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review by Philip Clark

CARNIVAL SKIN

Carnival Skin is a quintet of New Yorkers: free jazz veterans Perry Robinson (clarinet) and Hilliard Greene (bass) meet Bruce Eisenbeil (guitar), Klaus Kugel (drums) and Peter Evans (trumpet). The quintet evolved in 2004, happy coincidence of mutual connections on the New York improvisation scene and, for a group that fell into place by accident, their horse-sure sense of how to move together as an ensemble is remarkable to witness.

There are six tracks - one composition from each member, and a valedictory free for all to close. Perry Robinson's "Journey To Strange" sounds like the lead sheets for Monk's "Four In One" and Ornette Coleman's "Turnaround" got superimposed in the photocopier. Robinson belongs to an era when reed players made definitive statements, and the intensity of his sound - an electrically blue, perpetually inquisitive raspy tone that has no respect for boundaries- is testament that he's a one-off. Evans's brittle metallic strut sporadically bolsters Robinson's line, before both men unleash racing-cert solos.

Hilliard Greene's spiritually optimistic lament "Iono" has a lineage that looks back to Coltrane's "Crescent". Greene's proudly bel canto bowed bass leads, until the rest of the ensemble feed off it like a circuit board, with Eisenbeil's wild tremolo guitar gluing the monolith together. Evans and Robinson weave gnarled up counterpoint and make an occasional bid for solo freedom, but it's now that the group's ability to twist and turn with a unified sense of direction seems most honed. Evans's abstracted, deadpan blues "Monster" is another highlight of this compelling, incessantly surprising album.