
Roots and Leaves – Reviews

By Jean-Marc Gélin



Didier Verna? Unknown. A computer scientist I think. As well as a researcher it seems.

Yes, that's it. Not someone used to evolve in the regular, known and renown Jazz spheres. Except that, after moving from Bordeaux to Paris at 21, he could quickly exercise his 16 years of conservatory, and above all, his incredible talent. It is as a singer that he first distinguished himself in Paris, when this long-time fan

of Bobby Mc Ferrin's met Thierry Lalo and joined the Voice Messengers, a band well known for the required level of its recruitment.

Talking about this polyinstrumentist musician's influences, we can hear that of very classical guitarists (Wes Montgomery for instance), but also Pat Metheny or the likes of Mike Stern and all those who plot around the jazz-rock boundaries. We can also hear some connivance with John Scofield from whom he likes the reverb game.

From his past as a singer, Didier Verna kept a true sense of melody and a very natural lyricism which could almost make him pose as a six strings singer. It also happens that this gentleman compose magnificently and plays with this sort of obviousness that makes the music flow naturally from him, with grace.

Didier Verna has practically everything for himself. As well as being an extremely nice and uncomplicated guy, he also possesses a bluffless mastery of his Jazz, inside and out, which he displays with the elegance of the modest.

In this album, Didier Verna is backed up by a wild unit, an infernal trio which has been touring together for ages (Eptein - Zelnik - Georgelet; the "Autour de Minuit" jam's old timers still remember this) and which works perfectly.

Didier Verna's album, out there for a year now, is still somewhat confidential because the man does not benefit from an agent or any big marketing machinery. Believe me however when I say that you should definitely rush to this CD which does a world of good.

In any case, I come back to it on a regular basis. In fact, I listen to it in a loop. Pure joy.



By Jean-Jacques Dikongué

It is not very often that, unless being faced with a pure race musician, since the very first notes, we are welcome by the fluidity of the playing, we are comfortably ventilated by some music, because it is not saturated. It is this strong feeling of well being that is brought to us by guitarist Didier Verna's album Roots & Leaves.

12 tracks (including an alternate solo take of the song Coconette), symbolizing the blooming of a guitarist already firmly anchored into his art.

An airy album, of a thrilling freshness, joyous, which ventilates all the subtlety of the playing and exhibits the good spirit of the musicians. While Didier Verna transports us with the good quality of his playing, we feel compelled to mention his complicity with the excellent Laurent Epstein on piano; this complicity being cadenced by David Georgelet on drums, under the groove of Yoni Zelnik on the double bass.

Very very good 12 tracks album by Didier Verna. A genuine discovery!



By Chris Mosey

Parisian guitarist Didier Verna plays very much in the Pat Metheny tradition but with a sunny, melodic touch. His music is well thought out but never overly serious, with humor playing an important part in his compositions and improvisations.

Roots And Leaves, the title of this, his second album, was chosen with care. Verna says: “Roots are our foundation, our basis, our legacy and our culture. . .leaves are the multiple, blooming facets of our personality, our character and our uniqueness.”

He names the Quebecois band Uzeb as one of his influences but is less reliant on synthesisers than they were. And he is far more down to earth—often downright funky—than another mentor, John McLaughlin.

Verna calls his quartet “@”, insisting that it should be pronounced English-fashion as “at” even though his fellow countrymen prefer “arobase” (the final “e” is optional).

The songs are all originals. “Old Times” is based on a former practice routine. It’s a gently swinging piece with a nostalgic feel, featuring solos from the leader and pianist Laurent Epstein, known for his work with manouche jazz guitarist Patrick Saussois and New Jersey alto saxophonist Richie Cole, among many others.

It’s followed by a more recent composition, the up tempo “Circulocentrique”. Verna says of this one: “It turns around itself. It’s the chicken and the egg, the dog biting its own tail”. He establishes a solid groove with bassist Yoni Zelnik.

By contrast, the standout track, “Coconette”, is a lovely, lilting, very folksy number that Verna sings to his daughter Coline at bedtime. It’s reprised as a solo at close of play.

Verna has a real feel for the blues, typified by “Vert de Blues (Green Blues)”. It’s called this because, he says, “it’s a blues that’s not fully ripe”. Its “unfinished” quality is its charm. It starts slowly, almost uncertainly, then builds, with some dazzling guitar runs before solos by Zelnik and Georgelet.

The waltz “Petite Mort (Little Death)” belies its rather ominous name, rivalling “Coconette” in terms of melody. Epstein is in fine form on this one.

“Minor Nuisance” and “YYAB (Yet Another Blues)” are jaunty toe-tappers, while “Maroc” is a more serious, impressionistic piece, inspired by a trip to the Draa Valley in Morocco.

A lot to listen to, but never hard work.



By Roger Farbey

Don't judge a book a book by its cover or a recording by its first track. “Old Times” is certainly that, a paean to the swinging age of the Quintet of the Hot Club of France and guitarist Didier Verna displays his considerable talent with a nimble solo, as do each of the other members of the quartet.

In the true tradition of Moby-Dick, “Circulocentrique” is something completely different. This is a tasteful funky blues workout, again with some gripping guitar. The elegant ballad “Coconette” has an engaging melody and shows that—as with all the selections on this disc—Verna is clearly capable of composing solid, memorable tunes.

“Hints, Tips, Tricks 'n Cheats” starts with collective improvisation but settles into something more organised and fast moving, with Verna displaying considerable skill on fretless guitar. “Vert de Blues” is a straight ahead rapid-fire track as is the subsequent track “Monday Morning” replete with a jaunty melody.

Proceedings slow down for the more reflective “Petite Mort”, Yoni Zelnik contributing a fine bass solo and this pace paradoxically allows Verna's solo to make more impact. “Mister Crusoe” is an outing for Verna's guitar synthesizer with interesting results because he's not afraid to employ it in a more conventional way as opposed to attempting to extract the most unconventional sounds from the instrument, as seems to be the fashion with this instrument.

“Minor Nuisance” harks back to the swinging sound of “Old Times” and indeed its near-titled progenitor “Minor Swing”, the standard by Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli. “Maroc” is a breezy composition in a moderate tempo and again Verna is heard soloing on guitar synthesizer.

As it says on the tin, “YYAB” is indeed yet another blues and gives both Verna and Laurent Epstein the opportunity for some satisfying solos. The final, bonus track, a reprise of “Coconette”, reveals Verna in a totally new light, here playing unaccompanied acoustic guitar. A decidedly excellent, albeit short, track.



By Edward Blanco

French guitarist and composer Didier Verna delivers his second album as leader with the very audacious Roots and Leaves containing eleven original compositions ranging from contemporary traditional to funky, bluesy and

even folksy at times. A classically-trained pianist who at age eleven moved to the guitar as his preferred instrument, employs the fretless and three other different guitars including a synthesizer to produce a variety of sounds that makes this album a pleasure to hear.

Inspired by the guitar-led Canadian jazz fusion group UZEB, Pat Metheny and John McLaughlin, the music of Leaves, in many ways, is a reflection of and pays tribute to, the different styles these multiple influences have had on the guitarist.

Joining Verna on this project are three of the most in-demand musicians from the Parisian jazz scene with pianist Laurent Epstein, bassist Yoni Zeinik and drummer David Georgelet forming the backbone of the leader's @-Quartet originally formed in 2006. Together the group lays down one formidable session of jazz worth repeated spins.

There are many impressive pieces including here among them, the opening and buoyant "Old Times," the blues-styled "Vert de Blues," the swinging "Monday Morning," the light balladic "Petite Mort" and the more reserved impressionistic "Maroc." Other notable stand out tunes not to be missed are two other bluesy-tinged tunes namely "Minor Nuisance" and "YYAB (Yet another Blues)" as well as the brief bonus track "Conconette" featuring the guitarist on an exquisite solo performance.

Parisian guitarist Didier Verna is a dynamic voice in the jazz world today and his impressive Roots and Leaves leaves little doubt that, with his talents as a composer and obvious mastery of the guitar, that this artist already has the firm roots and foundation from which to develop the international recognition he so well deserves.