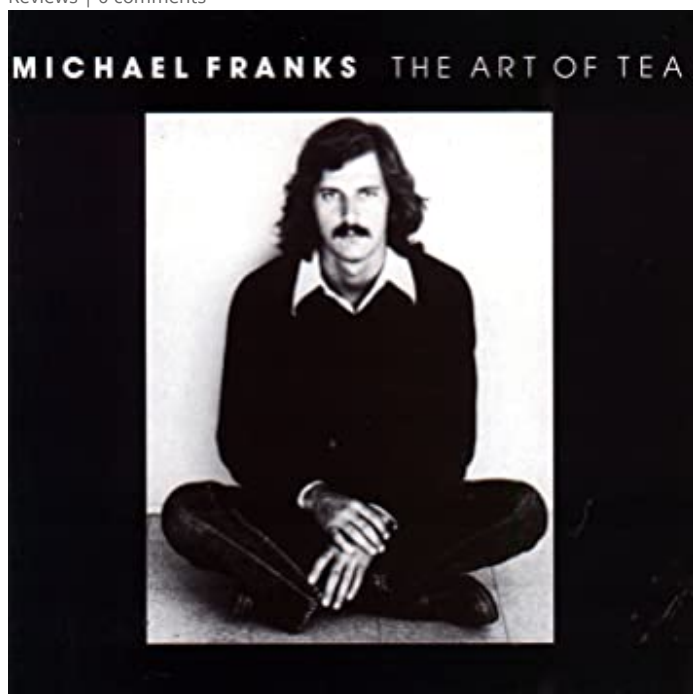


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Michael Franks – The Art Of Tea – Speakers Corner Records

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Michael Franks – The Art Of Tea – Reprise MS 2230 (1976)/Speakers Corner Records (2021) 180-gram stereo vinyl, 35:03 ****1/2:

Jazz vocalist Michael Franks gets a shimmering vinyl upgrade.

(Michael Franks – vocals; David Sanborn – saxophone; Joe Sample – keyboards; Larry Carlton – guitar; Larry Bunker – vibraphone; Wilton Felder – bass; John Guerin – drums, percussion; Jerry Steinholtz – congas)

As popular music evolved in the 1970's, the different genres were changing. Jazz adopted electric instruments and synthesizers, creating a fusion sound that was smoother. The hard core rock scene was winding down. Heavy metal and punk music was still undefined in the future. More importantly, r & b moved away from the crossover dance music at Motown and the deeply gospel-rooted Memphis expression. A new hybrid, radio-friendly genre, *quiet storm* emerged. Incorporating elements of soul and jazz into a contemporary format. Marvin Gaye, Al Green, Barry White, Roberta Flack and Bill Withers were among the early proponents of this new movement. Another of these

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performers was songwriter and vocalist Michael Franks. In addition to recording with artists like Patti Austin, Brenda Russell and Art Garfunkel, he embarked on a three-decade career as a pop/jazz vocalist. His breakthrough album, *The Art Of Tea* included his only charting single "Popsicle Toes".

Speakers Corner Records has released a re-mastered 180-gram vinyl of *The Art Of Tea*. Backing up Frank's silky tenor are first rate session players like David Sanborn, Joe Sample, Larry Carlton, Larry Bunker, Wilton Felder, John Guerin and Jerry Steinholz. Side One opens with the gentle sway of "Nightmoves". Franks' ethereal vocal delivery is framed by smooth electric piano and guitar. His delivery is straightforward and fits into the instrumental pocket. "Eggplant" has a finger-snapping cool vibe and Franks stretches out on vocals, while delivering a humorous, poetic take on love. Joe Sample's electric piano is fluid and is matched by subtle guitar. Adding some muscle to the instrumentation, "Monkey See-Monkey Do" has a funky, pulse-driven beat with a soulful run on saxophone. Franks articulates a jazzy stream-of consciousness with topical, anecdotal references. "Switching gears, "St. Elmo's Fire" is a romantic ballad with pop sentiment. Frank's vocal phrasing is excellent and the overall relaxed structure offers the singer ample opportunity to showcase his innate vocal skills. On "I Don't Know Why I'm So Happy I'm Sad", he incorporates laid-back reflections on romance with clever rhyming framed by the understated instrumentals.

Side Two kicks off with a jazzy attitude and up tempo music on "Jive". The saxophone adds depth to the structure. Franks' wordplay is clever and memorable. A certain highlight of the album is "Popsicle Toes". Franks injects a whimsical, bluesy aesthetic into the jazzy arrangement. Touches like vibraphone enhance the atmospheric feel. Sample's piano is glowing and offers deeper jazz accents. The band complements Franks' vocal styling with cohesive play. With a rock tempo, "I Just Forgot To Smile" is more wry observations with quick-rhyme and numerous popular cultural references. The instrumental jamming on this one is excellent. The finale ("Mr. Blue") shifts to romantic melancholy with a smoky saxophone, synthesizers and acoustic piano weaving a gossamer tapestry.

The Art Of Tea maintains its creative and commercial appeal 45 years after its initial release. Speakers Corner Records has done an exceptional job in re-mastering this to 180-gram vinyl. Franks' dulcet, higher-register voice is captured with clarity and warmth. The instrumentation never upstages the vocals and the stereo separation is flawless.

TrackList:

Side One: Nightmoves; Eggplant; Monkey See-Monkey Doo; St. Elmo's Fire; I Don't Know Why I'm So Happy I'm Sad

Side Two: Jive; Popsicle Toes; Sometimes I Just Forget To Smile; Mr. Blue.

—Robbie Gerson

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