

Plastic Sax Review

Umbra, the Matt Otto album released in August by Origin Records, is an understated masterpiece. Imbued with quiet grace, Umbra reflects the subtle magnanimity associated with Otto, a Kansas City saxophonist with a cool West Coast approach.

Yet the vaguely threatening “Little Things” opens Umbra. The core trio of saxophonist Otto, bassist Jeff Harshbarger and drummer Kizilarmut is supplemented by shadowy contributions from trumpeter Hermon Mehari, keyboardist Matt Villinger and guitarist Alex Frank.

The musicians seem intent on pursuing peaceful resolutions on the remainder of the album. Otto promptly sets about addressing the quandary on the gorgeous second selection “Hawk.”

“Paw Paw,” perhaps Umbra’s best track, mirrors the excellence of Otto’s previous 2023 album Kansas City Trio. Kizilarmut’s sly playing indicates he’s become one of the elite drummers in improvised music.

The elastic “Melisma” concludes Umbra by alluding to the tension presented in “Little Things.” Profound equanimity, paired with extraordinary musicianship, gracefully resolve the album’s intellectual and spiritual challenges.

<https://www.plasticsax.com/blog/topalbums23>