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DRUMCLUB (ITALY) INTERVIEW 2008

1) How did your collaboration with keyboards player Michael Borstlap start and what challenges did you face working with him in particular?

We were introduced by a Dutch TV Producer, who was putting together artists for the Nijmegen Festival in Holland in 2002. We met at Heathrow Airport as you do – we hardly knew each other's work, but both liked and trusted the Producer. We drank a lot of coffee, hardly talked about music at all – musicians never do – and a few weeks later we were on stage in front of 800 people having never played together before. The result is the Summerfold DVD (In Concert in Holland BBSF 097DVD), and if you look closely, you can see the look of sheer terror in our eyes as we walk on stage with no prepared music at all. Sometimes in music, your first reaction is your best reaction.

The challenges are the same with most musicians – to get to know them as quickly as possible, to get to know what they like, how they approach their instruments, so I can compliment that and we can make some fresh and interesting music. Michiel is a very strong player with loads of ideas, so he's going to be easy to work with.

2) Which one would you consider to be the best drumming performances in "In two minds" and which are the reasons?

I'd prefer to leave you to judge! Sometimes you can play very little to profound effect, or a whole lot of drum action to very little effect – all heat and no light. I try to avoid this! I was never impressed by flash and thunder on its own, but rather what it is that the drummer is offering that is defining the track – giving it its special flavour. I like all the tracks on the CD, but my favourite is the flat-out groove of 'From the Source, We tumble Headlong'. That's a tambourine lying on the snare drum, by the way. It's a nice sound.

3) How long have you been working on this project with Michael Borstlap?

Since 2002 is one answer; my whole life is another.

Some people doubt the effectiveness of a music that has not been sweated over for months in the rehearsal room, but in my experience there is a wonderful music that can only arise under the circumstances under which this music arose, and that cannot be arrived at by any other means. If, as a musician, you want to hear your 'inner man' speak, you need at minimum a stage, an audience, good instruments, and no idea what you are going to do next. 'Reacting in the moment' sounds precipitous, and fraught with danger; 'improvisation' is a word that makes people nervous. The original

derivation of the word, however, indicates that which is 'unforeseen', which is much closer to the conversational purpose of the group.

Michiel and I are doing no more than conversing as two old friends, and we don't know in advance what we're going to talk about. We don't meet often. We like it that way – we have plenty to bring to the table through our refracted experiences elsewhere. The Art of Conversation requires a willingness to listen without prejudice, to contribute, and to build on what has gone before, for the enlightenment of all parties. Sometimes the conversation may be becalmed, no more than a water colour (Low Tide, Camber Sands), and sometimes it may be the raging flood of a breathless diatribe (From the Source, We Tumble Headlong). It might be teasing (Flirt), slightly sinister (Duplicity), or three minutes of Sheer Reckless Abandon. We don't know what it's going to be, and patience may be needed before it's true colours emerge. Whether it's the piano imitating my Chinese peacock gongs (Kinship), or the unexpected second-half of The Odd One Out; the slowly emerging hard swing of In Two Minds, or the melodious babble and scratching of Conference of the Bees, it's as much a surprise for us as it is for you.

Judging from audience reaction over recent months, it seems that the delight we find in our discoveries about each other resonates well with the active listener. The music has, of course, been 'worked on' for all our working lives, so those who need evidence of sweat need look no further. More importantly, it is the figment of two imaginations at full stretch, and the product of two minds which are trying hard to persuade their owners they have never played music before, and they are really just two kids in a great big sonic sandpit. We like it like that. Can't wait to play in Italy.

4) Was most of the material of the album ("In two minds" of course) improvised in the studio or was there some previously conceived structure for that?

The CD was recorded at recent concerts in Kristiansand and Trondheim in Norway, and Gateshead and Bath in the UK. Audience noise and applause has been removed. There has been a little editing, no mixing, no over-dubbing, and no fancy post-production cosmetic enhancement, so what you hear is about as true to the original performance as it is possible to get. The music was improvised without prior discussion as to tonality, tempo, duration, or any other extraneous expectation – we simply tried to get out of the way and allow the music to develop as it did. It did not exist before the concert; it came into existence, lived and died at the concert, and now cannot exist again outside its recorded form. It had the gossamer thin toe-hold on existence of the butterfly. We've now done two CDs and the DVD this way.

I haven't made a studio record since Earthworks Sound of Surprise in 2001. My last 4 or 5 CDs have all been live. Live recording is now so good, it's easier to record it 'in the moment', live, in real time.

5) Let's talk a bit about the way you work, especially when you're playing live (if you don't mind.) Once you have analyzed a part you have to play by metric

divisions, do you find helpful to throw that away and go back to the phrase itself?

Well, that's difficult. All drummers use patterns, but in the beginning stages of development, they are rather obvious, being a repeated measure or two, usually without deviation. The more progressive drummers have more sophisticated patterns and more of them, so it's not all so obvious. At the highest level, you can drop into any Jack De Johnette track, and he will be playing a measure of 4/4 that he has probably never played exactly that way before in his life. His playing appears to be a continual stream of invention. Ideally we aim for that – a continual stream of invention with the hands and limbs seemingly never repeating themselves. I also aim for a music, altho' I am many years away from it, that is non-repetitive and endlessly inventive. I could do this with Bruford-Borstlap, if I were a good enough player, which I am not.

6) What's your set up in the studio?

My set up is pretty much the same studio or live. My drums are arranged symmetrically around a central snare with the remote hi-hat positioned immediately in front of it. There are then 2 toms and 2 cymbals on the left, mirrored by the same (different pitches) on the right. All the drums are flat on the same plain, like a tympanist with 5 tympani.



Personally I find the movement a few inches to the left to find the high tom easier than moving forward and up, as on the standard set. The movement is more a swivel at the hips to get round the semi-circle of drums. Getting rid of the old right-hand-over-the-left-to-reach-the-hi-hat routine also opens up the left side of the kit considerably. Sometimes I practice without the strong right side of the kit set up at all, in order to give the weaker left side as airing. A disadvantage is that you have to have a remote hi-hat, not always available at jazz festivals or rehearsal rooms, etc.

The drums are not set up in descending pitch order, so the well known sound of a descending roll round the drums needs a complicated bit of sticking that I tend to avoid. Generally I've always been interested in unusual drums arranged in unusual ways, feeling that it might give me a different sound, or way of doing things. Robert Wyatt of Soft Machine, so the story goes, used to have them set up differently

every night! I'm using a great set of Tama Bubingas. Tama have always been of the utmost help to me as an artist and musician.

7) What do you think have been the most important ingredients in your successful career?

Well, I have been very privileged to share the stage with some remarkable people, but I think at my best I had something to offer which could heighten their music-making. A drummer has to have something to bring to the table - an approach, a style, a sound, an attitude – as well as all the technical dexterity needed to realise all this, and then be ready to abandon it. At an early age, a drummer called Jamie Muir showed me that the music did not exist to serve me, rather that I existed to serve the music. When you get that the right way round, you have some chance of playing something interesting. Or at least avoiding playing rubbish.

8) How do you perceive the drummer's role in nowadays rock bands?

At the highest end, the drummer serves to shape and control the music, to give it air, light, dynamics, shading, contrast. But many of these things are not required in rock music, which is essentially played at one dynamic level and within a very narrow tempo range. Lower down the food chain, the drummer just plays the same rhythm everyone else plays, twirls his sticks, and looks cute. I play what they call jazz now - reactive music - but if I had to play in rock I'd probably want to be in a death / speed metal band.

9) We all know that you wrote a book with instructions for young drummers, "Bruford and the Beat". What do you think is the most important part of this manual?

I have a book 'When in Doubt, Roll!', and an instructional video called 'Bruford and the Beat'. You can probably find excerpts from the video on YouTube. With both I think you get a strong sense of the way I go about doing things – both are more about possibilities for the drummer rather than how to play a paradiddle. There is certainly demand for me to update these two items, but I find now there are so many instructional books and DVDs that I prefer to remain silent amidst all the din. The technical standard is very high now, and I need to practise hard to keep up! Have you seen the excellent Marco Minnemann book? The first 24 pages are deceptively simple, and very thought-provoking. Great! John Riley's material is also terrific.

10) Are you doing any drum clinic around Europe ?

No. I did 12 clinics in 13 days all across Canada recently, and I thought I'd give it a rest.

11) Knowing that you have influenced so many drummers, are there some that you prefer yourself nowadays?

There are some brilliant players about, but you may never get to hear of them. Try Mark Giuliana, with bass player Avishai Cohen's group, or Asaf Sirkis, an Israeli working in the UK, or British drummer Martin France. Bill Stewart and Gavin Harrison are world famous and rightly so.

12) Do you still remember your first drum kit?

Sure. It was a horrible red sparkle kit, with a wafer thin snare drum, an 18" bass drum, and a Zilket cymbal. I loved it. It cost a little more than £20 – about 30 EUR in 1964. I don't remember the manufacturer. Then I graduated, one drum at a time, to the British manufacturer Olympic, the junior end of what is now Premier Drums.

13) What other projects do you have in the work for the future?

I am very much developing my substantial recorded catalogue at Summerfold Records and Winterfold Records. We have some thirty titles there now, and it's growing fast. It's a pleasure to document my efforts there. Aside from that, more gigs, tours, and fresh music! Michiel and I will be at Fasano (Brindisi) Jazz Festival on June 3rd. All information and current dates is available at www.billbruford.com.