

Dancing Queens

Somewhere
between
hip-hop
and pop lies...
Luscious Jackson

“We use so many different smidgens of samples and live music, it’s not like we’re a guitar band or a bass band or a complete sample band either,” says Gabby Glaser, guitarist and vocalist for Luscious Jackson.

Indeed. Luscious Jackson’s delicate mix of hip-hop, funk, soul and jazz is backed with smarts and a subtlety that make it difficult to categorize. *Natural Ingredients*, the New York City quartet’s first full-length release, was one of 1994’s most pleasant surprises: a danceable album that, musically and lyrically, is as challenging as it is catchy. Having been invited to fill an opening slot on R.E.M.’s monstrous tour, the band is poised to step up to America and introduce their bad selves.

Mixing the ingredients

The experimentation that led to the earliest Luscious Jackson recordings began in a pre-LJ trio that included Glaser and bassist/vocalist Jill Cuniff. Glaser and Cuniff knew each other from the early ’80s New York punk scene, but the band didn’t come together until Cuniff talked Glaser into joining her out West in 1992.

“She told me it was really fun in San Francisco and that I should come out there,” says Glaser. “So I did. That’s when we started making up silly lyrics and jamming and stuff.”

Glaser and Cuniff’s early use of samples would prove significant later, but as it was, the chemistry just wasn’t right. (Glaser now describes the old band as “kind of tacky.”) The pair took a break from music before re-forming as a duo and experimenting more seriously at a friend’s recording studio in New York. This led to part of 1992’s *In*

Search of Manny EP, which Beastie Boy Mike D agreed to release on his Grand Royal label — on the condition that the duo record two more songs. The pair recruited original Beastie drummer Kate Schellenbach and keyboardist Vivian Trimble, and the present four-piece lineup was born.

“We realized that this was the band we wanted,” Glaser says. “Since we were a live band at the time, we didn’t want to just put out songs we did in the recording studio with samples.”

To introduce listeners to the band’s live sound, the last two tracks on *Manny* were recorded with Schellenbach and Trimble. The strictly Cuniff/Glaser tracks, like “Life of Leisure” and “Daughters of the Kaos,” feature multi-tracked samples, rapped vocals and a deep hip-hop tone. The final two tracks, recorded more or less live with Schellenbach and Trimble, are more spacious and instrumental and generally less hip-hop

oriented. With lines like “No family jewels between my legs/My wealth is my brain” (“Keep On Rockin’ It”), *Manny* displays a lyrical assertiveness to match its musical ambition.

Following *Manny*, a series of New York shows and a mini-tour with college radio darlings Bettie Serveert allowed the band to explore the instrumental elements of the EP — and also made them more comfortable operating as a live outfit in the studio. The result is the less hip-hop, more pop sound of *Natural Ingredients*.

Cover and let simmer

Conspicuously missing from *Ingredients* are the off-kilter loops and rap delivery that made *Manny* so bracing. The band maintains that there was no conscious decision to reduce the hip-hop elements.

“On the new album, there’s a lot more traditional four-piece band songs played just straight as a band,” Schellenbach says. “We have more options — it really opens it up.”

“A lot of songs also mutated in the studio. Songs that we had been playing live

for a year all of a sudden had a whole different liveness.”

The expanded lineup also allowed for such innovations as sampling a Schellenbach beat and manipulating the sample live from Trimble’s keyboard. But in Luscious Jackson’s nonspecific song writing process, a song can also shift in the other direction.

“We still sample a beat if we just want a beat in there,” Glaser says. “We want the best of all worlds. We’ve got a great drummer in our band, but we also have the sound of a [sampled] drum beat that you couldn’t even get now unless you’ve got that particular producer.”

“Like on ‘Energy Sucker’ — I found these drum samples and we put that into the song. ‘Here’ had been more of a rock band song — we’d played it live for a long time. When we got in the studio, it just wasn’t working out, so we sampled a drum beat and made it into a disco song,” she says.

“It took the song in a totally different direction,” Schellenbach adds. “Like, ‘Wow! Now that this is disco, we can put in violins and change the vocal delivery!’ It really became a new song.”

Serve and chill

Whether completely scrapping a song’s conception or deciding to divide *Ingredients* into two sides (as a nod to the old vinyl LP format), the members of Luscious Jackson aren’t about to second-guess themselves. At least not yet.

“Obviously, we’ve done well with the way we’ve done things so far,” Glaser says. “So there’s no need to go, ‘Uh, maybe we should write this way, maybe we should sequence it this way, maybe we should change it all around and just do live music.’”

“You’ve just gotta do whatever feels good.”

Luscious Jackson is poised to step up to America and introduce their bad selves.



Smooth Operators — Luscious Jackson want to funk you up.

