

Jaune Toujours

Vertigo

Choux de Bruxelles

Review by Andrew Cronshaw

Photo: Roger Van Vooren



The bouncing rhythm of ska makes a good vehicle for the delivery of lyrics. It gives a strong, upbeat dance impulse with plenty of space for the words to be prominent and resonate. A prime example of that by non-West-Indian musicians, here in the UK, is the very London band Madness; in Belgium it's the very Brussels band Jaune Toujours. The two bands share the characteristic that neither is West-Indian-wannabe or pastiche, each just celebrates the great fun and usefulness of the rhythm in its own distinctive way, but those ways are very different from one another.

Whereas Madness has piano, guitar, bass, drums and sax surrounding Suggs's witty vocals, the sound of Jaune Toujours is of a tight melding of brass and accordion, with no guitars or keyboard. Its lineup is horns (trumpeters Bart Maris and Dirk Timmermans, here joined by guest Vincent Heirman on trombone), Mattias Laga on soprano sax or clarinet, bassist Matthieu Verkaeren and drummer Théophane Raballand, fronted by the accordion and warm, slightly husky voice of Piet Maris. The lyrics Maris writes are largely in French or Dutch, the two languages most spoken in Belgium, though for this latest album they're in French and English, often switching between the two within a song.

When I first saw Jaune Toujours, at Førde festival in Norway in 2003, in the period of its second album *Camping Del Mundo*, it seemed me to be a band at its peak. But a string of albums later, with much the same personnel, that peak shows no sign of decline. After a six-year recording pause occupied by related projects of the collective created by Maris and his film-maker partner Sarah Baur, Choux de Bruxelles ('Brussels sprout'), and the difficulties of the Covid pandemic, *Vertigo* is a musical pinnacle, the arrangements, playing and production more full and powerful than ever.

It’s largely built on a skanking ska rhythm, sometimes a loping reggae, but the wide experience of the players draws in skills and ideas from jazz-funk, Latin and more, in some places punchily evoking shades of the similarly funky music of late great Ian Dury and the Blockheads.

Propelled by this appealing, dance-motivating music, the songs are rallying cries, slogans for a better world, which has been a theme of much of JT’s output over the years. While all musically strong, lyrically they sound more fluent and poetic in French than English, to this Anglo at least. But then it’s always tricky when reaching out from one’s native language(s) to a wider audience, and this band certainly deserves to do that. Independent of the muscle and finance of any kind of major record company, it has spent more than two decades of hard work in creating not only JT but, also within Choux de Bruxelles, a wide range of other projects including the band Mek Yek featuring two Slovak Roma singers, the jazz trio 3’Ain, Arabanda with Moroccan-Belgian singer Laila Amezian, Maris and Raballand’s children’s-show duo Ik En Den Theo / Moi Et Le Théo, and a street-marching accordion band.

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