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REVIEW: Alune Wade, 'Sultan' (Enja)

by MICHAEL ROBERTS



a Senegalese bass guitar virtuoso who makes his home in France, tapped musicians from three continents for *Sultan*, the latest project from an instrumentalist, composer and singer who has worked with a long list of jazz, fusion and world-music notables. Recorded in Tunisia, Paris and New York, the album is his fifth as a leader in 15 years.

An intoxicating blend of undulating grooves and flickering textures build on seamlessly integrated keyboards, horns, string instruments, rhythm sections, and vocals — sometimes wordless, sometimes spoken in tongues of many nations. Listeners tempted to engage in spot-the-influence games might instead gain from simply allowing these soundscapes to unfold and hypnotize at will.

The album, inspired by Wade's 25-day musical residency in Tunisia and meant to evoke a melding of the musical traditions of East Africa and Egypt, offers 12 tracks intended to represent a dozen chapters of a voyage. Opener "Saba's Journey," built on a snaking bass line sometimes played in unison with other instruments, incorporates shiny Farfisa organ chording, rising and falling horns, Hugues Mayot's keening tenor sax interjections, and, finally, a round of bright-toned soloing by trumpeter Carlos Sarduy. "Donso," riding a thicket of drums sprinkled with Leo Genovese's laid-back piano declarations, wends its way into an up-tempo section led by trumpet and woodwinds, and an entrancing vocals-and-percussion passage.

There's never a dull moment. The title track, led by singer Mounir Troudi, benefits from the fiery playing of trumpeter Josh Deutsch, among others, while the leader's Marcus Miller-style funky melody lines cross paths with Guimba Kouyaté's fiery guitar and a bluesy horn section on "Nasty Sand," and loping jam band-like rhythms underpin "Portrait de Maure." Wade is joined by four American musicians, including pianist Christian Sands and drummer Lenny White, on the somber "Lullaby for Sultan," also featuring trumpeter Deutsch; and the zippy, multitextured closer, "Café Oran," with Wade leading an octet, feels like soundtrack music for a global spy thriller. Afrobeat, highlife and juju are certainly musical references for Wade, but his decidedly eclectic, global boogie is a wholly appealing concoction of his own making. — **Philip Booth**



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