

Sonar with David Torn at the Vortex in London, December 1 & 2, 2018.

Concert review by Michael Bearpark.

"Swiss quartet SONAR returned to The Vortex in London's N16 for two nights at the start of December 2018, with guest guitarist David Torn.

How to describe their collective sound? Does 'The Shadows via Discipline-era King Crimson' even come close? Maybe it's more so now with David Torn playing Jung's 'The Shadow', his outlier guitar switching from stellar atmospheric to searing distortion in a moment, shifting the quartet's balance and bringing out a freer, darker, more assertive - but also more playful - side in their generative minimalism than before. Sometimes conjuring up the deep distorted rhythm lines of Sonny Sharrock, sometimes bringing country chordal beauty, then becoming a mellotron on absinthe playing a melody line - it felt like the band collectively tuning an old radio dial until the magic idea appears, that lifts and connects the music in a new way.

How they balance opposites... there's disciplined playing, but it's seemingly effortless and very loose, within any framework set up. There are odd time signatures throughout: but they're not furrowed-browed, uptight or anxious; they flex and swing; they're infectious, with band and audience inspiring each other so enthusiastically. There are dynamics - not just volume, though there's plenty of that for a small venue - but also dramatic changes in tone colour: sometimes dropping to a thread of two interlocking guitars for a time, before bringing back sub bass and drum sparkle.

At times, there are some completely unexpected parallels... The Who, for example (!): the clean tritone-tuned guitars keeping the rhythm going, while bass, drums and driven guitar try to trip them up or push them over, heading them off into a different time and space completely before locking back together in an instant. On the current album - coincidentally called Vortex - the band had sometimes seemed in awe of David's playing. Now, while he still lifts their playing, there's a balance of opposites: they push back more.

Seeing the band on both nights highlights the variations, with a piece's compositional DNA being expressed in very different ways - slide bass and some heavy syncopated dub on the second night, for example, which was noticeably more relaxed overall. All of the musical pieces fit together so well now... these are players who all create other music, and who bring this to their performance together.

Drummer Manuel was delegated to give brief announcements, as he does for his own AKKU quintet, cracking jokes as his cracked cymbal delivered for both sets. Communication was largely saved for the music though, and for this it's vital that the repeating patterns are played. Microevolutions, evolving interactions... avoiding the temptation to build up or ornament too much: like a classic Swiss typeface, printing an unforgettable musical story inside anyone ready to listen."

Michael Bearpark, December 6, 2018.