

A Meeting Of Minds

FOR TRUMPETER **BYRON WALLEN** THE SONG MAY BE SUPREME BUT THE AUDIENCE CAN CHANGE IT ALL. KEVIN LE GENDRE CONCENTRATES.



Received wisdom says that rehearsals as well as time devoted to composing are a major part of a jazz musician's life. Bands and songbooks can only evolve in earnest after hours spent either in a dim lit practice room or on a cramped stage.

However, other activities eat into an improvising musician's schedule these days, and one of the most time-consuming - and most important - is form-filling. Applications for funding in the form of grants, awards or even entry into competitions are certainly on the mind of Byron Wallen.

"It's a big part of my life right now," says the trumpeter when we meet in north London.

"In order to get your stuff out there you have to have some kind of funding. Most venues don't pay you enough money to survive and give a decent wage to your band, let alone yourself, so it's vital.

"In a way it's a shame that so much energy goes on that. A lot of that time could be spent making music... especially if the application's not successful or, even worse, sometimes they actually lose your application!"

It's happened to him. Wallen has indeed had the disheartening experience of a funding body ask him to complete one of those A4s of explanations, justifications and mission statements all over again.

There's nonetheless a smile on his face. And that may be down to the critical endorsements lavished upon his work of late. His superlative 2002 set *Indigo* garnered glowing reviews and his ensemble of the same name [saxophonist Tony Kofi, bassist Larry Bartley and drummer Tom Skinner] delighted audiences up and down the country. By way of icing sur la gâteau, Wallen triumphed in the BBC Jazz Awards.

Although an avant-garde heritage along the lines of Ornette Coleman-Art Ensemble Of Chicago is explicit in both its instrumentation and arrangements, *Indigo* has always brought a marked African and middle eastern vibration to the table. The presence of the Moroccan gnawa musician Boujemaa Boubul on their new set *Meeting Ground* makes that non-western character all the more concrete.

Musical devices particular to his ethnic group

are astutely deployed. We're talking incantatory vocals, gumbri or buzzing box bass and kabaka metal castanets whose relentless trance-like pulse is the sound of galloping horses carrying silver choristers.

Having ridden shotgun with anybody from hard bop warriors Nu Tropic to jazz post-modernist Cleveland Watkiss to acoustic-electro groovers Red Snapper, Wallen is an extremely versatile player, and here his mission is not really 'world fusion' but the ingestion of gnawa musical culture into his writing and arrangements.

Due to financial constraints imposed by either lost or unsuccessful application forms, he could only afford to work with one gnawa musician - so the overdubbing of parts and the substantial input of Wallen himself on percussion helped to overcome the wafer-thin budget.

Yet there is nonetheless a real sense of authenticity in *Meeting Ground* and that may be ascribed to the leader's understanding of the particular idiom he is embracing. For over a decade Wallen has been traveling to Morocco to further his research on gnawa music and history and in 1996 he played with masters Oumarou Namazarou and Si Mohammed Chaouqi in Bambaraka, a brilliant venture conceived by French producer Martin Colliver.

That session marked an important stage in Wallen's journey to grasp the relationship between jazz and ethnic music. Or lack of relationship.

"For the Gnawa the session was not about well-tempered scales and keys," says Wallen of his collaborators. "It made me look at myself

and jazz in a completely different way. It made me think about how non-African jazz is as well. That's what I saw, the links and also the disparities."

Investigating these points of convergence and divergence between the music of the African diaspora and the music of Africa, the rivers and the sea, so to speak, is a major vocation for Wallen. The imperious command of harmony that has won him gigs of four-star prestige with post-bop and avant-garde icons McCoy Tyner, Jack DeJohnette and Andrew Hill, is not the only tool he must pull out of the kit for a project like *Meeting Ground*.

"For this work, it's not about chords, it's about continual energy. With traditional music people might say there's no real changes, people don't lay out, it's one great circle," Wallen says. "A lot of people might feel it's monotony, but from their point of view there are loads of nuances within the circle, the way the energy goes up and down, the change of attack. That's another art."

With that in mind the big question, then, is this: how does Wallen find common ground, a meeting ground with musicians such as Boujemaa Boubul who don't think in terms of II-V-I progressions and 32 bar forms? If harmony won't actually define the compositions in a prescriptive way, then what will? What will be, as our good lady Nommodamus Dorothea Smartt might say, the connecting medium?

"Rhythm!" Wallen trumpets enthusiastically. "Rhythm is the most important element. You might be out of key, but if you're rhythmically entwined then the connection is made. Rhythm is almost like a seal. You're breathing together.

"I always start all my music workshops with a rhythmic exercise. Try walking with someone and talking to them and try *not* to walk in time. It's difficult. In fact, it's impossible. Everything points to you being rhythmically connected so you can carry out a conversation. I think that's the essence of all music."

As keen as Wallen is to prioritize a rhythmic foundation he won't completely discard harmony. It's a question of working it in with more stealth, a bit like a New Labour tax. The harmony might permeate through counterpoint and overlapping themes.

History bears out the value of this methodology. It worked for the baroque boogie boys. It worked for Indian musicians. And it certainly worked for one of Wallen's great sources of inspiration.

"With Ornette Coleman's harmolodics you have these different melodies happening and when they intertwine that's where the harmony comes from. The melodies were sung together and they intertwined and made a harmony. It's like a harmony has arisen from a melody.

"When you hear music written from a melodic basis it has a

completely different feel to something conceived from a harmonic basis. When I write a tune if I hear a melody first that song is completely different than if I sit at the piano, play some chords then think, 'That's a lovely chord, let's find a melody to fit it'.

"When you hear a melody first then fit the chords, it's a very different thing. In general the one that has come from the melody first communicates more to an audience than the one that comes from chords."

Song is supreme. Perhaps more than rhythm, it is a guiding principle, a seductive muse for Wallen. Listening to his 1994 debut *Sound Advice* and its 1997 follow-up *Earth Roots*, it's clear that his writing and playing have always sought a lyricism informed by his early role models Woody Shaw, Miles Davis and Kenny Dorham. More to the point he has devoted considerable time to the study of singers, be they Billie Holiday or Billy Eckstine, Oumou Sangare or Sibongile Khumalo. Song from around the world is supreme.

South Africa, Khumalo's country of origin, has proved an important learning ground for the trumpeter. After studying in New York with

the likes of Jimmy Owens, Jon Faddis and Donald Byrd, he traveled there in the early '90s as part of the Meltdown project [a collaboration involving Brazilian musicians like Airto Moreira and British and South African players like the late Moses Molelekwa].

As well as performing, Wallen also recorded man and nature heard in city and country. These sounds have stayed with him over the years and he has stockpiled a huge database of samples that he uses liberally with Indigo.

Every so often the affinities and synchronicities between different musics from around the world become apparent. The Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek found that out when he worked with Indian musicians who knew 'his' country's folk songs and Wallen had a similar experience on this latest project.

"One track on *Meeting Ground* has voice samples and when Boujemaa heard it he thought they were gnawa," Wallen clarifies. "I was like, 'No, this is traditional music from South Africa!' But it somehow had a gnawa sensibility.

"I suppose sometimes there's this whole feeling thing that comes in. Vibrations can be universal. I

understood gnawa music and language from a soul level. It's all very primeval."

All of which takes us into the nebulous but nonetheless fascinating area of the spiritual ramifications of music. And perhaps its 'art for the people's sake' mission statement.

Gnawas don't make music for the amusement of the chattering classes. They make music to heal. This is something that Wallen states with as much emphasis as G-Unit product endorsements at a 50 Cent gig, making the point that the underlying motivation for the creative act - not to harvest dead presidents for the high life - has a major impact on the creative act itself.

In other words the music performs a social function. Questions thus arise: what's the real point of a concert? Who does a musician really play for? And how does the audience move in the dance? How important are their vibrations?

"I remember going to a concert by Ravi Shankar," Wallen recalls by way of explanation. "And for some reason he had problems with his sitar and he was tuning and tuning and it wasn't working. And certain people were getting a bit uptight in the audience.

"They were like 'C'mon we paid a lot of money for these tickets, get on with it!' and he turned around and said, 'When I'm tuning the sitar... I'm tuning the audience!'

So, on the one hand audience is instrument and patience is a virtue. On the other hand, the ears are the real windows of the soul and audience's use thereof is key. Actually, perception of music and what it is supposed to achieve is key. Different people around the world hear music, particularly jazz, differently.

"Jazz has evolved into concert music that is away from community and social function... but then again, not always," Wallen continues. "Recently I was in South Africa and the thing is black people love jazz there. You go to the Cape Town jazz festival, people are dancing and singing to this music, they're making it personal. They're relating to it in a different way than western audiences - so a lot of the music is about how it's listened to and I think that really changes the way you play." ●

MEETING GROUND IS ON TWILIGHT JAGUAR.
WWW.BYRONWALLEN.COM



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