

# reviewthis

## 35th Parallel



Crossing Painted Islands

## 35TH PARALLEL, CROSSING PAINTED ISLANDS

(Self-released, CD)

Central Vermont's 35th Parallel play an invigorating blend of Middle Eastern, Indian and North African music. Their 2003 debut, *The Green Vine*, was lauded for its compositional adventurousness and lush sonic environs. The latest, *Crossing Painted Islands*, finds the core duo of rhythm man Gabe Halberg and string multi-instrumentalist Mac Ritchey augmented by a horn section and auxiliary percussionist. The result of this new union is pure sonic sorcery.

In the years between *Vine* and *Islands* Ritchey and Halberg have further honed their remarkable musical telepathy. Each plays with a focused passion that perfectly complements the other.

Opener "Hepsi Yalandir" begins with a mournful, melodic phrase from Ritchey, answered by Zach Tonnisson's sonorous sax. Soon the song erupts into a sandstorm of dynamic motifs and Casbah-rocking rhythms.

A hypnotic string figure and ambient drone haunt the intro of "Sevani Tsorgnorsner." Stark and beautiful, the song sashays with painstaking grace. The sharp ping of Halberg's tabla provides a resonant edge, as Ritchey's provocative melody cycles through several permutations.

The rousing "Uzaz" makes excellent use of the guest musicians. Waves of brass swell like Arabian tides, creating an entrancing sway. Trumpeter Brian Boyes takes a fantastic solo in the song's middle section, sliding between major and minor tonalities like a pan-global hep cat.

Michael Chorney's sultry baritone sax is given plenty of room to explore on the darkly resplendent "Sallassana Mendillini." Later, Ritchey combines Middle Eastern modality with bluegrass dexterity on the rousing "Donagan Bar."

Things take an avant-garde turn with "Kou Xiang," a tune featuring an electronically manipulated instrument of the same name. The song serves as an intermission of sorts; in a bygone era, it'd be time to flip the record.

I was particularly struck by "Penumbra," an evocative study in space and repetition. The song's interlocking acoustic guitar lines are reminiscent of progressive axemen Adrian Belew and Michael Hedges. A cavernous ambience pervades the track, adding to its meditative mood.

"The Deep" features rumbling didgeridoo, processed into a soundscape of alien tone and texture. The klezmer-like "Homunculus" presents a musical tug-of-war between members of the horn section. Full of subtle menace, the tune stumbles and lurches.

It's incredible to have such A-list world music talent right here in Vermont. *Islands* is nigh-perfect; here's hoping 35th Parallel get right to work on its follow-up. Don't miss your chance to hear them live on Friday, March 24, at Montpelier's Positive Pie II.