

the village

VOICE **FREE**

## Future-Soul

I felt privileged to see the fierce and funky a capella quintet Hot Mouth last Friday, because to look at them, they were clearly headed somewhere more fabulous than Classic Stage Company afterward. Dressed in slinky, diaphanous pants and spangled silver shirts, the lithe and intimidating group entered, sat, and began a private conversation of rhythmic breaths and sentence fragments like the title of their show, *You Say What I Mean But What You Mean Is Not What I Say*. They sang in a polyglot that has practically become the native language of New York avant-attitude, an African-influenced polyrhythmy that's inspired both great albums by the Talking Heads and sucky operas by Mikel Rouse. Pulling in pygmy singing, American soul and blues, Hottentot tongue clicking, Tibetan monk deep-drone, and Gregorian chant, Hot Mouth jams came from so many directions they had to be centered in New York. But Noise/Funk this is not. Hot Mouth, despite their multicultural membership and future-soul aesthetic, force you to >>

>> listen to the music rather than the message. Their intricate songs, mostly penned by leader Crisha Coleman, tend to express a refreshing ambiguity rather than didactic Black-speak. It's practically their raison d'être, to use a term from the Côte d'Ivoire. "I am not what you'd call a freedom child," they sing as they clap and stomp. In "Little Child," Coleman has this advice for the young: "Keep your ears plugged one moment longer/Keep your eyes shut." Though their nods to modern dance seem superfluous and the production design recalls En Vogue videos, so much of the musical material is joyous, complex, thoughtful, and entertaining, especially the mellow power of Helga Davis's voice, that I was tempted to just close my eyes and imagine that I was listening to the album I hope they're making. Like I said, they're clearly heading somewhere more fabulous.

—JAMES HANNAHAM