

Interview Blue Mango Café (november 2004)

A criticism that can be leveled against a fair portion of contemporary music, both disposable pop music and even a fair portion of other disciplines such as contemporary jazz or retro electronic music, is very basic. It's the criticism that the music just isn't very musical. Yes, there may be many of the calling cards of a particular genre and perhaps the hint of exploration. But overall, how many songs do you hear on a regular basis, be it the radio, movie theater or even a friends house, that are truly tuneful? Thankfully, Frank Van Bogaert is the kind of artist that will make sure there is tuneful music out there to be found as long as he is recording.

Van Bogaert arose on the contemporary instrumental music scene in the late 1990s, in part because he offered a fresh, melodic sound. It didn't hurt that Van Bogaert first two studio albums also reminded people of the more musical moments of Deep Forest as well as Vangelis. Now in late 2004, Van Bogaert has definitely established a recognizable sound and style that needs no such comparisons. Yes, there are moments on his latest album that definitely remind one of Vangelis, but that is in part only true because there are still very few artists recording today that can take contemporary instrumentation and so deftly articulate it with melodic structures into songs the way Vangelis, and now Van Bogaert, do. Truly, about the only other artist or group that has been this successful in such an endeavor has been the brilliant duo Symbian (interestingly enough also from Belgium). Closer (2004) is Van Bogaert's fifth studio album and once again represents an interesting set of tunes that hold more than a little tunefulness.

As you sit back and listen to the music of Closer, does anything within it surprise you?

Yeah, in fact a couple of things.

First thing is that with Closer being my fifth album, it once more sounds, or better said feels, different to what I've done before. It's clear that I've got my own way of composing and arranging music but the approach to producing a new album has been different with every album. This is something I'm very proud of! Whereas on my previous album Human, I improvised on a great deal of songs, with Closer I chose most of the time for what to me is the most basic method of composing--namely on the acoustic piano.

Most of the album has been composed on an old upright piano in my office and not in the studio. Don't get me wrong, Closer has not become a piano album but I could play this whole album in a kind of unplugged version on an acoustic piano only, leaving all synths, rhythms, atmospheric sounds etc. out and the songs would still stand.

To me, this also explains the fact that Closer feels more "emotionally loaded" than previous works. Songs were composed at the moment I felt I needed to play, for whatever reason, but never because I had to release a new album. So there's some very uplifting stuff followed by more comforting tracks and occasionally a more sad song, a bit like life goes by, isn't it?

What would you say are your most important aesthetic objectives when producing a solo album?

Everything has to sound great!

Even if the song is very intimate and simple, it has to sound right. I think I owe this to the people who buy my records. I want them to get "good value for money." So, my albums are produced in a real professional studio, not a home studio, using the finest gear and sounds. In the "Electronic Music" scene of today so much cheaply produced crap is going 'round that sometimes it really makes me feel bad or even ashamed when people ask me "oh, you're into electronic music? Not really my cup of tea, it all sounds a

bit cheap." Luckily the label I'm working with, Groove Unlimited, is not signing that kind of stuff anymore, so things are starting to look better for electronic music in general. Also, I always pay great attention to the cover-art work (always designed by my brother Kris, a graphical designer). I think you can distinguish a lot of badly produced albums from good by the look at the cover itself.

Some of your songs have an incredibly alluring sound design such as "The Drift" from Docking or "Falling Leaves" from Closer. How important is sound design to your creative process? Do you approach it differently for each track?

It is very important indeed. It can push a certain song into a direction you hadn't thought of before. Mostly I use sound design to create an atmosphere that's already present in my mind, to emphasize a song's feel. So this means that the approach differs from song to song, but as I already said, on some occasions sound design has opened new ways and sometimes it has even made me trash a song just to continue developing the "sound design" into what is to become a new song.

I also listen to a great deal of music that's mainly based on sound design alone, like Steve Roach's music (and I'm a big fan), but have always found it difficult to produce it myself. I'm too much of a keyboard player so I get bored pretty easily if nothing happens after two minutes of sound design. But I love to listen to Roach or Eno stuff.

What you can tell us about the emotional intensity behind the song "A Picture of You" on your latest album?

That's a special one!

I'm glad you felt the intensity in that track. This is something I'm sometimes afraid of: that people don't feel it, don't get it, especially with Closer. You mustn't really know what a track is about but just feel the intensity and interpret that in your own way. But only because you ask, and this is the first song I have ever really explained. "A picture of you" is about a good friend who also happened to be my roadie in the band I was in during the eighties, 1000 Ohm, so we've been through some things together.

He called me up one day to say he was dying of cancer. I was completely upset; he was only 40. Before we even had the chance to meet once more, he was gone. So, the day he went, I looked up all the picture books of 1000 Ohm gigs, parties etc...sat by the piano and wrote "A picture of you." The song hasn't become too sad but got more of a "letting go" feel.

What do you see as some of the more interesting styles, ideas or musical influences that hold untapped promise for progressive instrumental music?

First of all, to me "progressive" doesn't necessarily mean renewing but more like "standing out of the crowd." A band I've been following for a couple of years now, and one that you could file under progressive instrumental music is Ozric Tentacles; I love their fusion of space rock, jazz and even Berlin school sequencer influences. Also, some jazz musicians comply to my definition of "progressive instrumental" Just to mention a few: Pat Metheny, Jan Garbarek....

I share the feeling with many of them that we shouldn't let ourselves be influenced with what is being played in the media these days, but just do what we believe in. Progressive instrumental music isn't made to reach the masses (and by this making lots of money) but just because we feel it has to be made. Just make music that feels right!

Categorical names can be as unhelpful as they can be helpful but it can still be use to help give a prospective listener an idea of what to expect from a recording. How you would you categorize a diverse album like Closer for a prospective buyer?

This has always been a tough one! It's instrumental music; very melodic; every track is always a "song;" it's electronic with loads of acoustic instruments; it has often ethnic influences; it's made from the heart; some people like it to compare with earlier Vangelis work; from time to time it has jazzy influences; but it's always very recognisable as "van Bogaert."

But that's all too much to stick on a CD cover isn't it? So just let's call it "contemporary instrumental."

Do you have any broadcast or motion picture scoring plans right now?

I'm doing quite a lot of commercial work, so my music is regularly on national TV and radio. But this is all music made to the wishes of the client. This year there has also been a TV series I composed the music for. In 2005, there might be another motion picture to score, but the budgets haven't been approved yet. Always bear in mind that I'm living in Belgium. It's about the size of an average state in the US. I'm very lucky to have become a professional in this small country but I often have wondered how it would have been should I have lived in the US? Bigger budgets but also more competition, I guess? And, I'm sure I'd miss the Belgian beer ?