Chiaroscuro. An Italian-American Album for Paolo Fresu

Marina Melchionda (April 05, 2010)

Chiaroscuro is the result of a collaboration between trumpeter Paolo Fresu and American guitarist Ralph Towner We interviewed the Italian artist in occasion of the presentation of the album at the Italian Academy of Columbia University

On March 24 one of the greatest trumpeters of the world, the Italian Paolo Fresu [2], presented his latest CD at the Italian Academy of Columbia University [3]. A product born from a collaboration with guitarist Ralph Towner [4]and released by ECM Records [5], "Chiaroscuro" features songs that give the listener the same emotions of a painting by Caravaggio: the contrast among colors, tonalities, and shades, becomes a contrast among rhythms, sounds, and notes.

The Italian and the American artist performed before a full house of enthusiasts and jazz

passionates, journalists, and lovers of the genre, and were presented by the Italian Journalist Enzo Capua, one of the organizers of the internationally renowned Umbria Jazz Festival [6]

ChiaroScuro features 10 pieces, played by a total of five instruments: classical, baritone, and 12 strings guitar, plus trumpet and flugelhorn. All of them are original, except for one, "Blue in Green", a tribute to Miles Davis [7].

During the more than an hour performance, the two artists played the majority of them, leaving the public silent and moved. We were all like glued to our chairs, craving and asking for more. A final request for "a bis" was finally satisfied: five more minutes of pure Jazz before the CD signing and the meeting with the artists, a moment that many of us took to congrat both of them for the great duo they formed.

Italian trumpeter Paolo Fresu gave us the opportunity to sit with him for a full interview during which we talked about Italian contemporary music, his love for jazz, his travelling all around the world and, of course, his collaboration with Ralph Towner.

When was the "Chiaroscuro" project first conceived?
I met Ralph Towner for the first time in Sardinia, several years ago, when we were both participating to a Jazz festival. We lost track for a few years, and than met again for some performances. But we wanted to do something more together, something that would bond us to a common project. And that's when we started thinking to work on a new album together. Ralph chose this title. He compared our music to a "chiaroscuro" painting, our duo was a contrast of tones.

New York is the mother of jazz. What kind of emotions do you feel when visiting this city?
I played here several times already and I know the city very well. It's almost like being at home, you never feel a stranger here. I walk around and I breath, hear, see, jazz everywhere. It's a cuddle.

What can American Jazz still teach to Italian jazzists?
Jazz was born in America, it has its roots here, in this country. Artists here have it in their blood, they grow up with it, they will always be able to teach us something. But, still, there is something that Italian jazz has, and that can't be found in no other place of the world. It is that something that makes of our country the second capital for this genre of music: melody. Bel Canto, joyful rhythms, and "sunny" melodies are all ingredients of our own interpretation of jazz, that tells it apart from the American one, it's a "Made in Italy" jazz.

Given the success that many Italian jazzists have here in the US, I consider it possible to export our style abroad. If you ask me what an Italian jazzist can "teach" to America, I answer "the joy and the fun of playing".

From the international to the local level. How has the Sardinian culture influenced your music?
I always try to keep the two things separated. In my "everyday performances" my music has nothing to do with my Sardinian origins, also because I play with international singers. At the end of the concert, however, there is always somebody who comes and says "I heard a touch of Sardinia". Those are the people who want to hear only what they wish to...
On the other hand, there are other projects focused on Sardinian traditional music in which I participate, and in which I like to reconnect to my roots.

You are also very popular in Corsica, another territory with a very peculiar and independent culture...
When I am in Corsica I feel at home. I also collaborated with an extraordinary local group, the A Filetta [8], with whom I produced an album for ECM. That island to me is not a part of France, I understand everybody there, it's a completely different culture from the French one. Even our language is very similar. There are a lot of differences from the culture of my region, but also many similarities.

Talking about France, you still owe a lot of your success to that country...
France has given me a lot. Not only I became famous throughout the country in no time at all, but

my music became also popular in countries related to France for historical reasons, such as the Caribbean's.

In Paris I had the opportunity to collaborate with musicians of international fame coming from Africa, North Africa: it was a melting pot of different languages and cultures that has shaped my career in the deepest way. Things have somehow changed now, though. I can't find the vitality and the enthusiasm towards some genres of music that I felt once when visiting Paris. There is a sort of cultural flattening, musicians are less adventurous. Maybe it's also because there is less money on the market, and you kind of have to play safe.
So, paradoxically, if at the end of the 1980s I tried to cross the Italian borders in search of new life blood for my music, now I think that the most interesting jazz produced today in Europe comes from Italy.

How has the crisis of the record market affected your music?

The crisis has very little affected jazz music in general. This is probably because jazz amateurs like to buy original copies of the cds, they like to read the booklet that comes with them, have them showcased on the shelves of their houses. Jazz musicians are kind of artisans, they make every product from scratch. Unlike most of the rock or pop musicians, they have a strong relationship with their public, they play to donate them emotions, memorable moments, and the latter knows it.

You also write and play for theatrical and cinema productions…

I love both cinema and theatre, and I like thinking of my music as an object that I can shape in whichever way I wish. I always liked experimenting: even as a jazz musician my music is a mixture of different genres and languages, as I am always open to new discoveries and I am never static. The more you learn, the better the result gets.

From Europe to the US. What is your "American dream"?

I don't really believe in the idea of an American Dream. Music is my dream, and is something unique that you can find both in Europe and America. I love coming to the US, but I also collaborate with many American musicians in Europe. It's a constant exchange, a direct communication among artists that, to me, has changed the idea of the American dream itself.
I have one only dream: to always play for my public at the highest level possible. If this happens in Europe or in the US it does not matter. The only thing that counts is the final result.

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