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Front Porch #2

Duo LaRé: A New Blend of Classical and Jazz

Written by Paul Hormick

Chris Acquavella and Nate Jarrell were stuck. Somehow or other Acquavella had gotten the band's van into a patch of mud. They were somewhere between far away and nowhere, and after weeks on the road - eating fast food and sleeping on various couches of friends and family - the van's wheels were spinning away and sinking more and more into the mud. The two young musicians were going nowhere.

That was 1995, when both young men were playing in their punk band Born Blind. The van may have been stuck in the mud that day, but the two musicians have kept moving forward, diverging and reuniting in their musical careers in surprising and creative ways. Currently the two form Duo LaRé, a partnership that relies on their divergent backgrounds in classical music and jazz as well as the years that they've spent playing in bands together.

Acquavella plays mandolin and is one of the most accomplished musicians to play the instrument that you may find. He is the classical monopole of Duo LaRé, having graduated with honors first in his class from Trinity College in London with a degree in performance. In 2004 he was the recipient of the Wolfson Foundation Music Award and in 2006 was awarded the TCM Trust Silver Medal for String Studies. He has recorded with the European Mandolin and Guitar Youth Orchestra and released a CD of his own, *Letters From London*, that includes a self-composition and features the music of twentieth century and contemporary composers.

Jarrell plays jazz guitar and is a rarity in today's music world. He is a busy, working jazz musician. He can be heard at numerous musical venues in San Diego and southern California. He performs often at San Diego's two jazz hot spots - Dizzy's and Anthology - with Tokeli, a multilingual singer who has just been nominated for Jazz Artist of the Year by the L.A. Music Awards.

Composers and musicians have often interbred the genres of classical and jazz, combining and recombining them in different ways for generations. For Jarrell and Acquavella, when they perform as Duo LaRé, the two are grounded distinctly in their approaches. You can see it in their body language. Acquavella is centered and staid, as you would expect from a violinist or pianist playing a concerto, while Jarrell seems to have that inner groove going that all good jazz players have.

Yet there is an interplay between the musicians that goes beyond their different approaches. It's like a wonderful conversation, with two persons speaking in different languages but still easily understanding each other. They say that this sensitivity and interplay goes all the way back to their time together with electric guitars and oversized amplifiers when they met and were both playing guitar in Born Blind.

When Born Blind's singer/bassist wanted to concentrate on singing, it was a contest between the two guitarists as to which one would "take one for the team" and become the band's new bassist, an



Nate Jarrell & Chris Acquavella (photo by Gary Payne)



Acquavella with Born Blind



Jarrell with Born Blind

outside-the-spotlight position that can be one of rock 'n' roll's most thankless jobs. Acquavella was the one to take up the bass, but he satisfied his inner Jeff Beck by playing the bass like a guitar. The rest of the band was not only pleased, they were impressed with his playing. Born Blind received a fair amount of success and notoriety, but by the turn of the century both Acquavella and Jarrell were moving on to other things. They began playing bluegrass music and formed an Irish themed band, often performing at Dublin Square in San Diego's Gaslamp Quarter.

It was this musical move that spurred Acquavella onward. To play in the Irish and bluegrass bands he changed instruments again, picking up the mandolin. "Next thing you know, it took over my life," he says. It didn't take a lot of pondering for him to decide that the instrument was to be his career. "I also wanted to return to classical music. My father is a classical guitarist. And I'd taken classical guitar lessons since I was ten years old." Once again the universe came together to create an opportunity for him. His life partner at the time received a scholarship in a Ph.D. program at Cambridge University. Wanting to stay together with her, Acquavella applied to Trinity College in London, which has one of the best mandolin programs in the world. On the strength of his musical resume and a letter of recommendation from his teacher and one of San Diego's best classical guitarists, Peter Puppig, Acquavella was accepted at Trinity College and spent the next five years living and studying classical mandolin in London.

While Acquavella was off in Europe, Jarrell went in the direction of being a jazz guitarist, a process that had started years before. From the age of 13, when the hormones hit and he heard Metallica, Jarrell left behind years of piano lessons to pick up the guitar and play some heavy metal and punk music. He may have been fashioning himself as the next Yngwie Malmsteen, but jazz was always part of his life. "Even though I got into rock 'n' roll, I grew up with eclectic tastes. And one of my friend's older brothers was in the Greyboy Allstars, which may not have been pure jazz. They were an acid jazz band," says Jarrell. "It was still a really good thing for me to be around that music and have that experience.

"I kept playing guitar and realized one day that I hadn't learned anything in years," he continues. Jarrell started taking music lessons from Jonathan Barker, a local guitar teacher in San Diego. "And it was Jonathan who turned me on to jazz, and that was probably my biggest influence." Inspired with his new interest in jazz, Jarrell entered San Diego State as a jazz studies major. There he studied with Bob Boss, the guitarist who has performed with almost all the local jazz greats as well as Eddie Harris and tenor madness sax man Richie Cole. Jarrell says that Boss, while being an excellent guitar instructor, was also instructive about the practical aspects of the trade, the day-to-day things a person needs to do to be a working musician. After completing his bachelor's degree Jarrell entered graduate school and is currently finishing his master's in jazz studies at SDSU.

Graduating from Trinity College, Acquavella returned to San Diego and began performing in many classical settings, including dates with the San Diego Symphony. It was not a van stuck in the mud, but another near disaster at one of these concerts that drew Acquavella and Jarrell back together again. Acquavella had a classical music concert duo guitar and mandolin lined up. At the last minute the classical guitarist cancelled and Acquavella was left stranded. Although he hadn't played with Jarrell since their Dublin Square days, he contacted his old bandmate. "I called up Nate and told him that I know he's not a classical player, but maybe we could try something and see if it works," Acquavella says. Jarrell made the concert. True, he wasn't a classical guitarist, but the strength of his musicianship helped make the concert a success.

Acquavella and Jarrell noticed something else. Since their old days, they had gone their separate ways musically, but they still clicked. Although their punk rock days and the times they spent playing Irish and bluegrass music were years and years behind them - and all the musical genres completely different from both classical and jazz - the time that they spent playing Appalachian breakdowns, Celtic reels, and loud power chords had built a

musical relationship that bridged their differing musical directions.

I joined the duo recently as they were preparing for an upcoming recording. Their rehearsal hall was filled with the ringing of the mandolin and the more subdued sounds of Jarrell's electric nylon-stringed guitar. Hearing the sensitivity, openness, and trust with which Jarrell and Acquavella play, it's difficult to imagine that this musical relationship was first forged amid screaming amps and mosh pits. They started their rehearsal by playing a composition by Acquavella. The piece used a theme that ran over a simple chord progression. As the theme repeated, the composition changed in meter, going from 4/4 to 5/4 or another time signature and back again to 4/4, in a delightful and beguiling manner. Speaking about the piece, Acquavella explained that he tries to base his compositions on folk tunes, as they serve as the basis for all music. In particular, he likes to work with eastern European folk melodies. For him they offer a great range of harmonic options and a great number of meters that are uncommon to most western music.

They also played a composition of Jarrell's called Molly. Big surprise, the piece had a much jazzier feel. Jarrell once again credits Bob Boss for helping him with writing a jazz tune. He says, "Bob taught me a lot. He taught me how jazz works and how to structure a tune." The last composition that they rehearsed was a collaboration that Acquavella had completed with a friend of his who lives in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. The two had pieced together the composition through email.

Acquavella plays a Neapolitan, or round-backed, mandolin. He explains that the instruments can vary a great deal, depending on where they are made. "The Italians go for a more treble sound with their mandolins, while the Germans favor a deeper sound," he says. As someone who played the deeper voiced guitar for years, he prefers the more mellow sounding German mandolins. The instrument he now plays was recently made for him by noted luthier Brian Dean and includes beautiful inlays and a distinctive scalloping design on the mandolin's back. During the months that Dean worked on constructing the mandolin, Acquavella took part in every stage of the process, from initial design to the finishing touches.

Acquavella says that people are often surprised to find out that he plays classical music on the mandolin. "There is a rich heritage of classical mandolin, but you wouldn't know that in America," he says. "After World War II most of the classical mandolinists were from Europe and that generation died off." He also mentions that bluegrass music's founding father, Bill Monroe, so forcefully associated the mandolin with the High Lonesome sound that Americans had a hard time thinking of the mandolin as anything but a bluegrass instrument.

Besides the upcoming CD release, each musician continues with plans of his own. Jarrell will be releasing a CD of duets with Tokeli, as well as a disk with his own jazz band. Acquavella's schedule includes classical concerts and teaching at mandolin workshops. Of course they both hope to continue their musical relationship, one that won't be slowed down by last minute cancellations or even getting stuck in the mud.

You can see Duo LaRé perform on Sunday, May 30, 6pm, at Dizzy's in downtown San Diego.

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