

MediaReview

X. trioVD. EP. 2011. Naim (UK) [NAIMCD159]. £4.99.

The British jazz and improvisation export scene has been conspicuously uneventful for a rather long time. In contrast to the number of professional musicians, the cadre of national jazz musicians, considered together, have lacked an original, clear, and ultimately marketable direction—on par with, for example, their Scandinavian neighbors—and failed to successfully reach an audience beyond British shores. As Riley and Laing poignantly point out in a 2010 report summarizing the current state of affairs, “few British jazz musicians have recording contracts with the major international record companies or even the larger international independently-owned labels”.¹

Although the UK is an island teeming with individual talent and displaying an abundance of aesthetic variety with an impressive urban-to-rural spread, it had yet to match the artistic milieu and concentration of talent so broadly admired from 1960s London (with *The Little Theatre Club*; Evan Parker, Derek Bailey etc.) or the so-called British “jazz renaissance” prompted by 1980s *Loose Tubes* (Django Bates, Chris Batchelor and company). All was not lost, however, and in the late 1990s something began brewing across the country as Britain moved into an Age of the Jazz Collective, with a sudden concentration of talent and innovation organized around groups of largely young, up-and-coming musicians. As writer and critic Stuart Nicholson points out, “there is a buzz about the British jazz scene that has not been felt since the popularity of Courtney Pine, the Jazz Warriors and Loose Tubes in the 1980s,” adding, “there is currently an optimism and feel-good factor in UK jazz that has not

been felt in decades.”² With reference to the jazz collective, by far the most profiled are London’s F-IRE and Loop Collective, together with the Northern Leeds Improvised Music Association (LIMA). While organizing themselves, these collectives disregarded the general lack of public funding, poor media coverage, and a substandard nationwide jazz infrastructure, to take control over most levels of their musical output. By pioneering an idiosyncratic aesthetics and adopting clever branding and self-promotion techniques, the collectives secured media exposure and performance opportunities for their members. Subsequently, collective offshoots of recent years have made their mark on the European scene with ensembles such as Polar Bear and Acoustic Ladyland (F-IRE), Outhouse

¹Mykaell Riley and Dave Laing, *The Value of Jazz in Britain II*. (London: Jazz Services Ltd., 2010). Jazz Services is a non-profit information clearing-house for jazz in Britain, providing historical information on jazz in the United Kingdom, as well as facilitating contact between members of the British jazz community (www.jazzservices.org.uk).

²Stuart Nicholson, Emma Kendon, et. al, *The BBC – Public Sector Radio, Jazz Policy and Structure in the Digital Age*, (London: Jazz Services Ltd., 2009).

(Loop), and LIMA's current flagship trioVD leading the way.³

A band consisting of three people with the same first name (Chris x 3) might be unusual, but then again most things are unusual about trioVD: A bass-less trio, they have no problems compensating with the help of MIDI technology (Sharkey doubles his guitar-playing through a bass amp), extremely heavy hitting drumming ("I come from Bradford where the rock and punk scene is predominant"), topped by manic saxophone on par with any punk singer you can think of. All three of them are well versed in the jazz canon, but are equally experienced in genres ranging from pop, rock and electronica to contemporary classical music and free improvisation. trioVD manage to maneuver all this and more, and, most impressively, they do it in a way that makes perfect musical sense. Masters of genre-manipulation like John Zorn and Django Bates come to mind, and in that respect trioVD is on equal footing.⁴

The trio's 2009 debut, *Fill It Up with Ghosts* (Babel), was released to critical acclaim, effectively launching the trio onto the European circuit. This EP is a four track teaser for their forthcoming second full album distributed in 2012, both releases now on the less jazzy and more urban, eclectic UK Naim Label. Putting out an EP looks like a clever move to build a new audience for the trio's second album. Titled *X*, the EP is an X Factor dedication "to the behemoth British televisual institution" currently into its eighth series. The four tracks on the EP are effectively presented as "conceptual compositions inspired by the X Factor judges." In other words, this is an old-fashioned concept album, and the pop-cultural dimensions and commercial referencing are clear from the outset: "Our intention here is not to mock this program" they claim; rather, it "is a musical response to the show." The opening track, "Tulisa" ("A twisted homage to the new queen of pre-Xmas X-mania," Tula Paulinea Contostavlos), does indeed allude to a commercial scramble of metal, punk and progressive rock, albeit in a highly skewed and subverted manner. To me, this sums up the most fascinating aspect of trioVD, the equal parts of irony and respect towards popular genres; their music presents a subtle "piss take" as well as a respectful homage to the commercialized music business. Second out is "Walsh" (after promoter Louis Walsh), a King Crimson cum Steve Reich melodic cell pattern with overlaying voice and intertwining saxophone lines. The tune is an "inspiration from the 1 or 2 thousand ballads the afore-mentioned [Walsh has] racked up over the years." The pastiche sound of the power ballad saxophone grows out of the rhythmic cells like a phoenix from the flames, and it feels quite liberating to hear de Bezenac let loose from his normally cyclic world of frantic short stabs and white noise (created as pitch-less reed noise). De Bezenac displays his superb technique and control with a strong hint of an M-BASE-inspired (read: Steve Coleman) aesthetics. The penultimate track, "Barlow," is a juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated parts, a sort of elongated *Naked City*-like cut-and-paste approach.

³See, for example, Polar Bear, *Dim Lit*, (Babel. 2004), Acoustic Ladyland, *Acoustic Ladyland*, *Camouflage* (Babel, 2004); Outhouse, *Outhouse* (Babel, 2008); and trioVD, *Fill It Up With Ghosts* (Babel, 2009). The members of trioVD are Christophe de Bezenac (alto sax/electronics), Chris Sharkey (electric guitar), and Chris Bussey (drums). ⁴See, for example, John Zorn, *Spillane* (Electra Nonesuch, 1987), as well as Zorn's collective, *Naked City on Naked City* (Nonesuch, 1990). See also Django Bates, *Like Life* (Storyville Records, 1997).

Taking the words “Everything Changes” from the famous Gary Barlow tune by the same name⁵—the words panned across the stereo image—this is music that is highly filmic in its narrative quality. Utilizing sequential development, stylistic juxtaposing, sampled loops, and even dialogue, the music will stir your memory—the soundtrack qualities of “Barlow” vividly conjuring up images from the past (cinema or real life). “Everything changes” and so does the music, which is highly confusing to listen to, but as with Zorn, trioVD are masters of their domain—their structural control is impeccable. Finally, “Kelly” (X Factor judge, R&B diva Kelly Rowland) is my favorite: this track is less frantic compared to the other VD-material and is much more ambient in development. It is however, yet another track which comes across as filmic in the overall soundscape, starting off as something out of a Vangelis score, moving through fleeting sax lines and Ry Cooder-esque guitar, all in a slow pace. Towards the end, references to Radiohead finish the tune, also signaling the end of the EP; “we just wanted something that had space and a more lyrical side to it but with the trioVD attitude still intact.” Although the longest track, clocking in at 6:16, “Kelly” could easily go on much longer to underpin its ambient effect. I suspect “Kelly” in the right live setting (with the gig drawing to a close) will get the opportunity to live out its full potential.

The prospect of broad appeal for trioVD is questionable; they make music that demands a fully motivated and dedicated listener. You may well find that you do not want de Bezenac’s frantic pecking in your left ear and Sharkey’s eerily razor-sharp guitar distortion in your right as the explosive finale to a long working day. In fact, I sometimes long for them to move out of their angular, cell-like structures, to simply relax and let their improvisational ideas flow for a bit. With such outstanding instrumentalists, why not let go of the homogenous trinity and leave space for more individual solos? The answer to this, I suspect, is that trioVD is attempting to redefine the overused structures of modern, contemporary jazz (head-solo-head). Why play solos, they seem to ask, when the three instruments merged together inhabit the power of an outright sonic attack, effectively displaying an aural complexity few groups even vastly superior in size can match?

“Industrial” as a descriptive term, label, or genre may be somewhat of a cliché, but industrial is exactly what trioVD sound like; their music is über-hip, ultramodern and urban and fits right into the manic world of heavy industry, congested traffic and the aural violence of a large city. Additionally, they allude to the working class enclaves of northern England: the stereotypical impressions of honest labor (think machines against metal) and in-your-face frankness of heavily industrialized Yorkshire. This is not the slightly gentrified kind of modern jazz (these days) often associated with London, but rather a provincial, uncensored scream from the north. The veteran Leeds-based drummer Paul Hession recently claimed that Londoners have the impression of Leeds-produced music as being hard-core and rough-edged.⁶

⁵Take That, “Everything Changes,” *Everything Changes*, BMG, 1993). Barlow was a member of the British “boyband,” Take That; he co-wrote the song, which was certified quadruple Platinum (over four million units sold) worldwide.

Musicians from the north reputedly exude “working-class roughness” with stereotypical historical associations to industry and working-class culture: coalmines, factories, council estates and pub-life. The truth of the matter might simply be that modern London musicians are surrounded by a powerful and influential music business—hip clubs, marketing, and branding—and subsequently are much more encouraged to round off sharp edges in order to broaden their commercial appeal. In Leeds there is little incentive for smoothing off, especially because the bulk of the music business is truly underground, where a more palatable style is neither encouraged nor tolerated. The result is that trioVD sound hipper and more relevant than much of the music presently coming out of London. They have an honest and untainted sound, with parallels to the New York downtown scene (Zorn in particular), or the Chicago scene around players like Ken Vandermark. The music might be different from that of Chicago or New York, but the highly relevant urban philosophizing their music represents holds its own as a soundtrack to contemporary city life. As I hear it, trioVD thereby represents the sound of Leeds, with all its rough edges. With Britain in a deep financial crisis and unemployment rising, with conservative politics and cuts to public funding, and with a rapidly declining cultural industry, trioVD has provided us with the perfect soundtrack to a nation’s decline—sad as that may be.

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⁶Taped interview with Paul Hession, Leeds, June 2011.