

## Norberto Lobo & João Lobo

### *Oba Loba*

Shhpuma CD/LP

"When I play," Norberto Lobo told *Pitchfork* in an interview last year, "I'm in this mind frame of general forgetfulness. I am mostly self-taught, meaning I have a super lazy teacher." His influences are listed as Jimmy Page, Jacques Tati and the late Indian mandolin virtuoso U Srinivas, but *Oba Loba* is breezy, melodic, uncategorisable, the work of a largely acoustic sextet led by the two Lobo brothers from Lisbon. In spite of the presence of musicians who play improv or jazz, you'd be hard pressed to call this either – it's lush music touching upon countless styles that aspires to be both deep and ditz.

Norberto Lobo plays a Portuguese guitar with twanging steel strings, or a rich 12-string. His solo records present an evolving take on the Tacoma or John Fahey fingerpicking tradition: less a dry restatement of the school and more an emotional probing of its limits. Two years ago, with his drumming and singing brother João, he recorded *Mogul De Jade*, where the pair egged each other on, cheerfully sliding between experimentation and big Portuguese-style melodies. You could sense the fun being had in the studio, particularly when Norberto spins in a bass guitar after a couple of minutes. Off the same album, "Musgo Na Voz" took a devious guitarist's stroll through some lesser trodden harmonic paths before settling into a blissful daze of harmony vocals over rapid fingerpicking, with the quirky verve of Jim O'Rourke's *Eureka*. Then last year's solo *Fornalha*

pushed the boat out into a boundless ocean of music where everything was possible.

Now the Lobo brothers present an even more hybrid work with an expanded group. An album that clearly cares not a whit for boundaries and labels, it retains the jazz virtues of devotion to melody and a sense of spiritual striving for something just out of reach. The record's personnel are wide-rangers like young French clarinetist Jordi Grognard, whose career embraces chanson, raga, free jazz and punk. The daydreaming melody of "Olarias" segues into several minutes of glistening chrome electronics, completely unlike anything heard up to that point. It's the work of Lynn Cassiers, who teaches vocal jazz in Belgium. This in turn gives way to the gentle huffing of a euphonium in lockstep with a trumpet played by violinist Ananta Roosens.

Both Lobo brothers write melodies that feel like they've been around for years: opener "Tous Les Lapins", followed by "Kasuari", where Giovanni Di Domenico's piano reclines languidly over the group's uneasy riffing. They're mining the same melodic vein as several others. "Olarias" could be a Robert Wyatt song; Bill Wells's Glasgow melancholy comes to mind, also the austere beauty of last year's Arve Henriksen album *The Nature Of Connections*. Norberto's closing celebratory anthem "Magari" conjures up Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra.

In terms of creative strategy, the Lobos' fresh inventiveness deploys the dada playfulness of Tom Zé, with his programme of cannibalising all traditions at once. Or Sun Ra's sensual pleasure in sound's timbral

variety. Colours are constantly shifting and each track splashes a new palette. João steps away from his kit to pluck kora patterns on a harp, vocalising in harmony with his own lines. Here's a group in which instruments get swapped, all are happy to sing, and where the singer (Cassiers) contributes coolly understated electronics. The album's third number tips the hat to wyrd folk, with group vocal drones and bells accidentally dropped on the floor – tilting this one "AAAAAAA" suggests it could be tongue in cheek.

*Oba Loba*'s appeal rests on balancing such apparently casual freedom with disciplined arrangements and firm editing decisions. Tracks are concise and Di Domenico's placing of each element in the mix is clear, with an almost pop sensibility. Usually there's a gentle humour somewhere just offstage. Maybe it's in the cover art too, a sensuous painting of nymphs and lilies in a fountain, where flash photography seems to have smeared light across the centre of the image. The Lobos have crafted something obsessive and strange – not exactly a pop record, but relishing a kinship to popular song genres like fado and chanson, and indeed Jim O'Rourke's current *Simple Songs*, though if O'Rourke works as a sophisticated loner, the Lobos' world has more of a collective feel.

"I should like to give people the chance to whistle" – the quote is from Jacques Tati, one of Norberto's heroes. Welcome to Mondo Lobo, where improvising and composing are simultaneous, and the fresh and visionary *Oba Loba* makes a fitting soundtrack. □

The duo of  
**Norberto Lobo  
and João Lobo**  
(plus friends)  
craft hybrid  
instrumentals that  
cannibalise  
popular song. By  
**Clive Bell**



Nymphomaniacs: Norberto Lobo (left) and João Lobo