

The story behind *Jazz For Dogs*

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In a murmur, that elegant timbre, veiled in mystery, unmistakable, whispers into the listener's ear some of the intimate secrets of a dog's life: there is talk of Bach and dried sausage, tango, and tell-tale trickles left on a balcony. Like some victim of a mind-expanding substance, you have to pinch yourself to ensure that this is no dream: can it really be Fanny Ardant? In a handful of seconds, the eternal Woman Next Door causes her image to implode, sending us straight into a parallel world, the twilight zone that is *Jazz for Dogs*.

The tour-operators here are familiar figures, both with established reputations: **Jean-Michel Bernard**, the new-world composer, arranger and pianist, and his delicate spouse **Kimiko**, the Japanese-American lyricist, singer and artist/potter. Besides forming a real-life couple they are also married as writers, wedded and welded together by numerous fertile collaborations including, notably, the film *The Science of Sleep* directed by Michel Gondry, the poet who tinkers with dreams. Curiously, the genesis of the pair's *Jazz for Dogs* dates back to a film made by Thomas Gilou, *Michou d'Auber*, for which Jean-Michel fabricated several demos. *"In the end"*, he explains, *"they weren't used, and they fell asleep inside a Clavinova. One day, taking advantage of my absence, Kimiko put her hands into the machine without telling me. And, like the fairies in Sleeping Beauty, she woke up those literally slumbering melodies."* Kimiko interrupts with a smile: *"It was more like they jumped into my memory... It just so happens that I'm absolutely mad about animals, particularly dogs and cows. I was listening to a tune by Jean-Michel, and the words appeared immediately, it was like automatic writing: « Birdie num num », a portrait of our dog who'd just broken a leg. And then a second text came to me, and then another, and a fourth... This wasn't my vision of the animal; it was the animal's vision... it was the world seen through his eyes. I sent an email to a friend, the American rapper MC Paul Barman, and at the end I mentioned we'd lost our puppy Alfred from jaw-cancer: 'Losing a puppy is like losing an arm.' Inside an hour he sent me back a poem he'd written in a spontaneous reaction to that phrase of mine. So I ran over to the magic Clavinova where I came up with a melody which, metrically, fitted Paul's words perfectly. It had been lying there in ambush, just biding its time."*

In the course of 2009, those first songs were turned into rudimentary demos which Jean-Michel Bernard then recorded at his studio in Verrières-le-Buisson. Due to lack of time, and impetus, and a record company, the project diluted itself; it wasn't abandoned, just put back to a hypothetical "later".

It was a chance meeting - even better, real friendship at first sight - which reactivated *Jazz for Dogs* just when the year 2011 was turning into 2011-12. At the Quebec Film

Rendezvous in Montreal, Jean-Michel Bernard became friends with **Charles Papasoff**, a composer, actor and author and, especially, an acrobat of the baritone saxophone. They met up again at the Aubagne Festival, sharing a stage for a couple of pieces. The chemistry between them turned out to be total, both in music and from a human point of view. *"It all clicked through Kimiko,"* insists Bernard. *"She kept on at me, saying 'You've known Charles for only six months but it feels like forever. Do some concerts! Make a record together!' And that was when the idea of a reworking of Jazz for Dogs suddenly sprang up. New songs had to be written, and others melted down and reworked to make room for Sir Charles. I sent him an e-mail about the project and his answer was, 'I have to talk to my agent first.'. A minute later, I got another e-mail saying, 'He agreed', and there was a file attached: an enormous photo of his dog Skidoo! It was the kind of exchange that shows we had much in common..."*

"I don't see how I could have reacted any differently", adds the Canadian baritone-player. *"The pleasure of meeting Jean-Michel was the pleasure we had in playing together, improvising and surprising each other. Being able to go further than that and make a record... it was an unexpected present. Especially with a record where the concept is the animal's point of view: it's so odd, there are some very strange mental issues in there..."*

Inside a few weeks, the album's content filled out: the Bernards added the standard « Hound dog », made popular by Big Mama Thornton and Elvis Presley, and the American traditional song « Old blue »; they drew their friend **Bruno Coulais** into the album with an original song (« The Hills Beyond The Fence »); and Papasoff sent them one of his own themes: *"There was just the melody and the chords" ,* says the Canadian, *"together with a short bass line. Three hours later, Kimiko was sending me her lyrics... She'd written them over the bass line!"* (Laughter). The result was « Uncontrollable urges », one of the most insane songs in the whole project, with disco and Bach telescoping into funk and George Martin.

There was a decisive stage: what orchestral treatments were required to make a homogeneous whole from the nineteen weird titles which form the album's thread? According to Jean-Michel, *"My aim was quite simple; I had to tackle the orchestrations as if I was writing the music for a film: devise a precise group and stay with it, in this case, a superb combo. The idea being to insist on a fixed number of musicians, but with each one an ace on his instrument: **Claude Salmieri** on drums, **Philippe Chayeb** on bass, **Basile Leroux** on guitars, **Marc Chantereau** playing percussion, **Jean-Philippe Audin** on cello, **Eric Giausserand** on trumpet, **Jean-Michel Tavernier's** horn... On top of all that, it was imperative for me to avoid overdubs and special effects; wherever possible, everything had to be recorded in one take, like a 'live' album. So the ten of us found ourselves at Alhambra Colbert Studios in Rochefort-sur-Mer, the city of Pierre Loti and Demy's Young Girls. It was like being locked up in a bubble, cut off from the outside world. Political parties hold 'summer campuses' in Rochefort; this was our 'autumn campus'."*

Papasoff sees it differently: *"As far as I was concerned, it was more like summer camp, a*

holiday. I was the outsider from Quebec, the odd man out amongst musicians who had been used to playing together for ages. It all went down marvellously, and the place was a real surprise, too: an old abandoned cinema transformed into a recording-studio. We stayed in the same hotel, doing everything together: lunch, playing music, generally having fun. It was all about sharing: music and friendship." In the friendship." In the midst of this learned, all-male assembly, Kimiko traced her path and imposed her own voice, which has a sound like the inheritance of the great Blossom Dearie: it is the timbre of a woman-child, fragile, ethereal; and it spans gulfs of complexity. "I'm quite aware of my vocal qualities, but also of my limits", is Kimiko's analysis; "I've definitely tried to push those limits back. Because my role changes: it progresses and evolves according to each song. It has softness, of course, but also concern, worry, even aggressiveness.". The album features several notable guests, all of them members of an alumni association formed by and around Jean-Michel Bernard. Take « Garlic Dog », for example: how did Jean-Michel manage to convince **Francis Lai** to pick up an accordion again as reinforcement for **Laurent Korcia** and his violin? What spells and charms did he cast to have **Fanny Ardant** write and record the hallucinogenic text (« A cause d'elle ») which serves as an overture, accompanied by **Hervé Gourdikian** playing a duduk? Was it really perilous to have Micheline Dax's secret son Marc Chantereau whistling on « Lost »? We still have no answers to these haunting questions.

A word, finally, on « You look how I feel », written and performed by Nevil, the son of Jean-Michel and Kimiko, over a text by Barman. It is the only title on the album to have been recorded in successive layers: Nevil played the guitar, the bass (and sang) in France; **Michel Gondry** played the drums in America; and Papasoff and his Coyote Bill brass recorded their part in Quebec. If *Jazz for Dogs* was an imaginary country, its cardinal points would lie between Verrières-le-Buisson, New York, La Rochelle and Montreal.

Today you're holding a UFO record, a miraculous prototype that has no antecedent in the history of phonographs. Between rhythm 'n' blues and a lullaby, a jazz waltz and rock, *Jazz for Dogs* functions like a canine fresco painted in trompe l'oeil: the illusion of its apparent frivolity is camouflage for a vast palette of sentiments and emotions.

"It's got everything", says Kimiko, "from the expression of happiness to that of horror. Between two touches of humour, two splashes of sunshine, it talks about euthanasia or the despair of a lost dog. And those same alternating emotions are the ones which forged the identity of this project.". "With hindsight", says Jean-Michel Bernard, "I see *Jazz for Dogs* like a suite of tableaux; each title has its own taste, a specific colour. You could almost turn it into a musical... To me, it's a real 'pop' album, in the noble sense of the word.". And with an impish look in his eye he adds, "The whole experience definitely confirms the obvious: Kimiko has a real passion for animals." He pauses before adding, in a burst of laughter, "Look at me: I'm the proof!".