



Vida Blue
Vida Blue
(Elektra)

When the jam band formerly known as Phish went on indefinite hiatus almost two years ago, it seemed unlikely that we'd hear from keyboardist Page McConnell until the group's eventual reunion. But McConnell, usually the shy and quiet one, caught even his old bandmates off guard when, instead of taking time off, he wrangled together a rhythm section and headed into a New Orleans studio.

Enlisting Oteil Burbridge (Allman Brothers Band) on bass and Russell Batiste (the Funky Meters) behind the drum kit, McConnell has concocted his own all-star team with Vida Blue, named after the famed Oakland A's and San Francisco Giants pitcher. The improv trio joins bands such as the Disco Biscuits, Sound Tribe Sector 9 and Particle in a growing subgenre of the jam scene (where Phish, the Allmans and the Meters are considered classic heavy-hitters) that mixes fusional jazz-funk and electronica.

The group's self-titled debut album is marked less by an old-pro, stodgy perfectionism than it is by a fresh, exploratory casualness and a deviation from the players' typical styles—Burbridge even refrains from his overplayed scat-singing tendencies, leaving the album's infrequent vocals to the bandleader. McConnell doesn't totally ditch his previous band's noodliness, except now the adventure is driven by keyboard instead of guitar. He even repeats a method he'd used on Phish's *Story of the Ghost*, culling seven tracks from loose jams. The result is as spacious as it is spacey; even three- or four-minute spurts of experimentation don't feel rushed. The tempo-shifting 12-minute epic "CJ3" may be a microcosm of the entire album—from techno BPMs to slow grooves—but it's the nearly eight-minute opening track, "Most Events Aren't Planned," that sets the tone both literally and figuratively for what is ultimately an experiment gone right.

Robin A. Rothman
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