



all about jazz

Snake Charmer

Rez Abbasi | Earth Sounds

By Jochem van Dijk

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It probably happened to a lot of us. Aspiring to become the next Vincent van Gogh, we once picked up a paintbrush and enthusiastically started mixing colors, only to find out that we ended up with the same drab brown no matter how vibrant the original hues. In music, too, throwing together styles and cultures just as often results in the equivalent of muddy brown: a vague fusion-ish mishmash that lacks any depth, direction or character.

So when the liner notes of New York-based guitarist Rez Abbasi's *Snake Charmer* describe the record as a meeting between his extensive jazz and fusion background and various musics from the Indian subcontinent, one might be forgiven for having an alarm bell or two ready to go off. But miraculously, Abbasi gets it exactly right. Out of all the different elements arises a singular and distinctive statement with a wide expressive range on its own determined parameters, carried by an abundant technique. Consequently the music convinces and enchants on every level.

On the basic platform of an organ trio comes a custom-built and highly distinctive setup. Drummer and tabla player Dan Weiss chases his tempos up and down as if he is playing a yoyo. Gary Versace provides a fresh slant on the jazz organ

concept, not only by his very fleet lines and avoidance of greasy chords, but also by his choice of registers, opting for more harsh and nasal sounds that work very well in this context. Abbasi's own playing too, comes across more focused than ever. The contributions of guest celeb Dave Liebman show just how strong a record this is: rather than adorning the music like a ball in a Christmas tree, they serve as embedded elements.

The addition of vocalist and tanpura player Kiran Ahluwalia in particular was a very smart move. She is capable of communicating every possible shade of expression through sheer tonal coloration and sustained intonation. Her vocals both fit the music like a glove and reinforce the concept considerably.

While the pieces on *Snake Charmer* each have their own unique inner dynamics and character, they are connected through variations on the same thematic and rhythmic material, providing the music on the CD with an elliptic cohesion and inner logic all its own. *Snake Charmer* is a major and career-defining accomplishment, and most likely one of 2005's more important releases. A true masterpiece might be just around the corner—Abbasi is getting dangerously close.

Note: *Snake Charmer* will be presented at Joe's Pub in New York on Saturday, January 15, 2005.

Personnel: Rez Abbasi-guitars, sitar-gitar, percussion; Gary Versace-organ; Danny Weiss-drums, tabla; Dave Liebman, soprano saxophone; Kiran Ahluwalia-Indian vocals, tanpura.

Style: Beyond Jazz

