



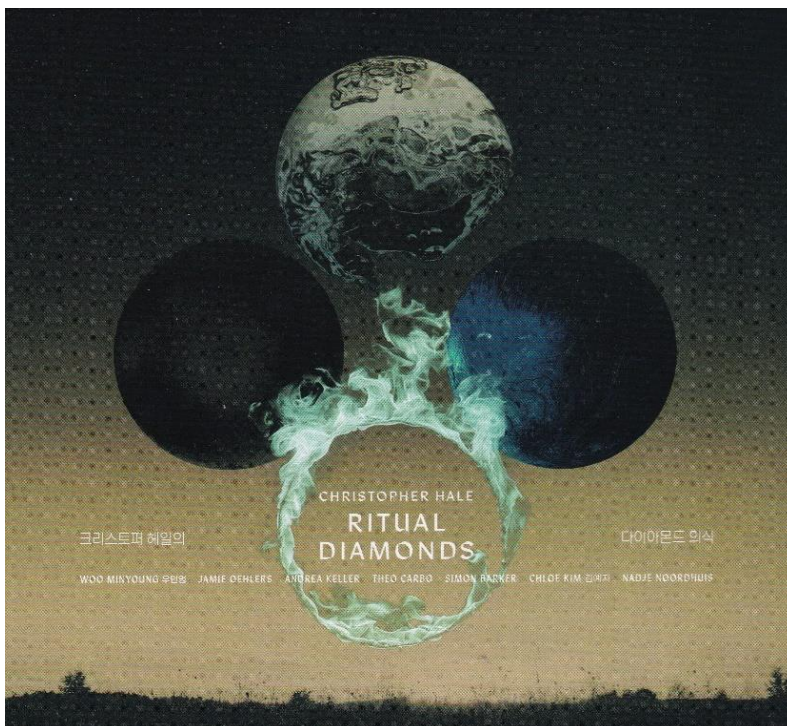
CHRISTOPHER HALE: RITUAL DIAMONDS

Album review by Eric Myers

Label: Earshift Music

Personnel: Christopher Hale (bass guitar, baritone guitar, acoustic & electric guitars, kkwaenggwari, ching, percussion); Woo Minyoung (changgo, kkwaenggwari, p'aram, percussion); Jamie Oehlers (tenor & soprano saxophones); Andrea Keller (Rhodes, piano); Theo Carbo (acoustic & electric guitars) Simon Barker (drums, mujing), Two special guests are Chloe Kim (cymbals, percussion) and Nadjie Noordhuis (trumpet).

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On first hearing *Ritual Diamonds*, one is struck by how beautiful the music sounds on the surface. Subsequent attempts at analysis do not very much disturb that initial impression. There's a unique soundscape in operation here and, given the dominance of electric instruments, it's primarily electronic. Leader Christopher Hale is on electric bass (among a bewildering variety of other instruments), keyboardist Andrea Keller is on electric piano, and Theo Carbo is of course primarily on electric guitar. Such an electronic soundscape is relatively unusual these days, even unfashionable, but it's so well put together here by extraordinary musicians, that it sounds fresh and innovative.

Overall, I found *Ritual Diamonds* a strange and unusual album, and difficult to categorise. Listening to it is a transporting experience, as if one is in a dream, or experiencing a reverie. The electronic bed is rich and lush, over which very attractive melodies are played with the time-feels often ambiguous. I feel this album is further testimony to the fact that the greatest Australian jazz musicians welcome the sort of complexity which tests their instrumental expertise. With music so challenging, I found it best not to over-analyse the music, but simply surrender to its beauty.

The declared purpose of the album is to reimagine Korean ritual drumming in the context of Western contemporary jazz. For ten years, Hale has been studying with the Korean drumming innovator Woo Minyoung who shares with him a fascination with rhythm. Hale explains it this way: "Minyoung shared with me her deep knowledge of shaman ritual drumming styles and traditional rhythms. I shared with her the rhythms of my communities in Australia: the flamenco cycles of my background and the mathematical rhythm codes of the Australian percussionist Greg Sheehan."



Woo Minyoung with her traditional Korean drum the changgo... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

Other than the three musicians already mentioned, saxophonist Jamie Oehlers plays a significant role. With enviable skill as always, he demonstrates how to construct a lyrical solo over a complicated time-feel; and there are some majestic guitar solos from Carbo. Luckily, I enjoy immensely grappling with music I don't fully comprehend, and find addictive the sort mystique such music creates.



Jamie Oehlers: demonstrating how to construct a lyrical solo over a complicated time-feel... PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS

Ritual Diamonds is a milestone album for Australian jazz and I believe that musicologists, and serious students of contemporary jazz, will long be fascinated by the music here, along with Hale's detailed and stimulating explanations of what is being attempted on each track. It's entirely appropriate that drummer Simon Barker, who has done so much to introduce elements of Korean drumming to Australian audiences, is part of Hale's group, and that his student Chloe Kim, herself originally from Korea, is a special guest.



Christopher Hale: detailed and stimulating explanations of what is being attempted on each track... PHOTO COURTESY AUSJAZZ BLOG