Was (Not Was), on ZE Island Records. Siree the Beat (Dance Ze Dance). Fania Arries on ZE Island Records.

As a matter of habit, I never listen to disco records. So many people told me about the "new disc" being produced by the cool crowd at ZE Records (favorite label of the New York City underground) that I finally decided it was time to give the stuff a listen. Previous releases on ZE left me cold — James Chance, the Conventions, and Kid Creole are too emo for me. I always felt that I had to be the one to judge it. Fortunately, the two new releases (a sampler and a new artist) aren't alienating at all.

Siree the Beat is a compilation of six tunes that were released previously as twelve-inch singles, all by members of ZE's more obscure (or bizarre) talent. The disc kicks off with "Bussing Out" by Material and Nozu Hendrys — a combination that looks great on paper. Put together New York's best punk funk ensemble and a great ex-oul singer, and you should get results hot enough to singe your scalp. Unfortunately, "Bussing Out" sounds like more Giorgio Moroder mindless Eurodisco — both playing and singing are uninspired and undistinguished. The one interesting point is that the lyrics are verbatim excerpts from a prison dairy.

Moving on to "Wheel Me Out" by Was (Not Was), we once again find interesting discs with cheesy vocals, and Coati Mundi's "Deputy of Love" by Don Armando's 2nd Avenue Rhumba Band is a cheesy rhumba "I'm a former Scientist, now on the Woodwork" by Julian Crenfell. Accompanied by street traffic noises and an Eric Dolphy-like hard bop line (delivered by sax and muted trumpet), one of the Was brothers (actually David Weiss) brings the metallic sounds of Detroit (their home) to New York and meld them with electronic disco and bizarre lyrics. The formula has proved successful — you can tell your tune has made it when it can be heard blaring all around Central Square. "Out Come The Freaks," the album's opening song, was an instant hit; a rap-styled ode to the drags of humanity with a chorus that says it all: "The woodwork squeaks and out come the freaks."

The Was sound is marked by a predomiance of heavy-metal guitar chording, lots of synthesizers, electronic handclaps, heavy brass arrangements, and a braying of background singers. The singing can wear after a while — the choruses are strident, almost jeering, and confer a "wha, wha, wha" attitude to each tune in which they are present. The Was' inspired use of strange sounds saves many of these tunes from mediocrity, in particular, the growl vocals by Ronald Reagan on "Tell Me That I'm Dreaming" convert standard staff to true weirdness. Speaking of weirdness, it's impossible to ignore "The Sky's Ablaze" (my favorite). Accompanied by street traffic noises and an Eric Dolphy-like hard bop line (delivered by sax and muted trumpet), one of the Was' recites a story about his drunken hallucinating father: "On the roof with wet legs they're kicking from the clouds / Shows fall through the morning haze / And our legs among the crowds / Very weird, but unforgettable. In a similar vein, "Carry Me Back to Old Morocco" demands attention due to its sparkling Eastern-sounding synthesizer embellishments, another Was' reeffective, and the omnipresent psychotic lyrics: "I was really almost there / Pulling hard on white hair / From the surface of the moon ..."

How could you not love this type of insanity?

Not all that the Wases touch turns to gold. "Who's That Teenager (in the Heart Crew)" by Gerry Rafferty goes disco ballad and "Oh, Mr. Friction," a rap philosophy fails miserably. The Wases should play their strong suit — sing you tunes themselves, lose the background singers, and keep to some of the drums or whatever it is that inspires their madness. I, oh, almost forgot — not only is this a great album, but you can also dance to it. Go to it.

David Shaw

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