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MUSIC: Artists showcase less-heralded instruments in new albums

MICHAEL POINT
Special to the Leader

For all the talk of the expanding eclecticism of the music scene, the same instruments remain front and center in almost all the music you hear. It really doesn't matter if it's rock or country or blues or hip-hop or whatever, it's almost always going to feature electric guitars, keyboards or saxophones in starring roles.

But there are other instruments out there that deserve to be heard and a trio of new recordings puts the spotlight on their admittedly unusual, but eminently entertaining, efforts.

The chromatic harmonica has a noble heritage, involving usage in everything from Celtic to classical music. But the instrument has had very few virtuoso performers, especially ones with a creative streak, in its history. Amsterdam's chromatic harmonica heroine Hermine Deurloo definitely belongs on the small and select list of such artists.

Deurloo is usually heard as a member of the Willem Breuker Kollektief, Europe's most adventurous and accomplished big band. The group has been around since the mid-70s and has been involved in an amazing array of creative projects in almost every aspect of performing arts. It has developed an affinity for Austin audiences, playing here regularly on its American tours and even recording a live album on one recent visit. In addition, saxist/flutist Alex Coke, Austin's best and brightest horn player, was enlisted in the band for almost a decade.

Deurloo was here in November as the Kollektief performed a live soundtrack for the classic German silent film "Faust," an audio-visual experience of magnificent proportions. Her work in the ensemble was impressive but it only illustrated one element of her masterful musicianship.

Deurloo's two albums as a leader do a much better job of presenting a more complete picture of the multiplicity of musical marvels she conjures up with her chromatic harmonica. "Soundbite," with Deurloo backed by a big band on most tracks, showcases the artist and her unlikely starring instrument in tunes, such as the Isley Brothers "It's Your Thing" and Stevie Wonder's "Too High," you probably wouldn't expect from a classically trained member of a jazz big band.


The simpler "Crazy Clock," recorded in guitarist/producer Tony Scherr's house in New York City in 2005, is arguably even more successful as Deurloo performs with minimal accompaniment and maximum impact. The songs, ranging from Jimi Hendrix's "Electric Ladyland" to a worldbeat gem by Ali Farka Toure, are perfectly chosen and the playing is uniformly excellent throughout.



Hermine Deurloo



Otis Taylor



Otis Taylor's enlightening "Recapturing the Banjo" is an enjoyable musical history lesson that brings the instrument full circle. It may be a staple of bluegrass these days but the banjo was an African instrument when first. And it was the African slaves who introduced it to our shores, long before Dixieland and bluegrass ultimately popularized the instrument.

Taylor gathered a group of his peers for the project as Keb' Mo', Guy Davis, Corey Harris and most specifically Alvin Youngblood Hart lend ample assistance. Hart, who played here last week at Antone's, is actually the album's co-star as he provides vocals, lap steel and 12-string guitar in addition to banjo.

Every song on the album is interesting and the combined sound of the whole is unique. My personal favorite is "Ran So Hard the Sun Went Down" with its four banjos and bass take on outrunning the KKK but each song has its attractions. Many will be very familiar as everything from "Hey Joe" and "Walk Right In" to "Deep Blue Sea" and "Little Liza Jane" are returned to their roots.

Bassist Victor Wooten knows something about both banjos and musical adventures. That's what happens when you're in a band with banjo innovator Bela Fleck and your brother, who goes by the name FutureMan and plays a "drumitar" - a drums/percussion setup on a guitar.

Wooten's approach is obviously a bit more expansive and experimental than what you would normally expect from a bassist stepping into the spotlight. His latest recording "Palmystery" continues his success under his own name as it digs deeply and widely in an eclectic set of enlightened, if not actually spiritual, funk and beyond.

Wooten, whose debut novel "The Music Lesson" comes out April 1, is a man of many talents and "Palmystery" deftly displays his musical flexibility. Its concept and execution are both world-class and even though guest stars, such as slide guitarist Keb' Mo' - fresh from participation in the Otis Taylor project - original Flecktones harpist Howard Levy and sizzling jazz guitarist Mike Stern make noteworthy contributions, it is Wooten who rightly stands out.

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