



Bio information: **LED BIB**

Title: **HOTEL PUPIK** (Cuneiform Rune 541)

Format: CD / VINYL / DIGITAL

www.cuneiformrecords.com

FILE UNDER: **JAZZ / BEYOND**

Before we get into the specifics of Led Bib's brilliant new record, Hotel Pupik, let's try a small thought experiment. Imagine, if you will, that you're in possession of a gigantic LP record, one big enough to contain all of the 104 pieces that the British group has recorded over its 22-year career.

Got that?

Now let's imagine that you're dropping the needle at random. You might wind up with a track like "Call Centre Labyrinth", from Led Bib's 2009 Mercury Prize-nominated release, *Sensible Shoes*. With its skronking yet carefully harmonized horns, Saturnine keys, and massively fuzzed-out bass, it's beautifully brutal. Lift the tonearm and repeat; now you're on to "Clatter", the opening track from the group's 2005 debut, *Arboretum*. The sound might be less polished, the energy even more brash, but Led Bib's singular blend of jazz adventure and 21st-century drive is already fully present.

So now let's try one more track. But what's this? Female vocals? Pensive and poetic lyrics? By chance, you've hit upon "To Dry In the Rain", from 2019's *It's Morning*, a radical departure for the band. Singer Sharron Fortnam's wistful soprano nudges Led Bib into something that might reasonably be called soulful jazz-prog—which makes sense, given that Middlesex University in North London, where drummer Mark Holub formed the group, is only a short distance away from Canterbury, and this track would sit comfortably alongside efforts from such U.K. icons as Robert Wyatt or Hatfield and the North. It's an anomaly in the Led Bib catalogue, yet Pete Grogan and Chris Williams' saxophones still swirl and joust, while bassist Liran Donin keeps the steady pulse around which all the other elements coalesce.

Led Bib's ability to retain its core identity while surveying a wide swath of musical terrain is remarkable, and on *Hotel Pupik* the group faced its biggest challenge yet: the departure of keyboardist Toby McLaren, a vital part of the ensemble since its inception. At first, successful evolution seemed like a distant hope, especially as Led Bib's first post-Covid quartet gigs without McLaren were problematic. "They weren't easy," Holub admits. "I think we were trying to play as a quartet, but in the same way that we'd always played. And it just felt like there was something missing."

And what were the missing elements? Nothing more than time, and luck.

Hotel Pupik—the place, not the latest Led Bib record—is housed in the outbuildings of a ruined castle on the outskirts of Scheiffling, Austria. Overlooked by steep hills and nestled in a grove of deciduous trees, it's a complex of dwellings and open, loft-like spaces; in the summer artists are invited to experiment there, attracted by the promise of free accommodation, attractive scenery, and a supportive environment. Holub—an American who has been living in Vienna for the past several years—had already been an artist in residence at *Hotel Pupik* and thought this could be a great place to develop a Led Bib quartet edition. After discussing with the band, they put together an application for the project with Arts Council England and somewhat to all their surprises, the application was accepted.

"The idea," he explains, "was that we would take a week and just play, and really try to reassess the sort of language we're using."

“Obviously it’s connected to what we’ve done before; it’s not completely alien to the catalogue,” the drummer adds. “But it was really a thing of going ‘We were 22, 23, 24 years old when we met. Now we’re 44, 45, 46. What will we do now?’”

And, more particularly, “What will we do without a keyboard player?”

Holub notes that Led Bib considered adding a new member, but decided not to mess with the obvious and intimate chemistry between the four remaining players and the social bond created through twenty plus years of working together.

“It did force us to rethink what we’re doing, in a really positive way,” Holub notes. “When you break up with a girlfriend or a wife or whatever, somehow you have to reassess who you are without them. It’s like ‘We’ve been together for so long, your identity is intrinsically linked with that person, or in this case, with the band. Who am I if I’m not with that person?’ Who am I as a musician, if I was never in this band? ‘How much are the choices that I make in Led Bib, sonically, to do with the other people in this band and our experiences together and how much of them are to do with what I would choose myself?’ So in some ways doing this record was a way of imagining that we’d never played together before. Where would we go if we were to start again?”

All of these questions have been satisfactorily answered on Hotel Pupik, the record. The leisurely pace of the week-long session allowed Led Bib to explore a huge range of ideas and emotions, and while only a small part of what was recorded was used, the group took a similarly relaxed approach to assembling the final product. Over weeks of Zoom chats and email exchanges, Led Bib shaped Hotel Pupik into what Holub calls, with deliberate emphasis, “a record”.

“We were thinking about classic rock albums, like [Pink Floyd’s] Dark Side of the Moon,” he explains. Creating something where the album itself is a story, and in this case, really considering the LP format of 20 minutes to each side.

The closest Hotel Pupik comes to classic rock is on kickoff track “Iron Ore”, a Liran Donin composition that strikes a perfect balance between avant-jazz freedom and metal bombast. It’s great fun. From there, the record diverges, scrolling through the memorably melodic “A Tin Teardrop” and the birdsong-laced atmospherics of “Dawn Chorus”, before arriving at the intellectual exfoliation offered by the one-two punch of “Pure O” and the title track. “Pure O” begins with quiet contemplation before leaning into a fierce passage of sustained high harmonics from the horns; this, in turn, leads into “Hotel Pupik”, a long and beautifully sustained collective improvisation created on the last day of the Austrian sessions.

“It’s not free improv, like capital-F free improv, or Derek Bailey improv,” Holub says. “It’s improvising within the sound-world that Led Bib occupies. but there wasn’t a lot of structure in the sense of ‘This is how this tune’s going to go.’ Previous Led Bib material was almost always about a more traditional jazz way of working: head, solos, head. That tended to be what we did, and the solos were always free but somehow related to what we had played before. While some things we played at the session were done in this way, what ended up on the record is mostly not, the compositions are somehow evident throughout, rather than just at the beginning and end. So, to us, it feels quite different.”

Different, yes, but also fresh. That Led Bib feels renewed is especially evident on Hotel Pupik’s final track “Till Next Time”. It’s a surprisingly sweet and gentle benediction that clearly offers the promise of more—and more from this band will be a very good thing.