



Pure Pleasure SF 10178

The Dirty Dozen Brass Band: What's Going On

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In 2006, exactly a year after Katrina, in the aftermath of a vicious natural disaster that displayed the incompetence of the Crescent City's infrastructure, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Federal Government, they addressed the tragedy in the only way they know how, by re-creating the same kind of bewilderment and anger that Marvin Gaye felt and witnessed in 1971 by issuing their own take on Gaye's classic album "What's Goin' On". This is a question that is proved all the more poignant given the efforts of an entire region trying not only to rebuild homes and businesses, but trying to preserve a culture as this recording was released. The Dirty Dozen recruit a number of vocalists to help out on the hinge tunes. The samples of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin's voice in the aftermath of the hurricane usher in the brass slip-sliding along the dark funky overtones of Gaye's signature tune. Guitarists Doug Bossi and Ben Keeler dig into the groove, as does drummer Terence Higgins and keyboardist/producer Anthony Marinelli, as Chuck D raps the refrain in the context of modern history, the disaster, and the ineptitude and even hostility of a government who wages war and ignores domestic problems. It's a news report from the front lines as the horns cut the melody, the harmony, and the deep, steamy funk groove. "What's Happening Brother", closes the funk from the inside, turning the groove back in on itself not only playing the rage, but echoing it in the grain of Bettye LaVette's vocal, which dares to spit out the truth with questions and observations in the pain of a first person narrative. The airy arrangement of "Flyin' High (In the Friendly Sky)" is nearly mournful, nostalgic for a more innocent time, but is all the more poignant for that longing. The deep tribal drums Mardi Gras Indian-style, with the skronky saxophones, tight guitar groove, and screaming narrative in "Save The Children" give way to the smoothness of Gaye's melody. It's a bewildered tune, sad with undercurrents of rage. Ivan Neville's arrangement for "God Is Love" is a stunner, full of deeply imaginative hues and colors and gospel grooves. G. Love helps out on "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)", where the musicality in Gaye's vocal disappears but is supercharged in the horn charts, and Love's vocal sounds confused, displaced, out of time against the instruments. "Right On" is both militant and celebratory. It's got the funk, but it's also got gospel, rock, and deep soul blaring from

the trombones and the repetitive riff in the rest of the brass section. Guru from Gang Starr cuts out from the moody, spectral introduction of "Inner City Blues", when Higgins drums play counter to Kirk Joseph's deep blues sousaphone on the bassline. Frustration is everywhere and the horns point fingers to this truth which Guru lays out: that today is the same and perhaps even more so than it was in Gaye's time. The desolation in Gaye's lyric isn't lost but it is fleshed out over the chart so that they are merely the ghosts from the past preaching and exhorting in this new generation. Never has party music sounded so poignant, so utterly damning and hopeful and unbowed. This is the next step in the Homecoming that was a funeral for a friend; this is the aftermath, the sound of angry resurrection coming out with the sun, one where the revolution may be televised but bursts out of the edges in the screen and makes itself known by the medium understood by the people who have to live its realization. With killer grooves that take no prisoners, "What's Goin' On" is the most fitting tribute yet to Gaye, because not only does it prove the timelessness of the music itself, it echoes that what is indeed goin' on (Gaye's dedication to Detroit as its decline became a reality with no onlookers interested in doing anything) is even more true today than it was in 1971.

"What's Going On" - The Dirty Dozen Brass Band with guests vocalists including Chuck D, Ivan Neville, G. Love, Guru und Bettye LaVette.