

INCOGNITO

Beneath The Surface (Verve/Forecast)

Rating: ****

By Josef Woodard

In the musical world according to Incognito, it's the '70s all over again: echoes of Earth, Wind & Fire, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye are coming back to haunt with the irony-free sound of soulful vocals, undulant grooves and softcore jazz chord changes. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. What's more, this is not a case of post-mod retreading, but a latter-day payback for the band that founder (and leader) Jean-Paul "Bluey" Maunick started back in the early '80s, when the '70s were barely history. That sound fell out of fashion by the mid-'80s, but has found new purpose and audience in these mid-'90s. History lessons are hard to avoid in pop music, particularly in an age when looking back comes naturally.

Like the similarly '70s-fixated Jamiroquai, but with silkier grooves and less grandiloquent lyrics, Incognito also reaffirms the old British penchant for skillful recycling of Americana. In this case, retro sophistofunk is the putty, and--truth be told--it sounds pretty fine. Chalk it up to the statute of cultural limitations coming around, turning that which was moldy back into what is hip.

Guitarist-songwriter Maunick runs the band with the ear of a producer (his side gig all these years) and has no compunction in using multiple vocalists: Chris Ballan, Imani and the especially searing Maysa Leak mix it up, creating a soul revue vibe. The vocalists embellish romantic themes, as on "Beneath The Surface," "Fountain Of Life" and "Hold On To Me," where they hold on to a simple anthem of a chorus, refusing to let it go, in soul tune tradition.

Instrumentals like the loopy opening prologue "Solar Fire" and "She Wears Black" (featuring righteous retro keyboard work from Graham Harvey), tilt the balance toward the jazz end, but this isn't a jazz album by any stretch. Incognito just harks back to a time and cultural place where pop hooks, soul idealism and musical invention lived in a harmonious groove.