



TOP TEN Local Albums of 2011 (#s 6 & 5)

December 13, 2011

#5 *LP* by Liminal Phase



I guess you're finally getting to be a big shot when Adam Levy brings in a copy of his new side project and asks you to give it a listen – it wasn't long before *LP*, the first disc from head Honeydog's new instrumental group Liminal Phase, was in our player, and less than ten minutes before it was a new favorite.

While there are moments of genuine groove throughout the disc, much of it expands into disparate, radio-unfriendly genres such as electronica, experimental, and even (ulp!) jazz fusion.



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A friend of mine says there hasn't been a good fusion record since the genre's golden age ('69-'75, I think he says) and it's my hope he'll think different after reading this and hearing a few tracks by Liminal Phase.

LP (yes, a CD called *LP* – I'm told the album will see a vinyl release in 2012) was recorded live and contains no overdubs. It is also a fraction of the material recorded by the six- and sometimes eight-piece group, ranging from unfettered free form to thoughtful narrative. Liminal Phase, in name and in action, represents Levy's interest in anthropology, drawing together old-time and modern instrumentation as well as the sounds and rhythms of various cultures.

Adam Levy is surely no stranger to projects of epic proportions – the Honeydogs' 2004 album *10,000 Years* was, of course, rock's last great epic, equal parts *Arthur* (the record, not the movie) and *Brave New World*. It's ironic that *LP*, such a rewarding listen, is an instrumental project led by somebody usually so verbose on album.

But it is far from the work of a single artist – Each collaborator merits mention, and no one takes precedent. Pianist deVon Gray's role, especially in "Quantum Entanglement" is grounding, although his improvisational contributions are often the most soaring. In interviews he has described his work with Liminal Phase as creating soundscapes more than as improvisation. At the end of "Rhapsody", a nine-part piece you heard up above, Gray playing is far less reminiscent of any jazz record than of arrangements for solo piano by Aaron Copland – understated but sweepingly epic.

Joey Van Phillips drum work on the disc is never out of sync with the group, remarkable considering the entire project was unplanned. Appearing on [the Current's Local Show](#) they describe going into the studio with a handful of untitled arrangements and recording for hours. Nowhere in the 59 minutes of *LP* would you find Joey Van Phillips inattentive of the direction in which his bandmates are moving – Amazing!

The worldly sound that distinguishes *LP* from traditional fusion records, and places it soundly in the realm of chamber music, is that of the harmonium, a nineteenth century keyboard instrument that moves air



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through reeds. It's sound is often compared to that of the accordion although functionally it's as close to bagpipes. Lisa Hirst Carnes performed the harmonium on *LP*, and also – notably in the hypnotic “Loose Change” – oboe.

Another remarkable feature of this unique collaboration is the presence of cello in place of string bass (or electric bass, I suppose). Cellist Daniel James Zamzow ranges from plucky jazz in “Loose Change” to the refined strumming of chamber music in “Quantum Entanglements”. Add in the additional percussion by Peter Legett and Tim O’Keefe heard on two tracks, including the first one up above (“Mugabe’s Blues”) and Liminal Phase can really cook. The second of those tracks is a 10 minute jam called “3 Etudes” and features O’Keefe on oud (!) and some of Levy’s sharpest guitar work, a wild solo that sounds like Jimi Hendrix sitting in with Gabor Szabo’s band.

A final element to Liminal Phase’s sound is likely to a cynical response from a number of readers, although it is essential to the groups success. I refer to Nathan Brende, credited on the disc with “computer, electric arcana”. I’ll leave it to Lincoln Center to judge the role electronic sounds can play in jazz and stick to enjoying music for the sake of enjoyment – Brende brings more than something modern, new or novel to the group. The use of turntablists in jazz is a couple decades old, and hits its mark from time to time (Courtney Pines’ mid-90s albums, for instance). The use of additional electronics (ie computers) is also firmly established, playing a central role in one of my all-time favorite jazz albums, in fact (Dave Douglas’ *Freak In*).

Of course, *LP* is as much chamber music as it is jazz, but again there is a tradition of innovation and experimentation to build upon – Just as the harmonium has become a common feature in modern classical music (appearing in compositions by William Bolcom, Richard Strauss and Arnold Schoenberg, and also – along with the kitchen sink – in Mahler’s 8th symphony). Electronics have just the same become part of the landscape of classical music, whether in the form of the mid-century musiqueconcrète or the experimental work of Karlheinz Stockhausen. Like it or not.

Nathan Brende’s contribution to Liminal Phase is essential to its sound, even if he is heard less often than his bandmates. His subtle additions



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bring tension and excitement to slow-building pieces like “Quantum Entanglement” and downright soul to “Mugabe’s Blues”. If ever there were a case for the role electronics can play in jazz, it’s Brende’s performance on this disc.

This isn’t a record that you’re going to enjoy if it’s playing through computer speakers while you tippity-type. It’s music for people who are actively doing things, not being things. I have found that I work well when I am playing this record – that is, although it is a very cerebral piece of music I find myself more focused in doing tasks around the record shop, as opposed to the oftentimes distracting patterns in a more conventional pop record. Maybe that doesn’t make sense.

I should be listening to as I write just now, instead of eavesdropping on the surreal exchange my two toddlers are having by way of their Star Wars figures. Probably, I would be better prepared to explain myself. Inside the sleeve (and Daniel Levy’s cover art is one of this year’s very best, by the way) is a short description:

We went down to our basement.

We stayed for hours and days; weeks, months and years. We listened and we played. Alone. Together. With what we had. With what we could get. Hierarchies reversed. Outcomes were uncertain. Structures were disclosed.

We went upstairs.

If there’s a great record for the active listener this year it’s this. If there’s a record that captures the thrill of making music, and of collaboration, this is it. Eventually I’m at a loss for words, or maybe the choices I’m making are for the best – This is all happening in real time, my typing and your reading, whether we like it or not. I feel like that’s an attitude square in line with Liminal Phase.