

Intergalactic Storytelling with bassist Carlo Mombelli (31 March 2015)

The University of Cape Town's College of Music (SACM) hosted an illustrious group of European and South African collaborators at the Jazz Educator's conference of SAJE (South African Association for Jazz Education). Composition wizard, Carlo Mombelli, offered an earful of stories with accompanying sounds, ranging from how he must negotiate ways to bring his electric bass directly on board the plane, to a powerful vibrational song about death from a road accident. His workshop included performances and offered Q & A sessions for the thin but eager audience of music students and jazz enthusiasts.



Carlo Mombelli explaining style

"Creating compositions means being in the same headspace with members of my band," he explained. "We have a conversation that has to make sense. You don't repeat the same sentence to each other in a conversation, but move an idea along...adding new ideas. I set up the 'glue' that holds the story together, and we converse."

Boy, did those guys talk! Trombonist Adrian Mears (South African, currently teaching at the Basel Jazz school in Switzerland) and electric cellist Daniel Pezzotti (member of the Zurich Opera Orchestra) along with a masterful drummer, Dejan Terzic from Germany, debated with Carlo's topics musically. *"Compositions are topics,"* says Carlo. *"I invite the band to debate the topic, and thereby add their own instrumental voices and hearts to the song, while sticking to the topic."* There is structure to this intergalactic storytelling, even though the sounds and rhythms of the topics seem to veer around in aural space and time. It becomes headspace, painting whatever comes up.

"As a result, I've developed my style of playing from my compositions." One example of developing a style was when his damaged right hand and wrist were in a splint, but the thumb was left free. *"How do I practice my guitar under these circumstances?"* He used the fingers on his left hand to create the melody on the bass neck strings, while his right thumb strummed the strings lower down. The Carlo sound.

"Sounds have to come naturally," Carlo continues. *"A poet doesn't make up nonsense words or phrases, but pulls out what he or she wants to communicate naturally. Improvisation means having a deep respect for each other's playing, and complementing what each is doing."*

Does he sit down to write “South African music”? *“Of course not. Because I’m South African, my music is South African, but I don’t pretend to write ‘South African music’. I’m constantly inspired by the sounds around me and those experiences with sounds are what becomes integral in my compositions. SOUND! ...of the wind through the trees, its effect on the sound of leaves. I get freaked out listening to the insects, and the birds...”*

A whimsical finish to the workshop was a performance of his song ‘Motian, the Explorer’ in tribute to the inventiveness gleaned from the late drummer Paul Motian. *“Paul played horizontally, not vertically, and was a big inspiration to me.”*

Anyone listening to this notoriously creative band, led by Carlo, will also feel holistically touched by the unique improvisation that comes from such a tight-knit group whose repetitive loops spin one into a meditative trance-like state. No wonder my bottle of water shook with those looping vibrations!