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A Provocatively Philosophical, Deeply Articulate New Album From Alexa Tarantino

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Alexa Tarantino's new album *Firefly* – streaming at [Bandcamp](#) – could be interpreted as a protest jazz record. It came together during the lockdown, and the tech oligarchs' relentless quest to destroy the arts and reduce all surviving humanity to cogs in a soulless machine has without a doubt impacted much of the material on it.

But it's more of a philosophical than political statement, and ultimately an optimistic one. In her liner notes, Tarantino provides context to the album's central suite, *A Moment in Time*: "It's a raw and personal snapshot of a day in a creative's life, and the responsibilities that come with this lifestyle which, to most of society, appears ethereal, idyllic, novel, and curious. Today's fast-paced world of technology and instant gratification has centered the human priority on money, material items, flashy success, and social media following. Essentially, it's 'How can I get, produce, or be the next best thing, right now?' While we've seen how this has skyrocketed us forward in the realms of technology and science, it has undoubtedly impacted human thought, attention, and connection, forever."

Tarantino obviously has her eye on the sinister implications. It begins with *Daybreak*, a moody latin soul groove anchored by drummer Rudy Royston's spare, loose-limbed boom and bassist Boris Kozlov's lithe pulse, pianist Art Hirahara and vibraphonist Behn Gillece providing a spare gleam behind Tarantino's airy, wary alto sax. Essentially, it's the cradle of the day's artistic inspiration.

Tarantino switches to alto flute for *Surge Fughetta*, a warmly baroque-tinged miniature by Kozlov. She goes back to sax and chooses her spots to soar and spiral in *Surge Capacity*, a bustling, anthemic, purist minor-key romp that explores the magic moment when creative inspiration strikes, with briskly prowling solos by Hirahara and Royston. Then she picks up the alto flute again for *Le Donna Nel Giardino*, a balmy, verdantly swaying portrait of a playful female garden spirit, Hirahara's sparse, allusive lines offering subtle contrast to the calm cheer overhead.

Next is *Rootless Ruthlessness*, a gritty, tightly clustering picture of inner turmoil, self-doubt and self-sabotage, and the struggle for an artist to get their inner critic to shut up. Hirahara switches to Rhodes as Royston charges onward, the bandleader leading a morose, tormented descent where everything falls apart before pulling it back to a triumphant drive out.

She takes a break from the suite with an unhurried, expansive take of Wayne Shorter's *Lady Day*, Kozlov bowing a soulful solo to echo Tarantino's expressiveness. The suite returns as she switches to soprano for *Violet Sky*, a seaside sunset bossa groove with some very cleverly orchestrated echoes between Hirahara's Rhodes and Gillece's vibes, Royston adding the occasional wry flicker or turnaround.

The finale, *The Firefly Code* challenges us to find our souls amidst this awful mess, basically. Tarantino articulates her thought: "Our individual lights perhaps are not shining as bright as they were a year ago. But the bottom line is that we shine brighter together than we do apart. We, especially artists and creatives, are resilient. My hope is that after a time of 'darkness,' we as a society will re-emerge brighter than ever – with a renewed appreciation for the little things – an extended embrace with someone we love, the sound of the birds chirping while sipping our morning latte, or the way that staring at a painting, listening to a composition, or reading a poem makes us pause, think, and feel...in a way that no amount of Instagram likes or followers ever could."

She opens it on alto flute, the band shifting from a brooding, allusively Ellingtonian sway to more of a bounce as she picks up steam and spins around, matched by Gillece's pirouetting solo. Royston's emphatic drum break signals a very unsettled return: the choice is up to us, Tarantino seems to say.

There's more: the suite doesn't begin until five tracks in. To kick off the album, we get *Spider's Dance*, a low-key, catchy Hirahara tune meant to illustrate an arachnid mating ritual: in this particular universe, these creatures are more romantic than sinister.

Tarantino's alto flute wafts purposefully but enigmatically in *Mindful Moments*, a clave tune by Gillece where Royston has all kinds of subtle fun with on his rims and toms.

Move of the Spirit, an acerbically upbeat Royston swing anthem has a deviously amusing Tarantino quote and rippling solos from Gillece and Hirahara. A second Shorter number, *Iris* is a long platform for a thoughtfully constructed alto sax solo. This is one of the best and most important jazz albums of the year.