

More wrong music played in the wrong place at the wrong time.

No matter how grey life could become in Northern Europe, there was always the potential of a trip to the land where the exhausted adjective 'beautiful' could be used with matter of factness...architecture, food, wine, women, song...indeed the Dolce Vita. How to get there was not always so straight forward, once there, not so straight forward.

The Nickesldorf Festival was/still is one of the great festivals of improvised music. Before the collapse of the old 'Communist' East, it existed precariously on the border of Austria and Hungary, a perfect position for unpopular music but with a faithful 600 fans rocking up for its annual 'Konfrontationen' instigated by the affable but redoubtable Hans Falp. At one of these gatherings, a moment of serendipity suggested that I could play on a festival being organised in Bari on the Italian Adriatic. Thoughts of the good life were tempered with a certain lack of trust in the proposal. But then the air tickets arrived already paid for and so my doubts were assuaged.

Three of us flew from Berlin, and we were met at Bari airport by some others with still sunny dispositions. First problem: we are not quite ready for you but we take you to nice villa to spend night, OK? With night closing in, we were duly dropped off in front of an imposing villa. The building was completely empty, no sign of life - no food, no furniture, no beds, but I do remember some blankets and a stray dog. So we lay down, tried to sleep on the hard marble floor, and looked forward to the next instalment. Which came the next morning: we take you to nice breakfast, OK? We were deposited at a cafe by the sea. What's not to like? Well pretty much everything. The cafe had hardly any edible food, rubbish soft drinks seemed to be its speciality, and the beach stank with copious amounts of rotting fish. There is only so much coffee you can drink. Could we make a call to the organiser? No one had a number, the guy at the cafe looked non-plussed by the request for a phone: no phone OK? From 9 am till 4 pm, we discussed the meaning of life and other fishy issues. Finally our driver turns up: Very sorry, some technical problems, now all good, OK?

We arrive at a ranch quite a way outside Bari and are shown to our quarters. I'm impressed by a photograph of a race horse in the hall, the horse's name was 'Rosenberg' and I'm not making this up... and this should have been a warning. Things are not right. There is no audience, in fact no-one seems to be around. A guy with a big moustache says we are to play in this kind of grotto. We ask to see the boss and the money. After a long negotiation with a guy straight out of a Spaghetti Western, we are lined up and paid out in cash (in this time the bank notes were large and the denomination in Lira even larger - a one thousand Lira note was worth less than one US dollar). An improvement we mutter to the absent audience; Peter Hollinger (the drummer with Slawterhaus) demonstrates his lack of enthusiasm by playing a 20 minute solo with a single plastic cup. The next day it rains: only a few showers OK? and more musicians have arrived from New York - Butch Morris and Mark Helias among them. In between showers we play, still no audience. Then the big chief finally shows up with sombrero and a guitar, accompanied by a dozen minions who applaud wildly to his vein attempts at strumming and singing. The truth dawns on us, this whole 'festival' fiasco had been for him to serenade his eager sycophants, and him alone, OK?

With our wads of Lira we are relieved to be heading home with out any more OK? experiences. The Italians were not the only ones who knew how to design 'beautiful' money. Since the arrival of the tedious Euro, most musicians would have not experienced the colour and the complexities of a whole continent of differing currencies - some small and discrete (East German Marks), one with an heroic women charging into battle breasts a go-go (French 100 Frank), some with a taste of modernism (the Dutch Guilder also offering a curious 25 note guilder). The West German 10 Mark note even had a violin on it. The old 500 note Soviet Ruble was probably the biggest banknote in the world - impressive and soon to be worthless. Along with Vegemite, It is said that the Australians invented plastic (polymer) dollar notes which you can see through. The wonder of old style money was that it was anonymous, hard to trace, perfect for the waters of the cash economy in which the working musician swam. I used to tour Europe with 4 or 5 currencies deposited in my collection of earmarked pockets.

Anyone who has read my irregular memories will have surmised that I have often found myself playing the wrong music to the wrong people in the wrong place. Jumping forward some 30+ years, the scene changes to central Australia and my recollections of Bari have brought me to yet another episode of incongruity.

It's a commune dedicated to growing organic dates, registered as a non-profit maker. Could we come and play for free? It's gonna be great and it's a celebration of 30 years of community work. We got rid of the

generator - so noisy - and now we are all solar powered. We are expecting a crowd (and true enough about 200 hundred hippies, hoons, happy clappers descend for a celebration). There must be live music but no-one will pay for it - plenty of expensive cars around but the organiser will not pay for the fuel for us to get there. Most musicians assembled have amateur status and they play to that expectation - mediocre imitations of popular music (really bad and incompetent renditions of popular music I love). There is a problem, a conflict of dates - the grand final of the AFL (Australian Football League) is on tele - so a large screen has been set up 6 meters from where the music is happening, on the other side of the kitchen (also acting as a back stage). All eyes converge on the footie. It's an interesting mix (like some of the sport powered compositions I've created in previous decades) - footie commentary and free improv violin followed by my wife Hollis playing fiddle tunes and footie commentary. The main organiser is a lovely guy, fully committed to community, and he somehow assumes this is OK for musicians to pay their way to play for nothing and, after a 90 minute road trip, not be heard or even seen. He is disappointed we are not going to play the bird song pieces as we politely tell him it requires some level of concentration. These are good people not idiots, not capitalist arseholes, not sharks putting on stadium rock, not cynical opera re-cyclists - and yet - and yet there is no knowledge of the ecology of sound, respect for people who have spent their hours, days, years, lives honing their sonic skills. One of the community workers came up to us and said 'Gee I wish I was a musician, not a care in the world'. That's right Hollis said 'Not a care in the world' - the irony fluttered past him without a murmur.

What is it about music that it has fallen so low in people's esteem? Is it education or lack of. Everything is available now on the internet but you wouldn't know it as the level of investigation and curiosity is so low. Is it celeb culture? Is it fear of the unknown, fear of the future? Fear of the next Pandemic (which is guaranteed on its way as you read this). Hence the endless rehash of music from their teenage years or mindless minimalism - something to snuggle up to and feel warm and cosy - undemanding - the classic I don't know much about music but I know what I like - or more - I know what I don't like even though I haven't heard it yet. Or dreaming of baroque palaces, compliment court composers, and that expensive European holiday once in Italy. I've written about Australia's love of tribute bands in other places, but we are no worse than anywhere else, just further away from where we still believe 'it's really happening' and we want in or at least a copy.

Or does the quality (mostly uninventive even when played well) and quantity (billions of ubiquitous sound files) of music really define the collapse of our species and via the destruction of the biodiversity on which we depend? At 3.30 in the morning there was a DJ set in swing - they brought their own sound gear to make sure it could be heard for miles around. Most of the party people were asleep by then in their tents, I was wide awake and feeling like shooting someone, or more specifically the person hoisting crap unmediated MIDI files on us. We were expecting to record bird life early the next morning - but the avian clientele were traumatised into silence even under a full moon.

Does the decline of compelling and challenging live music define the collapse of our Species?

A more nonsensical statement than 'music is the universal language' there is not. You may say that music is universally liked or enjoyed, you may say that just about all music is now available as a digital download, but you may not say it is universally perceived as the same experience or understood in the same cultural and historical context. Pierrot Lunaire (1912) by Arnold Schoenberg is unlikely to be even comprehensible as music through the ears of someone brought up on MOD pop music. Yet in our post modern puree, maybe one day soon, when all cultural castration has been completed, music is AI is music, all unique experience smothered, we may have arrived at a universally flat and grey playing field.

Taylor Swift may have pulled 96,000 lemmings to the Melbourne Cricket Ground (some sort of record for live music apparently), but Adolf Hitler was worshipped by over half a million of our species at the last of the Nuremberg Rallies...so still some way to go then.

Jon Rose © 2024