
@-quartet release – Krinein Interview



For the release of his first album as a leader, Jazz guitarist and composer Didier Verna offers us a rich and wide musical jaunt, demonstrating that Jazz knows no bounds: from Latin ambiances to ballads, from medium tempo to bop rhythm, from a more electric sound to passing nods to free-jazz, in all cases the music is melodic and will

please a very wide audience... definitely a guitarist worth keeping an eye on. We have met him.

First of all, how do you pronounce the title of the album?

This is also the name of the band. The “@” character should be pronounced “at”, just as in email addresses. This is a passing reference to computer science: the title of the album simply means “Didier Verna in quartet”.

But the “@” is also as in “@coustic” (laughs). The repertoire of this band is indeed almost exclusively acoustic Jazz. I have another project in mind, which would rather be focused on Jazz-Rock, so more electric. The band’s name would probably be “e-something”...

Isn't 36 a bit old for a fist album, even as a leader?

I don't ask myself such questions. I do things at my own rhythm, when I feel the need to, that's all; I'm never in a hurry. There are real answers to this question though.

First, I'm only a part-time musician. Consequently, my career evolves at a limited speed.

Next, Jazz is a very demanding art: it requires a great maturity and a very strong instrumental mastering. So it's not uncommon to see Jazz artists emerge late in life.

Besides, in general, I'm a bit too aware of my own value. I could probably have recorded this album a few years back, but for a very long time, I've been thinking "what's the point in making a CD when there are so many musicians far more interesting than me out there". It's clear that with such a reasoning, you never get anywhere! But I can't help myself, I'm like that. It's very difficult for me to publicly release anything, before it's absolutely perfect, which of course never happens!

Actually, two particular events contributed greatly to trigger this project. The first one is a chat with Antoine Hervé who once said to me “if you want to be successful in this profession, you have to be a little bit irresponsible”. What he meant is that you can't become famous if you're too modest and humble ! This is logical if you think about it: if a product is cheap, you get suspicious because you think it must not be a very good one. So if you want people to find you interesting, you've got to have enough self-esteem and pretension. The second factor is that more and more people, while listening to my music, were saying “Oh yes, that's your style all right”. From this moment on, I gradually let myself be convinced that I indeed had something personal to express, and that it was time to let people know...

In any case, humility will always be something very important to me, and I hope this shows through my music.

Do you find it easy to handle two different professions in parallel?

You mean three? (laughs) These days, I consider that being a father is a full-time job! Actually, I find this quite hard. Often, you get the feeling that you don't really belong anywhere. More precisely, you belong to two very different communities, but not completely to any of them. Besides, I get the feeling that being a researcher and an artist requires activating the same brain cells, so there are often conflicts for accessing them!

On the other hand, I ended up realizing that my life is not so different from that of some fully professional Jazz musicians: many of them can't manage to make a living with their music alone. So they also teach (I'm not saying that teaching is only good for getting money!). Consequently, the only real difference between them and me is that their field of teaching is also music, whereas mine is computer science. As for the rest, being a teacher allows you to live, and also to play at a loss. . .

There are very different sounds, ambiances, and rhythms on this album. Is there any homogeneity at all, is there a clue?

Good question! An album tells a story, just like a book. But when you read a novel, you're expecting different emotions: love, beauty, pain, distress, and developments. So why should a musical story be different? Platitude and monotony are boring, whatever their means of expression. By the way, this is a general shortcoming of the FM wavelength. Many popular artists have an idea and make a CD (sometimes a whole career) out of it, whereas there's actually room for one or two songs maximum. When you listen to their music, you get the feeling that it's always the same, and that's precisely the truth.

This album tells a story which is, as I say in the booklet, the story of my musical journey until now. That's the clue. As in a book, there are very different ambiances, because my influences are very wide and distinct, but each song is a "topic" on which I speak with my own words, at the level of composition as well as improvisation. Whatever the subject, this is one precise personality that is expressing, and that, is the homogeneity of the album.

In addition, the personality of the other musicians, and the "soul" they bring to the music is not to be forgotten. As I also say in the booklet, it's only by giving them a complete freedom of expression on my compositions that music becomes a collective process. This is the essence of Jazz.

What is Jazz ?

Very difficult question! There are people who think this is simply a musical style: the "chabada" of the drums, the walking bass and so on. There are also people who think that Jazz died in the 50's and for whom the electric period of Miles Davis is an abomination. To make a long story short, there's no real definition. But I'll give you mine anyway!

Jazz is not a style of music, but a philosophy, a way to envision all styles of music. Michel Petrucciani once said "Jazz is a music of thieves", and he was right! A Jazz musician, like a researcher, is fundamentally curious. He's interested in everything he can hear, and tries to appropriate all the ideas he's exposed to by adapting them to his own personality. This is a process that happens in composition as well as in improvisation. Improvisation is, to me, the key factor that unifies all musical styles in Jazz.

There is this one thing I love to do, when asked what Jazz is. I take people home, have them listen to some precisely chosen excerpts from my record collection, and watch their face go through all the colors of the rainbow under the weight of incomprehension. I could play some Steve Coleman,

and you would think it's rap. I could play some Tribal Tech and you would think it's very enraged hard-rock. I could play some Pat Metheny and you would hear world-music. And the story goes on and on. . . So, how is it possible that a Jazz passionate would listen to, and a fortiori play things so different from each other ? Because all those musicians are actually doing the same thing: they explore music, whatever the style, as a true natural language; they constantly try to extend their knowledge and culture through new ideas to express, new vocabulary to manipulate.

There are also two other aspects that I consider essential in the practice of Jazz: taste for "risky business" and "play" as in playing a game. Being in a state of research means that you can potentially fail. When taking new directions in an improvisation, you never really know where you're going, and that's assuming you're going anywhere at all, so you can perfectly fall down and break your neck. But that's not important. It's part of the game, and the audience knows it. The other thing is that not only a Jazz musician takes risks, but he actually likes it. In order to explore new ideas, you've got to break the rules first. A Jazz musician basically loves to break rules and plays with it. It's a shame that we have a tendency to forget that to play music and to play a game is actually the same verb. A Jazz musician plays music as much as he plays with the music.

There does not seem to be many Jazz musicians in the auto-production sphere.

That is correct, but I don't think there's anything specific to Jazz in that fact. Rather, I think that the auto-production landscape simply reflects the respective notoriety of the different musical styles. Jazz has always been a bit (too) confidential.

Why making the choice of auto-production?

This is hardly a choice, even though it may become one in the future. If you want to make a name in this profession, there are several possibilities. The first one is to begin early, make some studies in a Jazz school, or at least meet a few important people and have yourself noticed by those people. This could have happened to me when I was living in Bordeaux, but I moved to Paris for my scientific studies, and I knew nobody there.

The second possibility is to try and attend all possible jam sessions in every single club you know where you live. This, you can try when you don't have to get up early every morning, which unfortunately has never been my case.

Finally, auto-production was the best solution left for me. To make a CD before being well known is perhaps the opposite of what common sense would tell, but it has its advantages: you present yourself with a product of professional quality, just as if you were in the business for quite some time. As a consequence, people do pay attention to you.

Auto-production also has the advantage of granting you a relatively cheap access to notoriety. In the traditional circuit, people suffer from what computer scientists would call a "bootstrap" problem: in order to play often and make recordings, you have to be famous. But in order to be famous, you have to play often and make recordings. One has to realize that in France for instance, in order to get subsidized as a young artist from organizations like SACEM, SDRM, ADAMI etc, it is required that you already have a producer, a label, a distributor, in other words, you should be already in the circuit, to the point that you wouldn't need financial help anymore! Of course, I'm exaggerating, but that's the idea. On the contrary, there are associations or organization that help auto-produced artists sell their CDs on-line for example. There are also numerous web radios that are willing to give a hand to independent artists by airing their music. These all are alternate yet efficient ways to spread your music out.

Another pleasant thing with auto-production is that it allows you to sell your music at a reasonable price. The price you pay a CD in a store is way too high in my opinion. By avoiding all the intermediaries that withhold a percentage on the sales of your product, you can offer your CD at a lower price while earning as much or even more money per CD sold.

If you go even further, some great Jazz artists like Steve Coleman once decided that they were earning enough money with the gigs, and simply put all their former records available for download, free of charge. If only I could afford to do the same one day!

Who would you advise to listen to your album?

Everybody! Jazz amateurs of course, but also anybody else. Since the album is out, many people I know mentioned their surprise because they were expecting complicated, hermetic music, and eventually found it very melodic and accessible. For me, it's a victory.

Carla Bley once said "music should be simple, complex and natural". I would say that Jazz can be complex and understandable at the same time. This is a tricky exercise, which resembles scientific vulgarization a bit. How do you speak of complex things in simple terms? Music should be rich to be interesting to play (to me at least), otherwise, you get bored. Just like it is boring to listen to somebody only saying banalities. But this doesn't mean that you can only speak to an expert audience.

Being able to reconcile richness and apparent simplicity is very gratifying because at the same time, you please experts and you satisfy a wider audience... with the crazy hope to convert them for good of course!

Thank you!