

Mahadev Cometo

Space trip with sitar and sampler

On his new album "Taj Mahal Mafia" Mahadev Cometo takes the sitar into new sound realms. Although he couples the 3000-year-old instrument with state-of-the-art electronics, the sitar retains its natural sound. All around, the musician from Fribourg, who was the keyboard player of The Young Gods for more than 20 years, builds fantastic soundscapes.

As on his first sitar album "Freedom" (2017), the current album "Taj Mahal Mafia" focuses on a raga. On the vinyl edition, the "Raag Mega Marwa" takes up three record sides and unfolds its maelstrom in several parts. Mahadev Cometo has saved another gem for the fourth record side: On the title track "Taj Mahal Mafia" the former sound specialist of The Young Gods definitely brings the sitar and its sound world into the 21st century. This is ambient in a new dimension, in which the tabla playing of Rajaneesh Tiwari from Benares also gets its space.

The sonority

Compared to the debut "Freedom", Mahadev Cometo has further expanded the sound spectrum of the sitar with sophisticated electronics, beats, tablas and voices. The structural and melodic framework of a raga breaks through again and again, but the sound infusions, modulations and effects beam the sound into the here and now. The listening experience acts like a zoom filter, not only sharpening and widening the individual sounds, but also stretching and altering the timeline of sonic events.

The experienced musician, who began studying sitar with Rabindra Narayan Goswami in Benares, India in 2011, knows the traditions and rules of how to play a raga. But anyone who wants to hear a classically interpreted raga is out of place with Cometo. He never intended to play the instrument the way an Indian does, Mahadev Cometo says. "My roots have been much closer to rock 'n' roll than Indian raga since I was young. I acquired the technique and knowledge from my Indian guru to be able to develop my own musical ideas with the sitar."

So Cometo also puts his own stamp on "Raag Mega Marwa." "I follow certain basic lines of a traditional raga, but don't always stick to protocol. I'm interested in developing the playing style and sound." Mahadev Cometo could also play his new album purely acoustically on the sitar. But he wanted to go further sonically, combining the sitar with electronics and other sound sources. He uses his voice in a new way, sings the melody lines of the sitar, manipulates them or samples his voice to the choir. He also lets the beats clash and the dub pulsate psychedelically. But for all the variety, deceleration and a calm keynote remain dominant.

Since his six-month study stay in India in 2012, Cometo has stayed with the sitar. At the same time, he has been able to further refine his masterful sampling craft. His goal is to integrate the 3000+ year old instrument into the sound world of today, respecting both musical worlds. His sitar does not sound like a digital avatar, but still distinctly natural. What changes is the sonic universe into which Mahadev Cometo infuses his ragaesque lines and

his rock'n'roll torpedoes. To put it metaphorically, he has built a hi-tech musical house where the old spirituality and the new technologies come and go in the same rooms.

The technology

The central control point for Cometo's creativity is a new sampler. The device is a veritable sound-magic machine and enables him to call up any recorded sitar and tabla sequences at will, change them, reassemble them and additionally manipulate them with increasingly sophisticated effects. There is a great danger of sinking into the sea of endless possibilities, but Cometo navigates with experience and a tinkerer's instinct. He builds clear forms and architectures and also has fun breaking and alienating them. Sometimes the sounds whiz past the ears like airmobiles, or there are cuts and surprising breaks. On the piece "Taj Mahal Mafia" the layers of sound surge through the body like mighty waves. All with the sound of the sitar, made possible by the machine.

Thanks to the sampler, Cometo can improvise live with his acoustic and electronic sound material. "With The Young Gods, I usually had clear guidelines and could only work with samples of a few seconds. Now I have the ability to feed in ten- or twenty-minute samples and split them up as I see fit." He can change the album's tracks with ever-changing nuances or impulsively catapult them into sonic space at times. The sampler machine allows him to probe the sound cosmos in all sorts of directions, much like he does with his old flying machine when he's crisscrossing the skies as an aerial acrobatics pilot. "I was an acrobatic pilot before I joined The Young Gods, and I've been flying again for a few years now," says the musical aeronaut.

The recording process

Until Mahadev Cometo had his album in the can the way he wanted it, it took a few detours. During the pandemic, the musician's apartment was terminated, so he had to find a new shelter and temporarily store his studio. So he came up with the idea of mixing the tracks on headphones, which didn't work sonically for the vinyl edition. Cometo had no choice but to start all over again. He went back to the basic samples and mixed the tracks over three weeks at nearby Nice Hill Sound Studio in Schönberg/Fribourg to create the full album.

The struggle in this long process with all its obstacles and emotions can also be heard musically in some places. There he fights, lustfully and passionately, with the Taj Mahal Mafia. The sounding results of this fight point to the future and also make clear what musical potential Mahadev Cometo burns under his sitar and sampler fingers.

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