

The Faulkner Review

Freelance music journalist Alex Faulkner reviewing the latest new unsigned or up and coming music. Feel free to follow me on Facebook and Twitter. Get the latest reviews via email by signing up to the blog, the 'follow' button is on the right hand side. Down a bit.

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ALBUM REVIEW: Moon Rituals by Sienna



Sienna is an avant-garde EDM artist who is currently based in Norway but originally hails from Japan. Her music is an inventive meld of electronica, house, jazz and traditional-contemporary Japanese. She has performed extensively across Europe over a 10 year period as both a performer and DJ. She has collaborated with renowned artists like Nils Petter Molvaer, a psychedelic trumpeter from Norway, Mick Karn, an English bassist (now deceased) and famous group The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, whom she opened for in the UK on several occasions.

This latest album, Moon Rituals, is her eighth. To paraphrase her press release, it is unlike her former studio albums and "essentially consists throughout of chill-out songs – and all about the different phases of the moon in the Japanese cultural context."

The album starts with the highly evocative Moonrise, which begins with a swirl of distant, ambient synths and haunting, echo-drenched piano. The exotic melody is juxtaposed with some unexpected, almost jazzy harmonic progressions and the low-end brooding synth adds to the meditative, mesmeric mood of the music.

Around the two minute mark the mood changes and we hear birdsong before a much lighter, more playful high-end melody emerges augmented by subtle percussion. This melody becomes the main theme of the piece and the percussive arrangement builds gradually into a captivating, intricate electronica beat as the melody is harmonized and modulated in unexpected ways. Moonrise is a very sophisticated and successful attempt at painting in sound.

After the epic, six minute opening track the more succinct but equally potent second track, A Hazy Moon, perfectly conjures in sound the imagery of the title. Opening with a scene-setting plethora of natural sounds, it is based around a complex, fast moving harmonic progression on synth.

This somehow has the ethereal effect of making the music appear to be floating in mid air, in combination with the hypnotic tempo, the result being a perfect evocation of a "hazy moon". The brief bursts of the pipa, an exotic sounding Chinese musical instrument, adds to the magical, rich texture of the music.

Third track, Wesak on Mt. Kuruma, is about a festival that celebrates the birth, life and death of the Buddha, an event which takes place on the full-moon day of the lunar month Vesakha, which falls in April or May.

This mystical, other-worldly piece is set at a tranquil pace and consists of a simple but beautiful piano motif which is interwoven with blissful splashes of synth and a haunting female vocal (by Sienna) which gradually turns into harmonized vocals, creating a truly enchanting effect. Highly original and unique, both in terms of composition and performance/production.

This transcendent mood continues into the fourth track Moon on the Water which again uses delicate piano to paint the musical scene suggested by the title, and does so very effectively. The brooding mood, unpredictable chord changes and beatific melody brought to mind the work of French classical composer Erik Satie as well as other French impressionistic composers such as Debussy and Ravel. Ultimately, though, Sienna's musical style in all her own and this is a real highlight of the album.

Tsukiyomi, the fifth track, is rather different. The title translates as Moon of the Underworld and Tsukiyomi is a moon god in Japanese mythology. This piece creates a tense and brooding soundscape through a sparse arrangement of percussion and brief interludes of exotic melody. It lends the music a stately grandeur with the space allowing every element to breathe. As it progresses across its five minute duration, it slowly builds in complexity and nuance, holding the attention gripped to the final bars.

This minimalistic style continues into The Harvest Moon-Viewing Banquet, with strident percussion set against swelling synth strings. It results in a powerfully atmospheric piece where a piano melody gradually emerges, only for the music to fall away. The final two minutes are a subtle crescendo of musical layers that captivates the ear.

Seventh track Snow, Moon, Flowers is one of the album's epics at six and a half minutes long and is a return to the relatively more expansive and colourful sound world of the earlier tracks. With an unusual time signature that gives it a dreamy, ethereal feel it incorporates a pizzicato string melody with a deep bassline and glistening synths, as well as piano and flute.

A beautiful sung melody then floats serenely over the top before the pulsing kick drum develops into a full swing beat. The vocals on top help to make it the closest thing to a conventional song on the album, and it is my personal favourite.

Equally wonderful is the eighth track Crescent Moon, which is based around a recurring four note pipa melody. This piece truly showcases Sienna's skills as a composer and arranger, gradually building up a richly woven tapestry of gorgeous counterpoint melodies and harmonies. On top of this she adds angelic vocals engulfed in reverb to create an irresistible musical melange. Perhaps the most instantly accessible piece on the album, and the most melodic.

Moon Rituals concludes with the extremely beautiful piece A Pale Morning Moon which feels like both a distillation and culmination of all the album's lunar and musical themes. Driven initially by a moving low-end string motif and minimalist bass, the music gradually blossoms into a glorious extended climax of swirling synths and rapturous piano. It undoubtedly captures the mysterious and alluring power the moon has over us and completes the album in an inspired way.

Overall, this album is a truly captivating musical odyssey by a highly original and imaginative artist. She skilfully incorporates traditional musical styles with the modern ambient style to emerge with a sound that is quite unique. Sienna's music has the remarkable effect of drawing the listener into intoxicating soundscapes that somehow seem to stand outside time and space. Every piece on the album takes you on a different sonic journey, yet it works as a seamless and unified concept album. Sienna has truly given us the whole of the moon.

VERDICT = 9.1 out of 10

Alex Faulkner

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about 2 months ago

ALBUM REVIEW: Without Maps - 30 Years of Moments by Moments Of Pleasure Records
VERDICT = 9.2 out of 10
"A wonderful compilation of 30 years of material"

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