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Strange Meeting Trio + Durian @ Lineout Stage, Hangzhou (13/03/2016)

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If I come across words such as ‘psychedelic’ and ‘jazz’ then it’s going to be hard for me to resist dipping my toes in the water. These are the words which have been used to describe Strange Meeting Trio. Throw in the band Durian for good measure and Lineout Stage are seriously onto a winner when it comes to rounding off the weekend with an enticing Sunday evening musical menu. Having witnessed Durian live once before, ‘support band’ is not a description that immediately springs to mind. This is a group that has all the raw potential to go places, as far as I’m concerned. That said, they also prove a great choice to get things started this evening. Whilst a little tentative to begin with, presumably needing to get a feel of the room, the group quickly reel their keen audience in with a dynamic not too unlike an Eno-less **Roxy Music**, though the omission of synthesizers is not really an issue given the richness of the overall sound. Following the departure of their original bass player, **Ethan Ash** has made the role his own and looks very comfortable in it. Not only are the bass lines a key part of the mix, he has a certain stature onstage which heightens **Durian**’s stage presence in more ways than one. Whilst I’m enjoying the bass parts snake their way around standout tracks such as ‘Azul’ and ‘Ponte Salsa’, the other very noticeable addition is sax player Baron. There’s been a period of time in modern pop where the saxophone was almost scorned, probably due to the cumulative effect of tracks such as ‘Careless Whisper’. I am relieved we seem to be more open-minded as audiences these days. It really is a supremely adaptable and enjoyable instrument in the right hands, as listening to the works of artists from **David Bowie** to **Destroyer** sufficiently proves.

Guitarist Willem really pins the whole ensemble together with his staccato, funk rhythms bouncing off drummer **Adam Brillhart**, whilst I would like to see **Burundi** backing singer **Any Arlene** being given more room to shine as I hear on the grapevine she really does have the potential to wow a room, when given the opportunity. I don’t think I’ve seen a lead singer as charismatic as **Daniel Rojas Santacruz** from **Columbia** during my time in Zhejiang. He has a typical shyness, apparent in many artists, when talking to the audience but suddenly somehow flicks a switch when applying his talents to the microphone, acoustic guitar, and splashes of percussion. All very enjoyable, I’d love to hear what magic an experienced producer could work with this band.

Strange Meeting Trio take to the stage quite quickly, which means the momentum of the evening is not lost. **Simone Schirru**, the guitarist, makes a point of saying the group will be quite a contrast with Durian because their music is quite ‘sad’ if I heard him correctly. Well form a contrast they do but I’m not quite sure about the ‘sad’ part as I am grinning from ear to ear from start to finish. What a beguiling group! They describe themselves as ‘the bad son of a very polite jazz band’. If further explanation is needed, the three musicians (the other two being bass and synth player **Nicola Lanzerotti**, and drummer **Antonio Fusco**) form a core part of the JZ house band and they complete their residency there on March 31st. By branching out as a three-piece they are able to expand their avant-garde horizons to the limit and they find their perfect match in **Lineout Stage** who are always willing to embrace adventurous new sounds.



Opening with 'TWN 2' it is immediately obvious that this is not going to be a run-of-the-mill jazz performance with the participants simply going through the motions. Just as much as the group are challenging their audience, you feel they are challenging themselves also and this makes for a heady spectacle with the audience noticeably bewitched. It's not just about the notes being played, these players have a sophisticated appreciation of what can be achieved simply by varying the volume they play at. Sometimes it's quiet enough to notice amplifier hiss in the background, at other times they reach a crescendo that makes it difficult to hear whether I'm being asked if I'd like a whisky. Yes please.

Let's be honest, music in general can be hard to describe at the best of times and this group perhaps stretches this writer's ability to do so to the limit. So forgive me for expressing that the sound of this band is like someone violently assaulting your senses but somehow doing it in a really pleasant way at the same time, despite the music at times being really quite abrasive. Go and see them perform and perhaps you will get an inkling of what I am driving at. Whilst the core instruments are guitar, bass and drums, the manner in which synth sounds and shimmering guitar delays are threaded into the fabric of their sonic barrage means Strange Meeting Trio can offer the listener a certain level of finesse, a pretty layer of icing on an insane yet utterly appealing cake. Final number '**La Calma Prima Della Tempesta**' is a fitting way to round the night off, with the silence that follows almost as dramatic as the music that preceded it, and audience members left scratching their heads, looking at each other, as if to say, 'What exactly just happened?'. Top notch.

It seemed prudent to probe further so we caught up with Strange Meeting Trio after their performance...

DOGS: Please tell me a bit about your background. Where do the individual members of your group come from? What music influenced you as you were growing up and how did you meet each other?

***Nicola:** I started playing music quite late, at the age of 25, straight onto the double bass, after spending years listening to rock, grunge, rap, prog-rock and Italian folk singers. When I started playing double-bass I wanted to play like **Charles Mingus**, then I realised I didn't have those kinds of fingers (chuckles). I then moved to Brussels where I enrolled at the Royal Conservatoire, where I studied for 2 years. Brussels is basically the kind of place you can absorb many musical styles. I have been playing jazz, folk (French, English, Arab, Italian), impro, pop, afrobeat with a range of different people in various contexts. The electric bass is a more recent love, I'm still trying to understand it and I'm very curious. I met Simone in Brussels, he is also an Italian immigrant, and we became friends and played together on some occasions. I then decided to make him part of this Chinese adventure. Antonio and Simone go way back, they recorded an album together in Italy, and it was his suggestion to involve Antonio as drummer for the JZ house band.*

***Simone:** I come from Sardinia, and as a kid I was into rock (**Jimi Hendrix Carlos Santana, Alice in Chains, Faith No More, Mr Bungle, Pantera, Meshuggah**). Then came jazz, a bit by chance: **Charlie Parker** at first, then the **Weather Report**. As a student at the local Conservatoire I learned about avant-garde and free jazz, with **Ornette Coleman** a major reference point. For many years I've been connected with the free improvisation scene, meeting and studying with many musicians in the Chicago and New York City areas, including **Muhai Richard Abrams, Roscoe Mitchell, Anthony Braxton, Louis Moholo, Wadada Leo Smith, Butch Morris, and Steve Coleman**. Other major influences are certainly guitar players like **Bill Frisell, John Scofield and Marc Ribot**.*

***Antonio:** My background includes all musical genres. From rock, blues, pop to avant-garde and experimental music. The most important influence for me is of course the music of **Miles Davis** and some important drummers like **John Bonham, Mitch Mitchell** in terms of rock, and **Tony Williams, Jack De Johnette and Roy Haines** regarding jazz drumming.*

I've known Simone for a long time and we first met in Sardinia. Nicola and I met in Brussels some months before coming to China.



DOGS: Obviously I detect avant-garde and jazz in your music. Can you tell me if there's anything else consciously being thrown into the mix, i.e. any other musical genres?

*Nicola: We are like musical sponges, of course. We throw into our music everything we listen to, be it consciously or not. We are jazz musicians and also free improvisers. Each of our personal projects involve free improvisation in one way or another. But as said in answer to the previous questions, we are also involved in so many different projects that it is impossible not to be influenced by everything we play. Specifically I can think of **Jimmy Giuffre's trio with Paul Bley and Steve Swallow**, but in fact that's clarinet, double bass and piano. And I think our musician friends might be a big influence on us. Brussels is so lively that you get new ideas every week.*

DOGS: You have told me the names of the songs you played during your performance – I am keen to know how much of the structures are set in stone and how much you improvise when you are playing live?

Nicola: The whole concert was basically improvised around 6 written melodies or tunes. The first idea I had was to play a hundred percent improvised set to try out some new sounds with this particular band. Then Simone came up with the idea of playing a couple of tunes and brought three to the table, I brought three of mine and we agreed on a set in order to give shape to the show. Almost all the tunes are based around simple chordless melodies that are basically just a pretext for improvising. We also decided on three specific solo moments but of course we didn't really respect that!

DOGS: Was it my imagination or did Antonio have a tube in his mouth at one stage – can you tell me what that was for?

Antonio: Yes, it was not your imagination. I like to use the tube in the tom and floor tom to change the tuning and to create melodic patterns. The technique is very simple: blowing air in changes the tuning to higher frequencies, whereas sucking it out can change it to lower frequencies. Sometimes

I like to use it also on the bass drum. To create a clear sound it is very important to control the tuning of the drums and the touch. The best sound is of course the one produced with the mallet sticks. This conclusion comes from my own personal research and is an intrinsic part of my style.

DOGS: How did you end up in Hangzhou?

*Nicola: I played in Hangzhou at the **2014 Blooms festival** organised by **JZ club** with my own project **SKIN**. I then got in touch with the people at JZ and played again the following year with another jazz band called **Zola Quartet**). At that moment I discovered they would be happy to have me here with a jazz band to play every night as a house band and I was thrilled to seize the opportunity of playing a standards repertoire for 3 months, every night of the week. That's how we landed here. The rest is just part of our evil plan to conquer China (chuckles).*

DOGS: What are your plans for the future?

*Nicola: At the end of March JZ band will become a sextet for a couple of days with the addition of a sax player, also Italian, also from Brussels. We will then play a couple of concerts in Shanghai, Changzhou and Beijing as a jazz quintet as our singer will fly back to Europe on April 1st. I will play a quartet gig with my project **SKIN** in Beijing. Concerning the trio, we still don't know. We are happy with the results so far and will definitely try to make something of it. We will probably come back to China in a few months. There are a lot of projects on the go for now but nothing fixed or confirmed yet. Each one of us, starting from April or May, will be back concentrating on personal projects in Europe. Antonio has three album releases to focus on in the UK, France and Italy. I will be busy at the **Womex with Oghene Kologbo and World Squad**, Simone will be very busy with a soul band from Belgium.*

DOGS: We wish you all the best. Thanks for talking to us.