terms of Pagan Moon: its proper categorization. As mentioned in the first paragraph, the term Pagan is a most welcome marker, for it regularly – if not mandatorily – points to the Exotica genre more often than not. Jacques Loussier's estranged album differs, for his kind of Paganism is fueled by the impetus of Vangelis and the Blade Runner soundtrack, nurtured by the advancements of synthesizer-related technology in the 80's and justified by

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another genre which is close enough to the Exotica connoisseur's interests that it justifies an in-depth review here: Space-Age. Pagan Moon is a curious album in itself, but even stranger if you contrast it with Loussier's Bach-heavy oeuvre. While he has specialized in the jazzier interpretations of Johann Sebastian Bach's works, Pagan Moon feels enormously odd, as if it came from another dimension. It is one of the Frenchman's strangest albums, one he wants you to forget. But as is the case with Space-Age albums by artists or bands who are not generally known for catering to this clientele, it is exactly those works – of all things! – that gain the most traction; indeed, one cannot spell attraction without using traction. Pagan Moon is a rough dob which shimmers and shines, but has a long way to go and many solar systems to traverse until it maybe becomes a diamond. The darkness in the shape of Night Rider, Furies or Invaders can be seen as an affront to Exotica fans who are not targeted anyway, but Space-Age followers and worshippers of the Moog sound will rejoice. The anticipation of the virtual reality craze is then fulfilled by amalgamations like Moonchild, but especially so with the splendid Nocturnal Sea and The Dawn. Designedly artificial but partially rooted in the real world thanks to the classic piano, Pagan Moon is a curious critter, completely under the radar of Space-Age fans, but a rather interesting choice. ---ambientexotica.com

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