

WaxPoetics



L O U I E

DISCOVER

AND

COLLECT

Majoie Hajary
La Passion Selon Judas
(CBS Records)
1970

Majoie Hajary's *La Passion Selon Judas* is "the most Axelrod album that isn't Axelrod." So says Rob "Late Bloomer" Geddis, head LP buyer at New Jersey's Princeton Record Exchange, who first encountered the album on a trip to Utrecht. On first listen, the hallmarks are all there: the brooding choir singing something vaguely Latin and apocalyptic, a dark arrangement floating over a tough rhythm section that could well be Carol Kaye and Earl Palmer.

But listen closely and the record reveals another layer entirely. The "Latin" is actually Sranan Tongo—Surinamese creole—and beneath the snare is the faint patter of a tabla. While the album might resemble David Axelrod's *Songs of Experience* or his Electric Prunes productions in tone, its textures are colored by the itinerant life of Majoie Hajary, a Surinamese composer and pianist who found herself in Paris in the late '60s, asking big questions about God, music, and a place that she once called home.

Hajary's first two albums—*New Sound From India* (1967) and *Requiem Pour Mahatma Gandhi* (1968)—were the sort of East-meets-West jazz records that were springing up across the globe at the time. In India, there was Shankar Jaikishan's *Raga-Jazz Style* (1968) and, in Britain, Jamaican saxophonist Joe Harriott's fusion experiments with Indian-born musicians Amancio D'Silva and John Mayer. From the States, we might add Alice Coltrane's *Journey in Satchidananda* (1970) and a host of others to that list. Hajary's first two LPs fit right into this moment. Centered on the interaction between piano and sitar, drumkit and tabla, these albums explore the affinity between Western

scales and Eastern ragas, no doubt influenced by Hajary's travels to India and Japan several years earlier. In a theme that followed her throughout her life, the liner notes and artwork amped up her Indianness and downplayed, if not altogether ignored, her roots in Suriname, then still a Dutch colony on the northern coast of South America.

La Passion Selon Judas was a departure. This was no Orient-meets-Occident cliché because, like Hajary—and Suriname—the story was way more complicated. Born in Paramaribo, Hajary was the eldest daughter in a mixed Surinamese family: her mother was a Christian of African and Chinese descent, and her father was the son of Muslim Indian indentured migrants. Recorded at Studio Louis Gasté in Paris, *La Passion* was an extract of a longer oratorio Hajary had been composing for years, based on her grandmother's old prayer book. The liner notes emphasized the influence of Indian, African, and Dutch cultures that gave Suriname its "langue commune," the Sranan tongue. "According to Hajary," explains Ellen de Vries, author of the forthcoming Dutch-language biography *Surinaamse Rapsodie*, "there was no [other] country in the world where the music of three continents comes together."

That polyglot mix appears from the jump. In "Prologue," an organ and sitar vamp on a chord, while a prayer for Krishna fades in and out like a voice lost in transmission. Between songs that recount the story of Jesus and Judas, Hajary slips in a version of the Hindu bhajan "Ramdhun," a favorite of both Gandhi and Alice Coltrane, who recorded it several times, first on 1971's *Universal Consciousness*.



Despite the heady themes, *La Passion* is a remarkably funky record. An agile rhythm section led by drummer Christian Garros and bassist Pierre Michelot hold each track down, while arranger Roger Guérin and producer Jean Eckian add cosmic flourishes, feeding the horns and the drums through tape echo and bringing the tanpura up in the mix. Hajary's extended family were called in from the Netherlands to sing the Surinamese choral parts, and what emerges is the sort of funk-psych hymnal that

naturally caught the ear of global crate diggers like Geddis, Victor Kiswell, and Gilles Peterson.

But nothing quite prepares you for the last track—"Le Verbe," a version of Beethoven's "Allegretto"—which, arguably, unseats Geraldo Pino's "5th Bethoven Africana" as the hardest Ludwig cover there is. Garros and Michelot keep building and building up the groove, only to drop away at the final minute. What remains are the haunting voices of Hajary's family, singing an old church song as if back home in Paramaribo. ●