

AUGUST 27, 2004 SKETCH PRESENTS

Musicians have millions of possible sources of inspiration. One will go and take his inspiration from poetry, another (jazzmen of 'free', for instance) from literature or life in contemporary society, and yet another from cooking and all things culinary! As for Bill Carrothers, he finds his inspiration in History. If he hadn't been one of the most brilliant pianists of his generation, he'd definitely have been a historian. History is his second passion. We already had an inkling of this, because he's a musicologist musician (he has something like two thousand songs at his fingertips, that he plays without any score!) who goes trekking off untiringly down the highways and byways of American popular music in search of some

often unaccountably forgotten or unknown piece of music. He'll then manage to revive it and give it a new lease on life, to the point where you'd think he was the actual songwriter! That's how he goes about his investigations into the history of music. But here we're talking about History with a capital H. He already gave us a dazzling performance ten years ago with his "Civil War Diaries", a terrific piano solo record where he played popular songs dating from the American Civil War. His rendering was full of feeling but somewhat distanced too. Two years ago, taking a fresh look at his childhood memories, particularly marked by the stories of one of his grandfather's friends who used to delight in recounting him endless tales of his painful experience of the First World War, he suddenly set out to discover the music linked to this war. The more he delved into this part of our history, the more he discovered what a rich treasure trove it was, musically speaking. Thus a new project was born, first of all around the idea of performing a repertoire that he finds both familiar yet remote (some songs such as "Roses of Picardy" are also part of our musical history), and secondly around the idea of a story linked to the suffering caused by this war that threw the whole world into a maelstrom of horror, yet thrust it into modernity at the



same time. There's a narrative structure to the music, it's the story of man and a woman who love each other but who'll be separated by the War. The man will fall prey to the desolation of the war, but still cherishes his memories of happier days gone by; the woman will never stop thinking about him and the happiness they shared, but in the end she becomes a widow. Unfortunately this is the ordinary tale of several millions of ordinary families in the world who suffered such a fate in the early years of the last century; it's also what happens since time immemorial in times of war, and alas, what still happens nowadays... The music starts with a duo where the couple sings of their future happiness, and it ends two hours later with

the haunted notes of the piano in the background, and the woman singing "I didn't bring my child up to become a soldier." Between these two events, thanks to the presence of more instruments (piano, vocals, cello, double bass, drums, clarinet, percussion and chorus, all played by musicians who're close to the pianist in some way), we'll have experienced the memory of a happiness that's been shattered forever, as the horrors of the war gradually take over. The atmosphere is all the more poignant for the fact that it's Bill's wife, Peg Carrothers, singing the woman's part. Written like an opera, this humanist work speaks about the uniqueness of each human being. Some of the songs are familiar to us, sometimes very familiar – "It's a Long Way to Tipperary", for instance –, whilst other tunes seem to be part of our collective musical memory even if the title doesn't mean anything to us; maybe it's because we've heard them in another context (e.g. "And the Band Played On" used in Raoul Walsh's film "The Strawberry Blonde", starring James Cagney). So where's the jazz in all that? It's still Bill Carrothers' first language, and he could never be parted from it. The first jazz band to arrive in Europe was that of the well-named Jimmy Europe, and it came in the Americans' luggage in 1917... so we've come full circle...



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