



Zs (left to right): Sam Hiller, Ian Antonio and Ben Greenberg

**Zs**

***New Slaves***

Social Registry CD/2×LP

Of the many clichés levelled at groups, the warning that ‘they’re not as good on record as they are live’ has to be among the weakest. Leave aside the exclusionary, ‘you had to be there’ tone: more problematic is the idea that a group should sound the same whether performing among people or holed up in a studio. You often get the sense that what’s being demanded is consistency at the expense of surprise.

If the record/show inequity tag can be hung on Brooklyn trio Zs, it’s because they’ve had the reverse problem. Their recorded output is solid, but can sound too much like their concerts – at times predictably so – rather than actually *feeling* like them. Part of it comes from their devotion to minimalism. Their tight, intricate pieces owe as much to Steve Reich and Terry Riley as free jazz and Prog punk, and as a result their recordings feel constricted. Perhaps the title *New Slaves* is a nod to these shackles and their struggle to break free of them.

What’s been missing from Zs records is the visceral thrust and unhinged potential that’s so tangible when they perform. They usually play seated in a circle, reading from sheet music on stands, but there’s something compelling about their athletic effort and all-engulfing sound. His neck bulging and skin red, saxophonist Sam Hiller leans farther forward with every note, while his colleagues flop around in their chairs as if they were pummel horses. As the loops build, they bounce off the walls like ping pong balls, offering fascinating shapes if you follow them closely, or an exhilarating

Kicking against the shackles of an electronic pulse, the energy of Zs finally translates to record. By Marc Masters

blur if you just sit back and absorb it all. Witnessing this sweat and cacophony makes Zs albums feel too spacious, too dry – as if the sounds themselves, isolated in a studio vacuum, aren’t quite enough. The upshot being that, well... the group haven’t been as good on record as they have been live.

That changed last year, when Zs made their first release for Social Registry, the *Music Of The Modern White 12"*. It represented a more conscious attempt to use studio tools rather than replicate live sound, and the most important element was something Zs had never used in concert: electronics. Suddenly, their disciplined figures gained texture, with distortion and puncturing reverb. The record may not have sounded precisely like Zs live, but it captured the widescreen experience of their gigs unlike any previous effort.

Electronics take an even larger role on *New Slaves*, creating their most diverse record yet, and one which can’t be simply summed up with a few genre-crossing adjectives. The painting-with-synths approach recalls Black Dice and Excepter, as does the way they make a clean beat sound blurred, or condense dense noise into something like abstract hiphop. There are still jazz and minimalist influences, but they’re played off against digital glitches and found sounds. Perhaps the album title refers to the electronics, since it gives the group something to struggle with and play off against, with a friction to match their gut-punching live performances.

This effect is strongest on the 21 minute title track. It’s the closest thing on *New Slaves* to a classic Zs composition, with snug, repetitive loops that gradually accumulate into dissonant overload. I saw

the group play the piece live before I heard this recorded version, and no electronics were present, the musicians instead muscling their way hypnotically through its demanding paces. It’s not clear if there are electronics on this version, but there are definitely frayed edges, hissy blasts and, near the end, an elongated explosion that’s worlds away from being acoustic.

Some pieces have moved so far from dry instrumentalism that, were electronics and studio effects subtracted, they might vanish altogether. “Masonry” is an aural hall of mirrors, while the gurgling noise of “Gentleman Amateur” hides all traces of the saxophone and guitars that helped create it. Most striking is “Don’t Touch Me”, a hard-cut collage that echoes the Digital Hardcore of Shizuo, the bombast of Wolf Eyes and the absurdism of Eye Yamatsuka’s pre-Boredoms project The Hanatarashi. Still, every track hangs on to some semblance of beat, however abstract. Behind the curtains of sound, an essential Zs pulse survives almost involuntarily, more like a heartbeat than a timekeeper.

*New Slaves* ends with a two-part piece that stretches their stylistic range further still. “Black Crown Ceremony I: Diamond Terrifier” is like an Ambient Metal horror film score, filled with chirps and dolphin-like cries. “Black Crown Ceremony II: Six Realms” is even farther flung, more like field recordings of urban traffic than a composition. Yet these tracks are as visceral and direct as anything on *New Slaves*. Word is that Zs are now performing with electronics. Any comparison of records and live performance will be moot in any case, if the group continue to be as amorphous as they are on this stellar album. □