



Bio information: **MICHAEL COLUMBIA**
Title: **MIRRORS, SHAPES, OBJECTS** (Cuneiform Rune 3404)
Format: VINYL / DIGITAL
www.cuneiformrecords.com
FILE UNDER: **ROCK / PSYCHEDELIC / JAZZ-ROCK**

David McDonnell: synthesizers, bass, soprano & alto saxophones, vocals
Christopher Kalis: synthesizers, guitar, bass
Dylan Ryan: drums, percussion, vocals

Born out of the co-mingling experimental, free-jazz, and post-rock scenes of Chicago, IL, Mirrors, Shapes, Objects operate in the shared zones of those worlds. The record embraces an unbridled compound of electronic and acoustic textures that intersect in a world called Michael Columbia.

Born out of the stylistic free-for-all that was the Chicago independent music scene of the early 2000's, **Michael Columbia** has continually experimented with its sound, evolving to meet the creative whims and urges of its practitioners. Originally formed as a tangent of David McDonnell's work with the Elephant 6 group Bablicon, Michael Columbia's records have consistently defied expectations. Their latest offering, **Mirrors, Shapes, Objects** operates in the overlapping zones shared by free jazz, experimental, and post-rock. The unaffected blend of electro/acoustic textures and ambient swells suggest that the group may have at last arrived at an aesthetic equilibrium.

A multi-instrumentalist trio of veteran genrebenders, David McDonnell, Christopher Kalis, and Dylan Ryan first played together over a decade ago in the Chicago/Philadelphia-based post-rock collective, **Icy Demons**. Since then they have all consistently moved forward with their own respective musical identities, releasing records and performing with dozens of artists in the free jazz, indie, and electronic scenes in Chicago as well as on both coasts. Those varied experiences only serve to make the Michael Columbia more compelling.

Equally comfortable in an extended instrumental solo as in a committed motorik moment, the group drifts effortlessly between the Soft Machine-style soprano saxophone leads, the interlocking riffs of Discipline-era King Crimson, and the psychedelic-hypno-funk rhythms of Can. Vocals emerge periodically throughout the record, dispelling the notion that these pieces are just vehicles for improvisation and, unlike some of their progressive-rock predecessors, Michael Columbia's songs rarely exceed five minutes.



As the title suggests, the structures of the pieces are occasionally nonconventional, but as with the Canterbury scene, there dwells within the nimble musicianship clearly defined vocal sections where improvisation takes the back seat to vocals and lyrics. Michael Columbia seems keen to keep the record focused, opting for more songs in the same amount of time and embracing a new-wave/progressive sound, coaxing the listener to ponder what kind of songs Bennie Maupin, Laurie Anderson, and Connie Plank might conjure up for a Michael Mann soundtrack circa 1982.

The record opens with “Eagles of the Sea”, a playful yet mysterious little number that dances over and around the syncopated sample that runs throughout. McDonnell’s gentle vocal line floats over Ryan’s Kieth-Moon-esque time-keeping, giving way to an ebullient solo where McDonnell, shifting to soprano saxophone, sculpts out a delicate balance of slippery melodic fragments and heady improvisational exhilaration evoking early 70’s Wayne Shorter. Regarding the use of samples, Kalis explains “The electronics in this group have traditionally been phrase samples and loops of synth lines that aren’t locked on to a grid.” The avoidance of MIDI tempo-sync on these songs provides the luxury of a much more transparent and organic rhythm base that blends with live soprano and drums.

On cuts like “Red Paint” and “Lady Midnight” Kalis’ harnesses an Andy Summers-like guitar refrain while McDonnell’s relaxed, measured vocal delivery hints at early Peter Gabriel and the trio reveal their pop sensibilities, eschewing stylish synth textures for more traditional song forms, catchy melodies and, subtler rhythm section interplay. While on the surface, the presentation of these tunes may seem more straight forward, lyrically, they are embracing darker themes of the subconscious. In “Red Paint” McDonnell refers to Jim Jarmusch’s Acid-Western classic, “Dead Man”, explaining that the lyrics “seek to evoke the senses of the protagonist falling in and out of consciousness laying by the river’s edge.” Along the same cinematic bent, “Lady Midnight” imagines a duchess’ fever visions during the 100 Years War, painting them on canvas by the moonlight.” Indeed, the crunching intro sequence summons the clash of approaching armies; a portrait as much as perhaps a plea for our leaders to behave more maturely.

On “The Gholia” McDonnell creates swaths of synthesizers that swirl and oscillate over Ryan and Kalis’ motorik-inspired grooves as the group leans hard into an instrumental psych rock milieu. Tunes like this and “Maid of Metal” are built on spaced out soundscapes, the group’s psychedelic bedrock, on which they couple Kalis and McDonnell’s instrumental versatility with Ryan’s jazz-infused back beats. Speaking to “Maid of Metal,” Kalis elaborates, “...since there wasn’t a sample or a MIDI clock to synchronize the arpeggio and delay tempos, I wanted to create a very flexible and loose feel for the synth lines on the Roland Juno-60. The first part is played live and the second is an unsynchronized arpeggio modulated with different chords to create a more fluid and less repetitive rhythm.” This approach allows for the group to let sections develop uniquely within each live performance. The sense of immediacy in these songs hint that within the forms of the pieces there is plenty of stuff going on that may be happening for the first time, perhaps even the only time.



The recording of the title track, “Mirrors, Shapes, Objects” was rediscovered by McDonnell on a 15 year old hard drive and had originally been recorded on reel to reel tape nearly 20 years ago. With a new vocal line, the swirling world of pulsing bass synths and heavily delayed saxophone harkens immediately back to a heady era of crowded Chicago loft shows.

While the bulk of the tracks on this offering were recorded in December of 2024, a few, such as the above “Mirrors...” and “The Gholah,” have been culled from previous, unfinished recording efforts and then re-worked in the studio into a finished form. Michael Columbia is an ongoing creative process and this new release is simply the trio picking up from where they left off more than 10 years ago as they moved on to new cities and lives. The benefit now is the new skill sets, experience and creative insight they each accrued in their individual journeys before coming back together for this recording.

Band Bio Information

David McDonnell: David McDonnell is a multi-instrumentalist and composer who began his career with the Elephant 6 group Bablicon. Equally at home playing jazz saxophone as he is working with synthesizers and electric bass, or manning a recording studio his eclectic output has featured releases for Chicago’s Delmark Records, Portugal’s Clean Feed as well as the indie stalwart Misra Records among others. He is a founding member of the groups Herculaneum and Icy Demons. Recent work includes an album of electronic music under the moniker 5th World on Astrolabe Recordings as well as engineering the soundtrack to the feature film Mastermind for trumpeter/composer Rob Mazurek.

Christopher Kalis: Chris Kalis has produced dynamic work within the Chicago underground over the past 20 years. He is the co-founder of live hardware groups Chandeliers, Songs for Gods, and Drasii. His discography includes co-productions and remixes on labels such as Phonica Records, DFA Records, Potions Music, and Ghost Arcade LTD. Chandeliers live performances have received international praise from notable outlets such as The Wire, Pitchfork, and The Quietus, and they have supported acts such as Cluster, Psychic TV, and Shabazz Palaces.

Dylan Ryan: Dylan Ryan has drummed with groups like **Red Krayola** and **Cursive**, while maintaining ties to the jazz and experimental communities, frequenting the bandstand and recording studio alongside artists like **Bitchin Bajas**, **Bill MacKay**, **Jeff Parker**, **Patrick Shiroishi**, and **Jeremiah Chiu**. He has two recordings under his name on the Cuneiform Records imprint and has performed at the New York City Winter Jazz Fest, Massey Hall, Pritzker Pavilion, REDCAT Theatre, David Lynch’s Silencio, and the Getty Center.