

Press Release

KUMO

Slave Dances (Seven Portraits)

download and 52 page full colour zine

Sound-space/Psychomat

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International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition

“I have always taken a cue from visual art that my work should be thematic,” says **Kumo** aka producer and writer **Jono Podmore**. “A concept as the basis for a piece of visual art is considered an absolute necessity but in music we shy away from this, largely due to the excesses of the self-indulgent and tasteless ‘concept albums’ of the Seventies.”

On *Slave Dances (Seven Portraits)*, his finest and most rigorously thought through collection of music to date, **Kumo** draws on all of his strengths - his mastery of digital and analogue electronics, from Protools to his beloved Theremin, his depth of historical knowledge, ranging from the roots of African-American music to the European avant garde to contemporary Techno, his research skills as a Professor at the Hochschule für Musik in Cologne, Germany and his advanced conceptual sense which does indeed place *Slave Dances* at more than a cut above the addled, bucolic whimsy of conceptual English Prog rock.

Slave Dances (Seven Portraits) is an immensely pleasurable, brilliantly sourced weave of rhythm, texture and repurposed, reworked sounds doctored up in his South London home studio. It is, however, a vital tool for reflection on the connective history of Black music, remaking connections which have been erased by the habitual omission by whites of black agency in music history and its origins.

Kumo's fundamental observation is that dances such as the Charleston, Foxtrot Bunny Hug, the Turkey Trot and the Shimmy are not merely the quaint, frolicsome soundtrack to the flapper jollity of 100 years ago. These dances, popular with and often appropriated by whites, were originally slave dances, rooted in the anguish of the days of inhuman bondage.

Kumo links seven of these dances to seven African-American artists whose brilliant, purposeful work draws strangely on what might seem to be unlikely origins. Using other elements, including sampled voices, reworked classical music, these pieces function as collage-like portraits of the artists in question, juxtaposing and melding the diverse influences and sometimes unlikely connections that have been the making of them and their work.

So, *The Charleston (Josephine Baker)*, African-American Queen of 20th century Paris, the French enthralled by her Black “otherness”, reworks the rhythm of the krakebs, key to the original dance, whose velocity evokes “the insistent rhythms of the hooves of galloping horses bearing escaping slaves”. Also featured in the mix are samples of Baker singing her signature *J’ai Deux Amours*, reflecting her dual nationality, ethereally echoed by **Kumo**’s Theremin.

The Black Bottom (James Stinton), with its acid-tipped rhythms reflects on the latterday Afro-Futurist Techno auteur from Detroit; Black Bottom refers to a district in that city, not a posterior, as the title of the Ma Rainey film might lead you to believe. *The Turkey Trot (Dizzy Gillespie)*, a dance considered so lewd it was banned by the Vatican, is linked to the great jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, a deliberately beatless, melancholy piece which samples Gillespie’s complaint at the expropriation of African-American cultural property in a 1972 interview. “The Blacks in the United States don’t even have a national dance”.

The Bunny Hug (Nina Simone) shows how Simone’s 1964 breakout song had its unlikely roots in this dance. It’s augmented by looped, stride piano and even elements of the Bach in which Simone was proficient, making for a multi-dimensional portrait of the furious soul singer. As for *The Shimmy (Ol’ Dirty Bastard)*, **Kumo** reconnects this jolly, saucy jig with its origins as an Indigenous American dance, pointing out the huge sympathy on the part of Indigenous Americans for escaped slaves.

Juba (Jimi Hendrix) identifies the kinship between Hendrix the roving, restless artist and the character of an early song featuring the rhythm, mixing Hambone, a percussive method involving slapping parts of the human body, which **Kumo** learned, at not inconsiderable physical pain, with Hendrix-like guitar treatments, cascading like a waterfall of manic depressive tears. Finally, *The Buzzard Lope (Thelonious Monk)*, reveals the origin of this particular dance; when enslaved people fell dead in the fields, masters would refuse to allow their bodies to be removed at once as they considered that a waste of man hours; there they would lay, as the buzzards circled, looking to feast on the carcasses.

An essential accompaniment to the album, indeed a brilliantly educational document in its own right, is a full colour 52-page A5 zine, featuring soberly beguiling artwork by **Joyce Treasure** and superb design by **Dan Taylor** available from: <http://www.psychomat.com/store> Here, **Kumo** explains in detail how he sourced, researched and put together these pieces, his recording methods and motivations in making the album. There is additional text also from **Treasure**, an essay based around her cover image *The Dancer*, in which she lays bare the insidious

processes of cultural and mental colonisation which deprive both blacks and whites of true consciousness.

Treasure interrogated **Kumo** as to his undertaking of this project, given that, as he himself points out, “I am very white, at times almost transparent from lack of melanin.” The project benefits from that interrogation. Ultimately, however, reflecting on his own Liverpoolian upbringing and the geographical and ancestral link with the slave trade that entails, **Kumo** resolved to join the effort to “decolonise our collective history and identify how slavery continues to touch us all, economically, socially and culturally. It may be daunting but the fact is that black people have been telling whites about this for 400 years and yet the message never seems to penetrate. It is the responsibility of whites to stick our necks out and be counted; make mistakes, offend each other, risk accusations of appropriation . . . in order to get the conversation moving both between each other and the black community. Otherwise this central narrative in our economic and cultural lives will remain a sideshow and our true histories, no matter how vast and all encompassing, will remain hidden.”

There is the sensibility of the gallery of these pieces; one could imagine them as hanging sculptures, or mixed media works incorporating diverse visual elements and materials. However, there is none of the gallery’s white-walled, silent sterility about *Slave Dances (Seven Portraits)*, which is bristling and teeming, kinetic, and, despite the sombre subject matter, joyful, playful even. *Slave Dances (Seven Portraits)* is as delightful as it is educational.

David Stubbs
Aug 2021

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Taster

https://soundcloud.com/audio_visual_space/slavedancesminimix1

