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In The Mix

July 1998



...and then there were

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Since March of this year, the members of Chicago's own Tortoise, often with guest musicians such as Sarah P. Smith and Rob Mazurek of Isotope, have traveled from coast to coast as well as throughout Europe in support of their latest Thrill Jockey release, *TNT*. On the evening before a series of weekend gigs in Montreal, percussionist/guitarist/vibe man Dan Bitney took some time out for a few questions from *In The Mix*. What resulted was a thoroughly enjoyable phone conversation with an enthusiastic yet politely modest key member of one of the most unique progressive jazz bands to surface in recent memory. Their blend of classic jazz influences and alternative angles of approach has melded into a sound that is hard to describe (though I find myself trying), and which varies dramatically from song to song.

I recently had the pleasure of seeing the band live for the first time at Metro, and the diverse crowd of jazz fans included those like myself, on the cusp of late Boomer/early X er musical wave, and many considerably younger—just to show that jazz is not lost upon the ears of our youth.

The audience reaction was consistent and inspiring, and seemed to fuel the band onwards. I could easily see where Bitney's enthusiasm came from, and feel that with all the band's hard-won successes, he needn't be so modest!

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RFG: There are a number of multi-instrumentalists in the group. How do you decide who plays what and when?

DB: It mostly has to do with the recording process...their forte or whatever. I'll usually do a percussion track, like the congas or hand drums. Its not exclusive it's just, when we record, we're writing when we record. A lot of the songs started from bass lines, and we do basically a drum machine track, lay down the basic bass line, and then just kind of pick, like, we've got three drummers. You can just kind of tell sometimes who's better at what type of song, or who has ideas. And of course when we're



Photo by Chris Taylor

TORTOISE

Across the Sea and Back Again

A conversation with Dan Bitney

by Robert F. Gabella

recording we don't really think about how we're going to play the shit live.

RFG: "swung from the gutters"—did you play the drums on that track?

DB: "swung from the gutters" that's two drummers, John [Herndon] and John [McEntire]. It's just like, when we're makin' shit, you just kind of hear it you know, like bongos would be great on this! And then it's like, I don't know, I mean, once you can play piano you can play vibes... they're all set up the same. It's kinda' the same as bass. It's like once you can play guitar you can play bass. It's really not super-complicated, and we're not, like, great musicians, you know what I mean?

RFG: If you're not, you sure come across as!

DB: You know it's just important to keep the shit creative and stuff, and that's why it's kind of like that. Just like I said about when we record—somebody might be playing three voices on a song. We don't ever say, oh wait, we're not going to be able to do this live. It's just the creative process.

RFG: And live it came across beautifully. And whether you intended to or not, you probably find yourselves in kind of a nice position where a lot of people haven't been able to saddle you with comparisons to other bands or to other musicians because I think, probably, that nobody's managed to figure out who to compare you to. Whatever you've managed to pull together is awfully distinct. Did it come out that way, well, do you feel like some of your influences come through? There are some feelings I get, but I don't find many direct comparisons.

DB: That's not a bad thing depending on your attitude about it. I mean, a lot of jazz people will just like study one person's style, you know, and beat that to death until they make it their own, and unfortunately not too many of them ever make it their own.

RFG: Something like "the equator" for example, it's timeless in an odd sort of way.

DB: For me I can really tie that in...it was kind of...one of my compositions, where I kind of had rough ideas for

the majority of the chemistry of that song. I don't know if you listen to too much African...but that's really...

RFG: I got a little of that...if you've had a chance to hear Stan Getz, in the early to mid 60's, made I think more than one album where he used Astrud Gilberto [Bitney approves cheerfully] as the vocalist on some of the songs, and I kind of got that sort of a feel. It was almost like a movie or a soundtrack or something, but it wasn't like I'd really heard it before but I had that feeling...

DB: That song's got a weird African influence. I wanted to get some of the chemistry of like, I don't know if you know of Thomas Mafumo [I quickly admitted my ignorance: it's time I start-

ed recognizing world musicians by name!]

I then asked Bitney about the rousing response the band received from the Metro crowd. Was that expected? He cheerfully said yes, that it had been that way almost everywhere they'd been! Then, I asked him to run down a list of the some of the different tour stops the band had made since March.

DB: Oh, man, do you got a couple of hours? Coast to coast in the U.S. and in Europe, pretty much Spain to Scandinavia and England to Vienna [laughs...]

RFG: And how did you all come together? What's the previous history of the band members, or bands you've

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Tortoise

Sunday, June 14, 1998

Metro, 3730 N. Clark St., Chicago, IL 60613 • 773/549-0203

Reviewer: Robert F. Gabella

As quietly as the anticipation of their arrival was cacophonous, the members of Tortoise materialized on stage as if from thin air, and began the first set of their two and a half hour show with mesmerizing percussion accompanied by the eerie strains of a mournful trombone. The trombone comes courtesy of Sarah B. Smith, who along with fellow Isotope member Rob Mazurek on cornet, is a regular feature along many of the stops on this Chicago band's current tour (which has so far taken them to Europe and back) in support of their new *TNT* CD.

A large screen behind the stage flashed a mixture of street scenes and amorphous graphics which came together in a beautifully subtle fusion of sound and vision. And the second number brought to mind a Cat-In-the-Hat sort of rainy day feel, with lots of cymbal tapping, a crawling bass line by Doug McCombes, Dan Bitney's thumping congas, and the cornet and trombone in a punctuated duet of seconds and fourths. At first, it was easy to think the band may have gotten lost in its free-form wanderings, but as the horns and their harmonies pulled tighter on the rambling rhythm section, I quickly realized just how well these guys can play!

By the third tune, I was hooked. My mom, whose jazz roots had long ago been dipped in the fertile loam of Oscar Peterson, Errol Garner, Benny Goodman, and Stan Getz, was already there!

On "Beneath the Undertow," there was more hard-driving bass along with the horn section's harmonies. The number had a maritime feel, and the strong, solid congas, drums and percussion quickly built to the scorching climax of Mazurek's cornet. This is when I first noticed the crowd start to go wild, with a mixture of swaying and outright dancing; the band's impeccable counter-rhythmic timing fueled the crowd's fire with thumping bass lines and an eloquent tapestry of percussive sound.

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been in before? How did it all kind of fall into one place for you?

DB: Let's see, well, John Herndon and Doug McCombes were roommates, they were good friends, [but] they were never in bands together, so they just started playing together, and that was kind of the...embryo of the whole thing...the drummer and the bass player. They made a few tapes, and they just wanted to explore different shit with that kind of chemistry...they started recording and then hooked up with Bundy Brown and John McEntire, which coincidentally was another rhythm section in a

bassist and a drummer. With John McEntire, fortunately they got an electronic music major in the deal, and that kind of opened the door to like, a lot of processing, a lot of use of old synthesizers, and voices and stuff...I wasn't in the band when I saw the first show and I was like, "wow, this is like some other shit, you know?" At that point it was like '90, maybe one or two—that was still the days of Nirvana.

• • •

And now, these are the days of Tortoise. With a series of notable discs behind them, and so much touring experience to boot, the band can only build upon its successes. These are serious

musicians, proud of their craft, but good-natured, cheerful, and modest as well. They've come a long way, and they're sure to go farther yet; each new effort will surely open up a brave new world of sound. **MM**

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On the next song, a dreamy funk bass and keyboard thing, sleighbells kept time as the mood quickly brightened (sleighbells, of course, can never bring you down!). And on the next number, Dan Bitney's congas and percussion were clearly highlights. Although it's hard to pin down the "Tortoise sound," on this particular song, the hyper wood block gave the feel of an amphetamine-driven cross between Santana and Brasil '66; alternative retro-fusion non-tech!

Yet Tortoise is hardly afraid of technology: John McEntire's keyboards reflect a range of voices and samples which wash over the entire palette of sound. And John Herndon's high-energy drumming along with Jeff Parker's quiet yet searing guitar seal the force that binds it all together. Where one song stopped and the next one started wasn't always certain, but as the band segued into "The Equator," the audience was transported into a sand-between-your-toes beach scene which graduated into a "dueling marimbas" kind of finale.

Whether it's techno-funk with an otherworldly feel, or retro punk fusion with third-world roots, Tortoise has latched onto a sound which defies comparison. With tunes that build like epics, and a clarity of vision unique to popular jazz (which these days is all-too-often bland and diluted), Tortoise's live show has a razor-sharp edge to it that is truly refreshing. On tour since March, the band has received wide acclaim both here in the States and abroad; with their two-night gig at Metro, they took no prisoners as they sealed their claim to a place at the head of the progressive art-jazz table!

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