

The relatively long story of the Relatives

Interview & article: Michael Bjorn

The Relatives were formed in 1988 by Pip Pyle's childhood friend Jack Monck and Dutch keyboardist WillemJan Droog. Together with Pip and brothers Steve and Phil Miller, Jack was an original member of Delivery and also formed ill-fortuned super group Stars with Syd Barret and Twink in 1972. Willem played in Slipover together with Henk Weltevreden who organized concerts with Canterbury bands in Holland. However, the Relatives debut album "Trans Europ Connection" did not appear until 2007. Although filled with rather wonderful Canterbury-tinged pop jazz, it made little impact.

But with the release of new album "Virtually" on Relatives Records this summer, things may be about to change. Phil Miller has joined the band and Richard Sinclair appears as guest vocalist. On top of that, sax and flute player Marc Hadley contributes some of the purest Canterbury melodies you are likely to hear this side of the 1970s. To find out more about the Canterbury connection, we decided to have a chat with Marc.

How were the Relatives formed?

Marc: Willem became an architect and in 1988 he needed to spend a few months on an architectural project in London, and he got hold of Phil Miller via Henk Weltevreden. As it happened, Phil knew that Jack Monck rented out rooms in his house and connected Willem to Jack. When they found out that they had this Canterbury interest in common, Willem and Jack decided to write some material together. I had already been playing with one of Jack's bands. So Jack asked me if I would like to get involved, and I said yes. We ended up going to Rotterdam, got together with Willem's friends there and formed a band. We recorded some demos and started to play gigs in Holland, and it went on from there, with tours in Holland and Belgium.

You recorded a full album already in the first year. Was it never finished?

Marc: It was certainly finished. This was around 1989 when the wonderful Atari computer had come out, and this was basically my first computer. You could quite easily compose very complicated things thanks to this MIDI computer system. So this first CD called "Relativity" that we produced in my home studio in London, was done with quite a lot of MIDI programming and I think the Dutch side in a sense disapproved because it was seen to be not jazz.

When did activities in the Relatives really start picking up again?

Marc: About 2004, we got together again; Jack and I were again traveling over to Rotterdam and we made a studio album, called "Trans Europ Connection". A couple of years later we had the chance to have one of our live shows recorded professionally in Rotterdam so we produced a "Live in Rotterdam" album.

Around 2011 Jack also got in touch with Phil Miller who was having a bit of a rest after having made "Conspiracy Theories" with In Cahoots, and invited him over to Rotterdam to rehearse and play a few concerts with us.

I understand you had some frustrations with your drummer then?

Marc: Yes, we always used to have problems with drummers, and could no longer continue with our drummer at that time. At this point, Jack came down to Cornwall where I live, to do a gig with my quartet, A Beach Supreme. He met the drummer, Damien Rodd, and was very impressed. The two got on very well and Jack thought it would be great for us to work with Damien. So the decision was made to shift the Relatives from being based in Holland to something that was based in England. We

started producing three songs that Jack had written. Then we sent some of the mixes to Phil Miller and asked: "Would you like to put some stuff on to this project?" When he said "Yeah!" we realized we had something going.

How did that develop into a full album?

Marc: I also decided to put some material in. The original plan was to do a four-track EP, but around October last year we had six tracks in production. We then found a live recording from Rotterdam of a song called "Statelty Waltz" that had some potential. We decided to improve it and use it, so then we had seven tracks. And finally I had "On my mind", a song I had written some years ago and always thought had some Canterbury thing to it. So, I made a rough demo for Jack, who really liked it. I recorded a proper version and sent it to Phil around Christmas and said to him: "You can put some guitar on this now if you like. But should we perhaps also ask Robert Wyatt or Richard Sinclair if they would consider singing this song?" Phil phoned Richard in Italy and asked him; and Richard said "Yeah, sure, I'd love to." Richard got the song and after a couple of months sent me back a file from Italy. We inserted it into the main project on the work station and it was just perfect. So there we had one of the most Canterbury-like songs that I had heard for a long long time.

How did the track "Spaghetti" come about?

Marc: I would say that perhaps Jack got quite a long way towards the finished versions before he had the idea to ask Phil to put guitar on. Whereas by the time I started doing my songs, I actually had the chance to involve Phil at a much earlier stage. So, with "Spaghetti", I virtually wrote it for Phil to play. Again, it was a theme that I'd had from some years back, but I'd always felt that it was a kind of an homage to Hatfield & the North. Phil very much played what I hoped he would play on it, so I think it is really well integrated.

I think "Spaghetti" is the standout track on the album.

Marc: Oh, interesting that you consider "Spaghetti" the standout. I have had the most enthusiastic reception to "On my mind" of any thing I have ever done. I sent it to Jonathan Coe who wrote the book "The Rotters Club". He loved it and sent it to some friends: One of those was Stuart Maconie who played it on his BCC Radio 6 Freak Zone radio show. So I personally would regard that has the standout track. From my point of view, it's fantastic to have Phil and Richard, doing such lovely things. They were kind of my teenage idols, and it is an amazing experience at this point in my life to have actually done something with them.

The first two tracks on the album are very much in a Steely Dan vein.

Marc: Over the years, Jack, Willem and I realized that apart from Canterbury, our other point of connection was Steely Dan. I think the song form that tries to incorporate jazz and other influences is where Steely Dan connects to Canterbury. You end up with this hybrid which thinks it's a song, but has become more symphonic; or is basically a vehicle for improvisation.

What happens next?

Marc: Richard Sinclair wants me to do some stuff with him. And I would also like him to do some stuff with us. So there will maybe be two different projects; Richard wants to do an album and I want to do another Relatives album. Also, I know John Etheridge from Soft Machine Legacy and we have played a couple of times - one of my ambitions is to do some stuff featuring Etheridge as well!