

CITY

Athens blues

Mickey Pantelous

Half Greek half Danish, Mickey Pantelous has created during the past few years an anti-conventional artistic profile, ideally expressed/ reflected through his music. On the occasion of his new concerts and the recording of his first album, I think I'll give him a ring.

Interview to Mihalis Skaramagas.

Where are you as we speak?

In the café-bar Waiting for Godot.

And is Godot going to be late?

...(laughing) I don't know. The bar is in Kolonaki.

What do you do there?

I serve music and drinks.

Cool. And what do you play exactly in Café Alavastron where you perform live with the Chessmates?

We play my own songs. They are based on blues and extending to jazz and rock but now and then we make a mistake and you get a bit of reggae (laughing). We also play covers of Tom Waits, Guns'n'Roses, Depeche Mode...

How long have you been a band?

We have been together as the Chessmates for two years and there's five of us: Antonis Maratos from Mode Plagal plays bass, Nikos Papavranousis plays drums, Haris Lambrakis hammond and piano, Katerina Papagiannaki saxophone and I play guitar, harmonica and sing.

And I've observed that you don't do any conventional singing.

I distort my voice with a Rat pedal and sometimes I use a voice trumpet

Like Tom Waits. Have you ever thought that people can say you're imitating him?

It is clear that I'm influenced by him, I don't deny it, but it is true that generally people have started calling me things such as "the Greek Tom Waits" or "Tom Waits' bastard" and other crap, which is very flattering, but I also get not-that-obvious influences by others, like Kurzweil, and from the rock scene by the Who, the Rolling Stones...Therefore, no matter how flattering this might be, I know it's also a trap because I end up "being under the shadow of Tom Waits". I'm not interested in being his "bastard", I care to be Mickey Pantelous and to be treated as Mickey Pantelous.

Do you consider the contribution of the Chessmates to be determining for the final result of your sound?

There's no question about it. I might be the one who rights and arranges the songs and practically tells the rest of the band what to play, but it is important that they actually understand. To me, it is primarily a matter of perception and secondly a matter of skill – how good musicians they are as instrument players. Last but not least, we've become good friends and have created a nice atmosphere within the band, and that I think is the most important part, bonding.

You're half Danish. Have you ever had to choose between having a career in Greece or another country?

A proposition was made to me in the past, when I took part in that European Blues Contest in Lycabettus. In brief it went like this: we'll make you a record tomorrow, if you sing in Greek. My answer was "guys I'm not doing it". There are artists who can do this in an excellent way, I express myself better in English – and I happen to think that the English language is part and parcel of rock music. During the last years of course, with globalization, you get to hear very good stuff in Spanish, French, etc, and rock music's started to become multilingual, but I've grown up using the English expression, I was bilingual anyway. I've always thought "but why don't they sing in English?" I took that for granted.

And this was the only reason for you to stay here?

No. The other reason is that I like Greece. Abroad, I might have had a very easy career, but Greece's chaos is very healthy. The album I'm recording now though, will be sent abroad anyway. I'm not interested in releasing it here. There is a better audience for what I do abroad.

Talk to me a little about the album.

To me, making an album like this is a dream of a lifetime. I'm pretty satisfied with the result, it's an honest album.

Besides you've made your presence noticeable before. You actively participated in the soundtrack of the movie "Tomorrow will be late..."

Together with Platon Andritsakis, Roula Tzimou and some of the guys from Mode Plagal.

Where do you live?

I used to live in Gyzi, then I moved to Pallini and recently I moved back to the center. Exarhia.

Are you more into country blues or the city's electric blues?

Ah, I've never thought about it like that. Well for the moment I think I like more city blues. I go back home at night and passing by Solonos I see the transvestites and the prostitutes and I dare to say that I like seeing people on the street and not getting the feeling of desolation.

Which was not the case in Pallini I suppose.

No. There I only saw toads and frogs (laughing).

Moreover in Athens you can play music on the street.

It is very pleasant. First of all, you get to make money! I am very pleased when I walk on the streets and I see people playing music. And I've seen both in Greece and in Europe excellent street musicians. I saw Bruce Springsteen play in Copenhagen once.

Have you played in other European cities?

Yes. From Brussels to Copenhagen.

And where did you make more money?

Strangely, It was about the same everywhere.

And what do people normally tell you?

They usually ask me if I'm from the States, funny cause I've never been there.

What do you do when you're not playing music?

I'm in an amateur theatrical group in Holargos where we stage The Threepenny Opera and I play the introducer, and a fella from Mackieth's gang.

Only this?

Some times I work as a driver, I work at the bar a couple of days in the week, and some times I work at building sites, like a couple of hours ago I finished carrying

three tons of building material from the ground floor up to the sixth. I'm having a whiskey now, helps relax the muscles.

Excuse me... its two o'clock in the afternoon and you're drinking whiskey?

It's the second. Think I'll get me something to eat, and hit the pillow. Got to be in shape for a rehearsal tonight...

JAZZ & JAZZ

MICKEY PANTELOUS: Hangover

JAZZ EYE

“Too much fuss about nothing”/ “All that glitters is not gold”. Nonsense. A few days ago I ran into Mickey Pantelous, a Greek Danish blues singer (at least I thought so) – I had seen him play in Lycabettus about ten years ago, beautifully interpreting in a semi-acoustic one man-band style- who started telling me “crazy stuff”, about recording a blues CD on his own, which is not exactly blues and that he doesn't want to release it in Greece, because here people don't know a thing, and that in general he is not interested in Greek things but he's looking for something abroad, in some “mysterious” but serious labels such as Rune Grammofon, as he wants to sell and become known in Europe because he deserves it. I tried to explain him that he should be more down to earth, that discography's “fat cows” belong in the past and that when a blues album in America sells more than 50 thousand copies (and it is not by B. B. King...) everybody's celebrating. Pantelous was dauntless. He was talking as if he had discovered ... Columbus' egg. Ok my friend, I told him, brings me your CD and I'll tell you what I think of it. And so he did. A trim CD-R, with the title “Hangover”, under the name of Mickey Pantelous and the Chess-Mates. To begin with, it is an excellent production (externally), with a 16-page inset containing lyrics and additional information, and doesn't look at all like those rough copies. I begin to understand what this is about... I read 2-3 lines from the lyrics, and it felt like something had escaped from “the circus of terror”, and I tell him: Wasn't this supposed to be blues? Listen first, he says, and then we'll talk. And I listened but we didn't get to talk. I preferred to write to him and to you directly what I thought of it, now, in this way, because some things are better left unsaid – maybe also unwritten.

Pantelous is very cool in what he does, and, mostly, he has absolute control of the “watery” situation in his hands. You feel confident that this man knows blues so well, that if he gets the chance to break it into pieces on the way, blowing into every single piece the “value” of the primary integral mass, he'll do it without guilt and in an absolutely subversive manner. He can retain, that is, its essence and not necessarily its prosody or form. He knows how to transform blues into a Latin ballad, into hardcore, groovy-jazz, a narrative song, or prog-rock... And above all, he leaves on top of every note the vague sense that everything you hear on “Hangover” has been there for the first time... even though sometimes you see Tom Waits, Van Morrison or Captain Beefheart sitting beside him.

Pantelous is also a powerful lyric-writer. We rarely get the chance to listen to such a complete expression in English, coming from a musician who is half Greek. The theme? It's dark. Spectral forms, the mind travels in a decomposition phase, loneliness, "good" and "evil" exchanging roles constantly, briefly, an art gallery rarely visited by domestic artists. The part of the Chess-Mates is absolutely determining here (Nikos Papavranousis drums, Antonis Maratos bass, Katerina Papagiannaki saxophone, Haris Lambrakis hammond, piano), as well as the part of the sound-engineers (Manolis Aggelakis, Simon Nikolaidis, Platon Andritsakis), all together offering a sound that is by far ahead of our local standards. Pantelous is conscious of what he does, but most of all, he has the luxury to handle his work by himself the way he likes it Romanticism? Cynicism? Indifference towards discography's costless "blah-blah" and its burial habits? Compared to the actual work, all questions seem silly.

Fontas Trousas

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