

At the end of 2019, about a month after this album was recorded, news started to spread: the New Jungle Orchestra, the peripatetic geomusical safari founded by Pierre Dørge in 1980, had set the time and place to celebrate the band's 40th anniversary. The concerts would occur the weekend of July 3, as part of the 2020 Copenhagen Jazz Festival, in Black Diamond, a modern extension of the Royal Library. This architectural gem combines new and old, with an expansive vista of the North Sea pointing toward travel and adventure; what better setting to mark this milestone for the homegrown NJO?

Fans flocked from all over Europe and across the Atlantic to hear the band, which shone with its customary panache. There was something extra, too. You could feel it in the gleam radiating from an emotional Dørge; in the charming pride of his wife, Irene Becker (the orchestra's keyboardist all these years); and in the raucous revelry that swept through . . .

Oh wait. Sorry. That took place in the alternate universe.

Here in the real world, as you know, the world got sick, just as concert tickets went on sale. The pandemic shuttered people in their homes and shut down clubs and concert halls. It soon became clear that even summer tours and festivals, scheduled for months later, would be dangerous if not unthinkable. In early April, the Copenhagen Jazz Festival canceled its 2020 edition. What surely would have been among the wildest anniversary celebrations – for one of the wildest of orchestras, led by one of the least predictable of artists – would not take place.

But now we have ***Bluu Afroo***, which serves much the same function that the Black Diamond sets would have done: recapping the band's history, recapturing its successes, reminding us of its reach – and, as always, regaling us with the leader's ingenuity.

The music on ***Bluu Afroo*** comes from a short NJO tour of Denmark – where they were joined by tenor saxophonist Stephen Riley, who had made several previous appearances with the band – and the repertoire nods to heroes and inspirations that Dørge has honored throughout his career. He salutes the exotic elegance of Duke Ellington (who led the original Jungle Orchestra in the 1920s), and the polyphonic muscle of Charles Mingus, and the sci-fi inclinations of Sun Ra, whose unfettered explorations extended beyond Planet Earth.

And as usual, Dørge returns again and again to the Jungle, an Eden of his imagination, informed by his travels and fired by not only the wild things of Africa but also its urban culture. Early in his career, Dørge studied the *kora* in Gambia, learning to mimic the instrument's attack and decay in his guitar work. Over the next 15 years, he returned often, to Senegal and Morocco, Ghana and South Africa (where he worked in bands led by the visionary bassist Johnny Dyani). These visits sent his music careening off to other far-flung sources of inspiration, including India, China, and even that most provocative of jungles, New York City.

In his words, *"It is all melting together, all this music. And of course there are pieces that are going a little bit into outer space. But also I always put in some African blues – 'a la Dørge.'* It was very important for me in this album to focus on the guitar." If **Blue Afroo** is a look back at the NJO's history, told in old photographs and newer videos, the narration comes courtesy of this Danish jazz composer's "African blues guitar," which weaves its way throughout the vividly vibrant compositions.

That narration assumes a variety of personae. Dørge's guitar sets the mood for the strutting pan-African hoedown **Fulani** and the soulful cry of **Ka Wa Ku Wo**, a song written after the NJO played in Zanzibar in 2018, which showcase's Jakob Mygind's volcanic tenor. The indigo meditation that introduces **Blue Afrik** slides into a wide-ranging and deeply expressive guitar solo, shadowed later by Mygind's soprano sax. In another vein, Dørge prefaces **Dancing in the Jungle** with strains of Gambia, interlaced with bits of Americana, after which he authors a thrillingly off-kilter solo when the band dives into a swingy West African rave. (And note the puckish brass chorale that materializes halfway through.)

The free-form, mystery-laden **Aburu Kuwa** transports our narrator to a reedy bamboo forest, where he and clarinetist Anders Banke use the simmering rhythmic undergrowth as a springboard. The song's title comes from the Ashanti people in Ghana, the birthplace of NJO percussionist Ayi Solomon, who first told Dørge of the Ashanti's *aburu* drum style: *"They use small drums, talking drums, to play patterns that imitate bird songs,"* explains Dørge.

He draws more inspiration from the animal kingdom on **Elefante Imposante**, where his writing unleashes a technicolor riot, filling the sonic canvas with fantastic hues and tones. (The electronics suggest that these pachyderms are not of this world.) At the top of the track you hear Dørge himself, spouting phrases in the Basque language. As he explains, *"In Bilbao I bought a*

children's book in the Basque language about a tour in the zoo; and then I took some sentences from there and put them into the music." He doesn't know what they mean, but that's not the point; his methodology reflects Dørge's fascination with Dadaism, and specifically the Dadaist "sound-poems" constructed from random words and invented syllables.

Back from Africa, Dørge reprises **Mingus' Birthday Party**; this composition debuted on his previous album, the sextet disc called **Soundscapes**. Buoyed by that performance, Dørge immediately added it to the repertoire of the NJO, where the piece changes with each performance. Per the famous "conductions" of Butch Morris – with whom Dørge played briefly in 1985 – he adds and subtracts soloists, and lengthens or compresses whole segments on the fly; it keeps the band (as well as Dørge) on their toes. *"I never know how it will come out,"* he marvels. *"It can be very powerful or very soft"* – or both, as you'll hear.

The music of Ellington, another Dørge touchstone, pervades the ravishing **Mama Asili**, redolent of the exotic portraits that Ellington and Billy Strayhorn compiled into their jazz travelogues **The Far East Suite**. This track fittingly stars Stephen Riley, whose breathy subtone technique owes so much to Ellington mainstay Paul Gonsalves, the majestic soloist on many of the ballads on which this piece is modeled. The Duke collides with Sun Ra on **Rockin' at Planet Pluto**, a feature for all the saxophonists, with interplanetary styling added to the chassis of Ellington's 1931 classic **Rockin' in Rhythm**.

Two other dedications exist outside the jazz realm. A wonderful composer in her own right, Becker wrote both **Dancing in the Jungle** and **Sister**, a tribute to her sibling Janicke, who died just a couple months before this recording. Emotionally complex, at first solemn and then playful, it includes appreciative comments from Riley as well as a last-minute addition to the Jungle caravan, Swedish trumpeter Tobias Wiklund.

The remaining "dedication," **Witchdoctor in the Burial Mound**, may be the strangest of all. As Dørge tells it:

"Where I live, there used to be an area in the woods, where the kings would hunt, and where red deer still run, and there are all these burial mounds there." They're called dolmens, they date from the Bronze Age, and they still stand throughout Denmark. *"And in 1845, they opened one of them and found a chief – a witch doctor. Those mounds go back 3500 years. And I was so inspired when I read about this guy, and the things collected in his grave – shells, beads, one of the oldest zippers found in Europe – that I wanted to make a piece about it."* The

appropriately spooky sounds at beginning and end come from conch shells; Ayi Solomon intones in Ghanaian; multiple spirits converse. *“We start it like a ceremony,”* Dørge continues, *“and then at the end, the witch doctor blows the shell again.”*

Actually, the *real* witch doctor is Dørge himself, wielding his guitar like a medicine man’s staff and mixing the ingredients of the New Jungle Orchestra into elixirs that suit the moment and cure what ails us. As ***Bluu Afroo*** incandescently reminds us, he’s been doing that for 40 years – and still counting.

NEIL TESSER