

**CD Asakusa Follies (Clive Bell 2017)****by Mike McInerney**CD by **Cusp editions**, Manchesterwww.cuspeditions.co.uk

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Mastered and cut by Rashad Becker at D&M Design by
Ecka Mordecia

1. Ultramodern Variety
2. Silk Factories
3. The Red Sash Society
4. Golden Bat Cigarettes
5. Erotic Grotesque
6. The Scarlet Gang
7. Five Story Pagoda
8. Idle Reminiscence

On an initial listen, the second track of this album, *Silk Factories*, suggested I might be in for a modern take on James Newton's 1981 classic of multitracking and extended flute techniques, *Axum*. By the time I had reached the final track, *Idle Reminiscence*, the impression had been completely swept away: *Asakusa Follies* is both noisier and more radical. Clive Bell's musical excursions now seem closer in spirit to the electro-acoustic avant-garde, though I believe that all the sounds I heard were natural, acoustic and instrumental.

Much of the credit for this effect must, I suspect, go to Bell's numerous accomplices in the process: Rashad Becker, who mastered the album, Grant Showbiz, who recorded it, and most notably his long-time collaborator Sylvia Hallett, who interspersed the various examples of acoustic work with quite extreme remixes of the core material. The utaguchi and other mouthpieces seem to have been deliberately close miked to capture the extraneous whistles, rattles and breath noises that other wind instrumentalists might prefer to downplay, allowing Bell to explore a soundworld of beat frequencies, white noise, multiphonics and other distortions. Of course few of these sounds are alien to the Kinko-ryu Honkyoku tradition, but Bell takes them further than most.

The album opens and closes with a massively extended echo effect - derived I suspect in both cases from a single shakuhachi tone - an effect which in its clear sense of artifice points at that other, post-technological realm of synthesised sounds. The first echo seems otherworldly, quavering in an uncanny space between real and unreal, before Bell's instrumental ruminations bring us down to earth. The second grows inexorably out of the final notes of *Idle Reminiscence*, until they are effectively obliterated by it. In between there are four shakuhachi solos, a duo, a trio, duets for the Hmong Khene and Taiwanese Pi-Saw, and three of Hallett's short remixes. Each of the eleven tracks takes its title and inspiration from Kawabata's early modernist novel *The Scarlet Gangs of Asakusa* (1930).

None of the noisier sounds predominate in any one track. Instead they arise through the music, as it were, as a natural extension of Bell's expressive vocabulary. Beautiful multiphonic sound sheets for instance both close track 4, *Golden Bat Cigarettes*, and open *Idle Reminiscence* (Tr. 11). Bell's technically accomplished flutter-tonguing permeates the album, but plays a key role in moving forward the musical logic of *Ultramodern Variety* (Tr.1), and deepening the impetus of track 2, *Silk Factories*. His use of beat frequencies - two paired instruments playing stable pitches sometimes only a few hertz apart to produce an audible beating sound - which can be exquisite, and seems ideally suited to the collection of South-east Asian instruments being celebrated on this album, also occurs a number of times: perhaps most clearly in *The Red Sash Society* (track 5), where the two Pi-saws have been panned quite hard left and right to accentuate the effect.

The ghost of Hon Kyoku is sometimes just below the surface. Track 9, *Five Storey Pagoda*, which spends its first four and a half minutes playing long, constantly nuanced, single tones from the lower register interspersed with high squeaks and multiphonics before finally hitting a single Ro Kan then descending back to Otsu, remains reminiscent of a *Hi Fu Mi* introduction, despite its avant-garde credentials. The graceful way in which the three shakuhachis in *Silk Factories* move between *Komibuki* breath and the close detunings that give rise to beat frequencies, so that the ear is not always clear where one begins and the other ends, reflects not only of the technical vocabulary of the tradition but also its refined aesthetic.

Ultramodern Variety provides a compelling introductory journey through Bell's challenging landscape, showing off his accomplished fluttersong to maximum effect. The control is admirable as he varies the speed of the flutter, producing at one point a sound that seems more mechanical than human (though perhaps a nineteenth century machine of wood and leather rather than anything contemporary).

There is a strong compositional element running through the album, though the balance between compositional nous and enhanced sonic vocabulary is best heard in the four ensemble pieces. Even the Khene duo, *The Scarlet Gang* (Tr. 8), despite the narrowness of its tonal and expressive spectrum, shows a quietly attentive sense of detailing. In *Silk Factories*, the shakuhachi trio, a single tone twice expands its tessitura, filling with harmonies, fluttersong and trills before collapsing back into itself. In its third iteration, noises, trills and ghost tones proliferate, before a final iteration in which fluttering acts as an equal partner to pitch, enhancing the expressive depth of the individual lines as they interweave.

(Tracks 4 and 5 have been inadvertently swapped on the CD recording, so that track 5, as played, is evidently track 4 (*The Red Sash Society*) as labelled on the CD and vice versa. I have referred to the tracks numbers as they appear on the CD, but applied the correct titles).