

## REVIEW - OKRA PLAYGROUND - ITKU - by Lee Blackstone in RootsWorld 7.11.2022

**Okra Playground**'s third album frequently mentions the Earth turning darker. As a metaphor, this looms large for a world that feels as if it is spinning off its axis, our times clouded by pandemic, conspiracy theories, war, climate crises, and other modern ills. At the same time the Finnish band's name is of the earth, 'Okra' meaning 'ochre,' the particular color of soil and clay on which the band trods. The group is anchored in Karelian traditions, and the set list mixes several original tracks which draw on beguiling wordplay such as one might find in the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala: lyrics redolent with a coursing, vibrant natural world, set against human foibles both tender and violent.

The sextet continues to blend traditional folk instrumentation with electronic soundscapes, balancing experimentation and pop flair. Singer and fiddler/bowed lyre (jouhikko) musician Päivi Hirvonen is again a guiding light, and her voice joins with the two (two!) kantele players in Okra Playground, Maija Kauhanen and Essi Muikku. Okra Playground's sound is rounded out by Sami Kujala on electric bass; Veikko Muikku, accordion and synthesizer; and Oskari Lehtonen, percussion. Additional electronic augmentation was provided by Sami Zimmermann on most of the album tracks. Band members worked alone, and also in co-writing sessions, in order to bring the material on *Itku* to fruition.

The album opens up with "Itku/Cry," highlighting Hirvonen's string playing, before a thunderous kick-drum settles in. The tune takes off at an insistent, frantic pace as the three women vocalize and the music builds, spiraling into the interplay of the group's kanteles. Okra Playground immediately set an urgent tone for the album, leading into "Ukkonen/Thunder" (written by Hirvonen, Kauhanen, and Muikku). This is a heavy track, appropriately beginning with a low rumble, and when the joined vocals enter it feels as if a runic spell is being cast. Indeed, Hirvonen, Kauhanen, and Muikku sing of calling up a storm, and they are underpinned by a looping fiddle phrase and a deep percussive groove that eventually settles into the shimmering ambience of kanteles. The elements are overwhelming:

*Water fell from the sky, ice fell Iron-like hail fell/ Water fell, ice fell Iron-like hail fell...*

*Lightning struck from the sky  
Fire covered everything...*

*The soil became blacker  
The soil became blacker*

It's a conjured deluge that is both life-giving and devastating, and "Ukkonen" powerfully captures the double-edge of nature.

"Laula!/Sing!" seamlessly merges Okra Playground's electro-folk with pop laid onto a stuttering beat, but even here the group displays an edge. Singing and shouting here are deployed against the weight of rage, felt frustrations, and inner turmoil; "What is this thing strangling your throat" Hirvonen asks, seeking an exorcism for the frustration that has bound so many of us in these times. "Cold Bird, Take My Tears" provides one of the album's slower moments, combining traditional poems and the echoes of unknown Finnish singers collected in the nineteenth century. The sounds are carefully layered, with the fiddle gliding over the kanteles, but the percussive foundation keeps percolating.

An absolute standout, "Veri/The Blood" moves like a panther as the frontline of Hirvonen, Kauhanen, and Muikku chant with malice over a pounding beat accentuated with the banging of a low piano note that heightens tension. "The great death progressed/Destroyed everything in its path/blood ran in streams": this might be the anthem of the COVID years. The tune takes chances, blowing wide open into a chorus that feels inspired by dervishes, leading to glistening kanteles and a final explosion of sound. The fury unleashed by "Veri" is counter-balanced by "The Tithes Collector," which makes the visit of the collector to a village sound almost tranquil. But in Okra Playground's world, such looks are deceiving; "...the alders turn blacker/Blacker," and "Ruin will come to the little ones/A great sorrow to their bearers."

"Hetkeen/Into The Moment" lets the kantele players carry the tune over a playful bass line, while the lyrics trace transformations that blur all the lines between human interaction and the natural world. Perhaps it is 'sinking' into such profound emotions such as love that reveals the audacity of humans to think of themselves as separate from nature, when the interconnections are always present in our being. "Jouksen Karukuun Aurinkoa/I Run Away From The Sun" highlights the singer's relation with the environment, but with the inspiration coming from the night and lunar movements.

The album closes with an instrumental, "Hypnosis," and like the opening track it is accompanied by wordless vocalizations. Here, the beat builds as a techno dance track as the voices, accordion, and percussion provide a sense of motion. It's a glorious composition that I wish had continued long into the night.

Clocking in at around thirty-seven minutes, this is a short album, but one that allows Okra Playground to waste not a moment in leaving a lasting impression on listeners and dancers. *Itku* is a roadmap for where we've been and where we are headed, and it is quite the trip.