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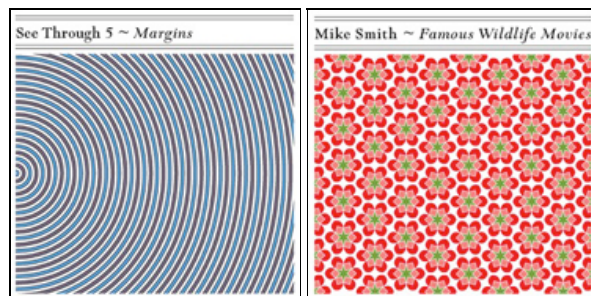
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**See Through 5: *Margins***

All-Set! Editions

The Mike Smith Company: *Famous Wildlife Movies*

All-Set! Editions

Bassist Pete Johnston and keyboards player Mike Smith are certainly doing their part to enliven the Toronto jazz scene with fresh and inventive music. It must needs be said, however, that neither of the group projects they head up, Johnston's See Through 5 and The Mike Smith Company, have much if anything to do with jazz as conventionally known, and anyone expecting solo-indulgent riffs on standards and traditional swing will find precious little of either on these latest recordings. What you *will* hear is a really interesting kind of chamber jazz on one (chamber-prog, if you prefer) and eccentric keyboard-rich reveries on the other.

In probably the biggest overturning of traditional jazz form, soloing is almost wholly absent on See Through 5's *Margins*; instead, Johnston, pianist Tania Gill, saxophonist Karen Ng (also clarinet), drummer Jake Oelrichs, and synth player Smith direct their energies into bringing Johnston's intricate, largely notated compositions into being. Yet while their collective focus centers on hewing carefully to the tunes' maze-like constructions, their individual personalities nevertheless emerge in the way each gives voice to Johnston's material. Recorded by Smith and Sandro Perri in Toronto in August 2015, the five electronic-and-acoustic hybrids pull into their orbit minimalism, funk, prog, krautrock, and, yes, even jazz as they unfold with the precision of a Swiss timepiece.

Oelrichs powers the opening "The Maps Were Right All Along" with a lumbering groove that solidly underpins alternating statements by Ng and Smith and that Gill and Johnston embellish with their own support. As the track advances, moments surface that suggest lines could conceivably be drawn from *Margins* to Strata Institute's *Cipher Syntax*, the 1989 set issued by Greg Osby, Steve Coleman, and others in the M-Base collective. Such a connection declares itself in particular when the polyrhythms of the drumming joins up with the stab of the saxophone line and throb of the acoustic bass; further to that, the slo-funk pulse Oelrichs weaves into "Underused Sense of Wonder" resembles a slightly less busy one Marvin "Smitty" Smith might have brought to that earlier session. Soloing is such a rarity on the album that when Tania Gill and Karen Ng contribute free-wheeling turns to "Piecing Together That Dream," the effect is almost startling. Perhaps the biggest compliment that could be paid to Johnston and company is that *Margins* and by extension See Through 5 sound pretty much unlike anything else out there at the moment, even if dubbing it *sui generis* would be stretching it a bit.

Eccentric and whimsical describe Mike Smith's own set, *Famous Wildlife Movies*, which features Ng and Oelrichs also (the latter on timbales) along with Ali Berkok (electric piano), Mika Posen (violin), Matt Valentine (guitar), Jay Hay (saxophone, bass clarinet), Heather Saumer (trombone), D. Alex Meeks (drum kit), Blake Howard (congas, percussion), and Lisa Conway (drum machine). As plentiful as such resources are, the album is clearly Smith's baby, his woozy synthesizers very much a defining element of its sound. Like *Margins*, the one-time Muskox member recorded the material with Sandro Perri between 2015 and 2016, much of it again taking place in Toronto.

Smith's naturally playful sensibility is on full display, but an unexpectedly different flavour seeps into the album on occasion, one that originated out of a chance viewing of Salsa superstars Willie Colon and Hector Lavoe. As a result, a tune such as "Boneless Ghost" ends up straddling multiple universes, the first populated by endlessly chattering synth micro-organisms and the second packed

with conga and timbales players. *Famous Wildlife Movies* also veers into Muskox-styled territory when a tune such as "Fairyland Lustre" expands into a full-band arrangement featuring guitar, keyboards, bass, and drums. Clearly the album's centerpiece, the title suite folds any number of styles and sounds into its six parts, from the woozy, psychedelic ambient swirl of its opening section to its second's wonky riff on slow jazz-blues conventions. In Smith's world, it's perfectly natural for a walking bass line to accompany a violin-and-synthesizer front-line or for a braying sax to wail against an Afro-Cuban backdrop, and with wobbly synthesizers stretching every which way, "Famous Wildlife Movies VI" even begins to sound like something Joe Zawinul might have crafted for *Mr. Gone*. With salsa a key part of its blend, Smith's solo outing proves to be as unusual as *Margins*, never an unwelcome thing in this neck o' the woods.