

## Nubya Garcia – *Odyssey*

### Liner Notes

Something magical happens when caution flutters in the wind, when fear of the unknown drives creativity to unforeseen plateaus. The doubt can paralyze, but the rewards are greater when pushing past concern. So when you hear *Odyssey*, you're hearing the sound of an artistic breakthrough. You're hearing Nubya Garcia come further into her own as a producer, bandleader, and composer. It's an album equally fit for swanky concert halls and open-air festivals. Symphonic music with a pronounced groove. Classical but it's jammin'.

You won't be surprised if you've followed her to this point. Since her debut EP in 2017, when she and other British jazz musicians garnered headlines in the global marketplace, Garcia's work has made grand, sweeping statements without sacrificing the beat. At certain moments on *Source*, her critically-acclaimed debut full-length album released in 2020, one could hear a love of reggae soundsystem culture, an artform she grew up listening to in the Camden section of London. Take the title track: With its big drums and deep bass drops, Garcia eschewed the aspects of traditional jazz in favor of an ample vibration best suited for nightclubs. A similar divergence happened on "Together Is A Beautiful Place To Be." Here, she went the opposite way; floating keys and light drums conveyed an understated elegance, blurring the lines between ambient and R&B. Over the past seven years, Garcia has proven she isn't just jazz, reggae dub, or dance. Instead, she's all these things and whatever else she wants to be. Because she grew up learning how to play Herbie Hancock doesn't mean she can't appreciate Mary J. Blige.

*Odyssey* is a string-centered LP about Garcia falling back in love with music composition. "Even knowing that I could have a vision that meant something to me before it meant anything to anyone else," she says. "It represents the notion of truly being on your own path, and trying to discard all the outside noise saying you should go this way or that way." The album documents this trek through lush, expansive compositions that feel immense and cinematic. Close your eyes and you can hear a big box office film taking shape. "The Seer," a propulsive cut with double-time drums, upper register piano chords and echoed saxophone wails, is Garcia's attempt to find clarity. "Wishing that you could get a peek at the future," she says, "or even just gathering some guidelines in your own future so that you could know that you're on the right path." To that end, "Set It Free," featuring the vocalist Richie Seiwright, conveys the feeling of letting go. A neo-soul-centered tune, Richie doesn't apologize for being one-of-one. "No other like me," she asserts near the top of the song. "I'm sorry I'm not sorry, truth is what I speak," she sings later.

*Odyssey* also finds Garcia rediscovering her love of string arrangements. It's a re-education of sorts; she played strings as a child, but stopped once she discovered the saxophone. For *Odyssey*, Garcia studied a vast array of orchestral sound, taking time to perfect the album's celestial parts. That, in a way, also speaks to the album's mission statement: She pushed beyond her comfort zone in pursuit of something lasting and infinite. Garcia achieves this by crafting two albums in one: the first half is an upbeat collection of spirited melodies and straight-ahead rhythms. "Solstice" feels inspired by dusk, when blue skies fade to black and the enchantment prevails. Like the other tracks on the first side, it doesn't fixate on one theme. Instead, it volleys back and forth, conjuring darkness and light equally. By the second half, the album has slowed to a leisurely pace, prioritizing mood over hard-

driving cadences. Songs like “Water’s Path” and “Clarity” are best consumed through noise-canceling headphones in the dead of night.

Between its wide textures and operatic aura, *Odyssey* transcends hesitation by gliding over it. She’s acknowledging the struggle without letting it define her. “No one’s journey looks the same,” she declares on “Triumphance,” the album’s closing track. “Release expectations from people and maybe we can just allow ourselves to be.” This especially holds true for Black women in experimental music, where certain listeners — many of whom never wanted jazz to evolve beyond the 1940s and ‘50s in the first place — try to stuff them in genre boxes that don’t fit. Or they’re compared with some man doing the same thing, even if they’re doing it better. Or, worst of all, they’re ignored altogether, as if they weren’t making jazz move the whole time.

On purpose then, the vocal features here are all Black women: the aforementioned Richie, Georgia Anne Muldrow on “We Walk In Gold,” and Esperanza Spalding on “Dawn.” To my ear, at least, *Odyssey* not only stands on the shoulders of pioneers like Muldrow and Spalding, it feels indebted to Jeanne Lee, Linda Sharrock, June Tyson and other Black women underrated by time. The nod isn’t so overt, but in Garcia’s break from her previous sound for something this adventurous, she’s honoring those who did the same and didn’t worry about outside perception. You don’t evolve by adhering to someone else’s opinion; you do it by holding true to your artistry. *Those* are the records that remain long after the flash of trend-chasing diminishes. *Odyssey* doesn’t tether itself to moments or time or anything to that effect. It feels like it’s been here before. It’s a boundless recording: nostalgic, forward-looking, sophisticated, and attainable.

If there’s a lesson to be learned from *Odyssey*, it’s this: Garcia’s music can’t, and shouldn’t, be identified by genre. In fact, listening to this LP, one would be hard pressed to even call it jazz alone. It’s jazz with classical flourishes, a landmark for contemporary artists shunned by gatekeepers. Featuring Chineke! Orchestra (Europe’s first Black majority and ethnically diverse orchestra) alongside other members of her regular band, *Odyssey* demonstrates a way forward, a path toward creative freedom. Therein lies its brilliance: By shedding apprehension and creating what she wanted, she circumvents the narrative of what she ought to be. And as a Black woman crafting music this far-reaching, she’s opening the door for others to do the same. But that’s just Garcia being herself and leading by example: Lean into uncharted territory. If the art comes from an honest place, it’ll resonate far beyond what you imagine.

— Marcus J. Moore