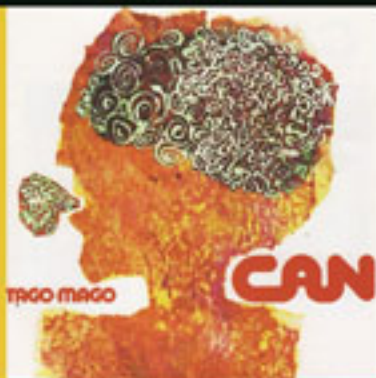


33 1/3



TAGO MAGO
by Alan Warner

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TAGO MAGO

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Tago Mago

Permission to Dream



Alan Warner

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Track Listing

1. Paperhouse (7:29)
2. Mushroom (4:08)
3. Oh Yeah (7:22)
4. Halleluwah (18:32)
5. Aumgn (17:22)
6. Peking O (11:35)
7. Bring Me Coffee or Tea (6:47)

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Part One

Halleluwah

I thought ‘Halleluwah’ on *Tago Mago* was the funkier and the most athletic thing I had ever heard. And I hated sports. You were excited before you even put on Side 2, Disc 1 of the vinyl record. Excited on account of noting that timing numeral: 18:32 on the inner cover of the gatefold sleeve. The thrill which came with this weird generosity of another Can song lasting nearly nineteen minutes; a whole side of the record! To hell with ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ which you had once briefly believed was the longest song in the world.

The first seconds of ‘Halleluwah’ are the bars of bass charted by snare drum shots. One of those great basslines which, as Miles Davis once said, asks a question of itself and then answers itself:¹

Bah bum ba bum
Bah bah bum?

Damo Suzuki’s orgiastic: ‘Mmoohh!’ before the bass answers itself:

Bah bah be bah bum
bumbumboo

then the shuffling run and groove of that drum-lock pattern – we are off for nearly twenty minutes: ‘Can anybody see this snowman ...?’ (*can* they?)

Even just a minute in, you sense something changes inside the music, an enriching of structure, a deepening of intensity, I might have thought of it back then; now I know it is just a tape edit at 1:03, from one stretch of recording tape to another. These magical thresholds of edits will later become clear to me.

Before two minutes, Damo Suzuki sings that celebrated ‘chorus’ which possibly begins: ‘*Searching for my...*’ something or other. (Attempting to quote vocalist Damo Suzuki’s actual lyrics is – as we now know – a fraught or even nonsensical process. Even Damo admits some ‘words’ are sounds or syllables called out in a sort of polyphonic reaction to the music, some are even nonsense phrases, mixing German, Japanese and English – while some are actually heavily accented but relatively straightforward English from which many track titles are derived.)

The drums begin to run and to swerve all over the song. When I was younger I thought they were fantastic tricks of drummer Jaki Liebezeit but they are in fact further overdubs on top of the beat on this section of an edit. The drum sound is especially lovely: acoustically rich, vivid and close to your ear, like Ginger Baker’s drums on Cream’s *Wheels of Fire*; the sticks and bass drum pedal hitting the skins sound as if they are in the room with you – not at all like the electronic drumming of 1980s pop music where the strange musical intent was to make a drum set sound not at all like a drum set – even though a drum set sounds so good. Eighties recording

was an economic thing, of course; recording drum sets to sound good is time-consuming and thus expensive. Today hardly any new recordings I hear have a really good drum sound in rock music – and even in jazz only sometimes.

You know how ‘Halleluwah’ goes. Through the basic groove, short wave radio abstractions weave between left and right speaker – a variety of Stockhausen bleeps, Ligeti and Webern squeaks and post-serial blips – a distant guitar solos as if from the balcony of an alpine chalet far across a mountain valley. A chattering percussion overdub actually stops the song which momentarily fades out.

There is a twenty-five-second cocktail jazz interlude: dreamy vocals, plucked or strummed guitar and electric piano – perhaps even verging on being out-of-tune – all clearly pasted in to the overall recording tape; then the swinging bass and drums are back, keyboard sounds, percussion, tape distortions, bowed cellos or violins complain. It is nearly eight minutes in and Damo – who we have forgotten about – suddenly reappears. ‘Oh!’ he exclaims. A series of Irmin Schmidt’s distinctive keyboard trills burble behind the singer’s gamine obscurity, those classically trained fingers rattle the keys for impossible duration and consistency.

At nine-and-a-half minutes we get another chorus refrain where Damo yells the title, ‘Ha-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la la-la-la-la-la-la la ooh-vah’. This leads into a long and coherent guitar solo, in some ways the first consistent instrumental statement within the ensemble playing, all the more powerful for having been anticipated by abstract sounds for ten minutes. The

guitar playing is pitched between jazz and rock, closer to jazz really – a warm valve-heated sound seeking out chordal harmonics and musical phrases which count and tell a thematic story within the framework of the song, rather than the burning rockish speed runs of, say, ‘Paperhouse’.

There follows a keyboard excursion, the downbeat becoming far more pronounced, building to the climax where tension is released and the intensity drops. Just when you thought it was over, the band explode into another keyboard attack but this one is extremely intense, the bass a plodding anchor, the drums and cymbals begin to slash, sometimes desperately in the crazed, sudden momentum; the organ-like sound is run through different effects, it does not try to phrase or operate in relation to a song – ‘playing us a tune’ – it is just a machine, ascending out of control, the sense of riding the back of a shining orca with leather reins attached to its teeth – the excursion cannot last and at sixteen-and-a-half minutes the music breaches a summit and resumes with Damo’s harmonizing vocal until ...

It is inevitable for writers writing about music that we must resort to image, simile and metaphor. So you are going to get guitars playing on balconies across a mountain valley, and you are going to get keyboard solos compared to a killer whale rodeo. It is not something I am proud of, it is a tradition, a trope, a linguistic attempt to seize the myriad impressions and sensations which affecting music can throw at us. We resort to common poetry to describe the impossible, the same way scientists and physicists must when attempting to explain their most recondite flights. These images are variations

of the pathetic fallacy but there is a tradition to it and sometimes the metaphors are apt. I like to avoid this plump fancifying but I cannot.

At least fanciful metaphor-blown ways of writing about music and anthropomorphizing sounds, avoids those deserts of dry academic terminology, and of having the deep self-importance to quote from Theodor Adorno when we are talking about rock and roll, man! More woeful are note-by-note transcriptions of solos which fail to communicate the unique and impossible-to-transcribe tones, the subtle inflections which define the individuality of very good rock or jazz musicians. You can transcribe a Hendrix solo but it's not really a Hendrix solo. The recorded sound IS the transcription. Rock music is aural, not intellectual.

When I was fifteen (unlike when I began to listen to Public Image Ltd's *Metal Box* and Joy Division at around the same time), I developed this slightly melancholy awareness of being a retrospective, second-hand listener to *Tago Mago*. I often thought to myself in those months of 1979/80: 'Long-haired hippies in the 70s must have loved this', or I thought, 'What did long-haired young people back in the early 70s *make* of this; it must have sounded really exciting to them back in those times?'

'Halleluwah' seemed like a natural stoner song. I imagined it was recognized as a sort of sign for those generic long-haired people to begin rolling their cigarettes of contraband, leaning back and smoking – a reluctant or willing girlfriend nods her head. Her beads jangle – I saw this happening in seventies' rooms with bright wallpaper and posters. Radical days and thoughts. I started to contemplate what this music would have