



JB Gallier

Star Feminine Band
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Born Bad Records (31 mins)

★★★★★

You go girls! Revolutionary group from Benin



Coming at you like an epic puppy stampede is the Star Feminine Band, a seven-strong group of Beninese girls whose combined talents and enthusiasm fizz across the 11 tracks of this fetching debut. Back in 2016 none

of these kids – who range in age from 10 to 17 – from north-west Benin had ever sung or picked up an instrument. But the offer of free music lessons for girls resulted, eventually, in this girl gang from the Waama and Nabo groups, who underwent intensive musical training.

That each Star member became proficient on drums, guitar, bass and keyboard goes some way towards explaining the group's preternatural empathy. Fun, too, is at a premium: there's a punkish, anything-goes

vibe to their three drum-kit line-up and shrill but sweet harmonies, to their cries of 'Hello!' and 'Faster! Faster!' in multilingual songs that both address the struggles faced by girls in Benin and champion their free-flying potential. Such themes are hurled across a sound that blends highlife, Congolese rumba and local voodoo rhythms including *sato* with psychedelia and bluesy desert rock. Electric guitar licks and careering keyboard complement beats on talking drums, brushes on upturned gourds and kit drums firing on all cylinders. With girl musicians, let alone girl bands, virtually unheard of in Benin, Star Feminine Band are so much more than a captivating curiosity. They're a game changer.

JANE CORNWELL

TRACK TO TRY *Peba*

GABO – Glasgow African Balafon Orchestra
Jungle Fever

Glasgow African Balafon Orchestra (43 mins)

★★★★★

Group deliver hot balafon tunes from the chilly north



Chief Chebe – aka Suleman Chebe – has tirelessly promoted African culture in the UK over the years in a number of guises, as a poet, storyteller, folklorist, historian, broadcaster, author, spoken word artist,

songwriter and musician. With his origins in the Sissala people from Ghana and Burkina Faso, his instrument of choice is the *balafon*, and *Jungle Fever*, the debut album from his nine-piece Scottish-based orchestra GABO, combines Afrobeat, highlife and other West African rhythms with traditional folk storytelling in hugely enjoyable fashion.

'Ambatayala' updates a Sissala song about forgetting your problems and pursuing your dreams. 'Co' tells a traditional Sissala story about three teenage girls searching for water in the bush, delivered over a simmering

Afrobeat groove. 'Soulee' explores the spirit world as the lead guitar of Jerry Boweh interlocks hypnotically with a battery of balafons. 'Dilimba' is a love song with a twist, based on the tale of a princess in love with a chameleon who can control the rain, the balafons duetting this time with the trilling flute of Daniel Ashton. Best of all on the album is the title-track, a new but timeless song with a mesmerising and exultant groove written as a tribute to the wisdom of Chief Chebe's Ghanaian grandmother.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

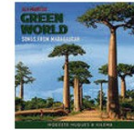
TRACK TO TRY *Jungle Fever*

Modeste Hugues & Kilema Ala Maintso – Green World: Songs from Madagascar

ARC Music (51 mins)

★★★★★

A satisfying introduction to Madagascar's lush sound-world



The instrument known as the *marovany* is a Malagasy zither – a hollow, wooden, rectangular-shaped

box with 12 metal strings running up each side of the instrument allowing for rapid and intricate syncopated plucking. The sound is similar to the *kora*, though it is lighter and more delicate due to the wooden sound box. On this recording the *marovany* is played by Kilema who comes from Toliara on the south-west coast, and playing acoustic guitar is Modeste Hugues from Betroka in the south central area. Although there are only two instruments playing, with some added hand percussion, the overall sound is incredibly full, complex and thoroughly engaging. Both musicians sing in a light whispered style that befits the organic instrumentation and general theme of the album, which is essentially about saving the planet, with particular reference to the forests and terrain of Madagascar. Modeste Hugues and Kilema both have extensive knowledge of traditional Malagasy sounds and *Green World* is an excellent and satisfying example of the country's musical heritage.

MARTIN SINNOCK

TRACK TO TRY *Tromba*

Ayalew Mesfin
Che Belew (March Forward)

Now-Again Records (41 mins)

★★★★★

Tewedije Limut (Let Me Die Loved)

Now-Again Records (43 mins)

★★★★★

Double helping of Swinging Addis



Aficionados of Francis Falcato's *Éthiopiennes* series will recall Ayalew Mesfin from the extraordinary track 'Hasabe' on volume eight: *Swinging Addis*. 'So singular is his style: angry, very rock-R&B and very

fast', Falcato wrote of Mesfin's unique synthesis of James Brown and Jimi Hendrix in his liner notes. These two