

**Mama - CROW COYOTE BUFFALO (Fly Like A Sprite Records FLASCD. 001)**



Mama is the name given to the Cornwall-based pairing of American-born folk songstress Sarah McQuaid and former chart-topper turned psych-folkster Zoë Pollock: an unlikely-sounding combination, maybe, but a significantly beguiling one as it turns out.

The dominant vibe is unquestionably retro-60s and more than slightly hippie, and Sarah's lyrics are informed both by ancient philosophies and legends and by more personal (or personalised) fables of wandering and wanderlust. Both Sarah and Zoë take lead vocal duties, and their voices, although very different in character, turn out to complement each other well when used together.

In particular, the raw, almost tribal directness and forward-energy of Zoë's delivery is captivating, and suits the spacious, "outdoor" nature of the lyrics. The songs evoke headily ethereal landscapes while dealing in what for yer average songwriter would be decidedly obscure or esoteric subject-matter: Tarot card illustrator Pamela Colman Smith (*The Lovers*), the sufferings of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (*Aquí Me Pinté Yo*), lucid dreaming (*Western*, with its trance-like spoken passages), the writings of Carlos Castaneda (the title track, which also integrates influences from Native American music). Eastern drones are used to mesmeric effect on *Pipe And Tabor* (which posits the theory that the Great God Pan still lives among us) and *Kathakali Boy* (inspired by the elaborate Indian classical dance-cum-story-play of that name), while Mama's take on the Biblical story of Salome bewitchingly utilises mariachi trumpet within a hallucinatory and chaotic swirling dervish of *Dancing Girl*. The flamboyant, devil-may-care insistence of opening track *The Fool Of Spring* is a bit like the *Roches on speed*, while further contrasts are provided by the disturbed awakening of *Liquid Sunshine* and the gentle ambient tinkling-bell-adorned idyll of *At The Waterside*, and the bonus track is a fresh update of Zoë's 1991 hit single *Sunshine On A Rainy Day* - mildly disposable perhaps (a bit like the *Hole In My Shoe* that's still letting in water, I guess!), but it's fit for purpose as a desirable encore here.

The instrumental backings are clear-textured, with Zoë's rippling ukulele and classical guitar in delicate counterpoint with Sarah's open-tuned guitar while further delectable backing is provided by Tiffany Bryant's flute and Andy Jarvis's intricate percussion (and occasional accordion, trumpet or harmonium).

These various elements add to the wayward, trippy vibe, but (and this bit's hardest to pin down!) there's also a curiously spontaneous sense of control to the whole proceedings, a feeling of considered arrangement that's conscious but not self-conscious - all of which adds to the appeal of the music. Even so, there's occasionally a nagging little feeling that the whole is less than the sum of its parts, with individual tracks very persuasive yet the total effect a touch too ragbag to be entirely convincing.

But after much deliberation, and despite superficially underwhelming first impressions and occasional reservations about the easy-trendy Glastonbury vibe and flawed vision of some of the lyrics, I've grown to really like the endearing music produced by Mama's fruitful, if idiosyncratic creative partnership.

[www.mamamusic.co.uk](http://www.mamamusic.co.uk)