



Toots Thielemans (1922-2016)

spectacular versions of it was the maestro's duet with Stevie Wonder, one of his greatest admirers. Toots referred to *Bleusette* as his retirement fund.

Toots suffered a stroke in 1981. That made playing the guitar increasingly difficult, so he concentrated solely on playing the harmonica, on which he became the world's number one player. Everyone wanted to make music with Toots, including pop artists with a global audience. Sting, Nick Cave, Paul Simon, Billy Joel and countless others shared the stage with him. Some critics blamed him for becoming too commercial. But in the end, he also came back to jazz. In 2009 he was duly bestowed with the Jazz Master Award, the highest American accolade in the jazz world. He was the first European to receive it. The Belgian King Albert II raised him to the peerage in 2001. In order to receive the title of Baron, he had to become a Belgian citizen again. Ever since Toots enjoyed dual citizenship.

Dual citizenship might well have suited this amiable man best. His musical inclinations were very American, though in actual fact he remained a true native of Brussels. An 'AfroAmerican *Marollien*,' as he called himself. That he had never renounced his Brussels origins was clearly most audible whenever he spoke in Dutch or French. But if you asked him where he liked situating himself most, he always replied: 'Between a smile and a tear, that's where you can find me.'

DIRK VAN ASSCHE

Translated by Scott Rollins

A Modern Troubadour

Jozef van Wissem and His Lute

Jozef van Wissem (b. 1962) is among the most celebrated lute players of this day and age. The Dutch-born, but Brooklyn-based musician is on a mission to free the lute of its stuffy image and to that end combs international stages with success.

Since 2000, Jozef van Wissem has released more than a dozen records, not including collaborations with avant-rock pioneers Gary Lucas and James Blackshaw. Moreover, he recorded three records with his friend Jim Jarmusch, who besides being a filmmaker is also known as a noise guitarist. The Dutchman's music for Jarmusch's vampire film *Only Lovers Left Alive*, starring Tilda Swinton and Tom Hiddleston, was awarded the prestigious Cannes Soundtrack Award in 2013. He could also be heard for the first time as a vocalist on the 2014 album *It Is Time for You to Return*.

Van Wissem became enthralled with the lute at the age of twelve when he saw one in the corner of his guitar teacher's room in Maastricht. 'I was especially attracted to its shape,' he recalls. 'Something mystical emanated from it.' The lute in question was so fragile he was not even allowed to touch it, but he did learn how to play pieces that were especially composed for it. The melodies compiled in the book *Music from Shakespeare's Time*, turned out not to be very intricate. Van Wissem would later use one of them, referred to in *Much Ado about Nothing*, in one of his soundtracks. Before he thoroughly immersed himself in the lute, however, he switched from classical to electric guitar, playing in punk and new wave bands.

Lute players use their thumb to produce constantly varying bass notes and the rest of their left hand to form chords, a technique similar to the one employed by harpsichordists. Jozef van Wissem considers it an advantage there is such a large repertoire for the instrument. 'What interests me is how to create something new from something old,' he says. 'I do that, for instance, by mirroring existing scores. My debut album *Retrograde* consisted mainly of lute music that was played backwards.'

Technique and discipline are crucial to any lute player aspiring to achieve a certain level. The neck of the instrument is equipped with a double row of strings that he must press in a specific way to ren-



Josef van Wissem

der a pure tone. 'Pretty complicated,' Van Wissem confesses. 'But as a composer my aim is to keep things as simple as possible. That is why I prefer playing melodies consisting of only three notes.'

He shuns frills and calls himself a minimalist. In his opinion, it is simply much harder to construct a good melody with a limited number of building bricks, than to show off with complicated runs. 'Anyone spending a few hours in a totally white room loses all sense of time. I would like my music to induce a similar effect on the listener. If you keep on repeating the same three chords, it *does* something to you. I wouldn't call it slow down music, but it is a protest against a society in which there are so much stimuli it is impossible to process it all.'

Jozef van Wissem once said that art ought to be oppositional and anti-establishment. Accordingly, the titles of his compositions refer to philosophical and political documents that advocate a specific attitude to life. He is convinced you don't need a computer screen to communicate: you can also go outside and talk to someone. His choice for such an anachronism as the lute is an act of resistance towards a technology that alienates us from ourselves. 'An artist may never forget that he has a social role to play. He is practically the only one who can go against the grain of the spirit of the age, and can protest against McDonalds, Starbucks, Coca Cola or other things that make the world uniform. There's no room anymore for something that's original, raw or real: everything's been formatted. So it's up to the artist to change our way of looking or listening.'

Van Wissem consciously cultivates the image of the outlaw: as a lutenist he leaves the beaten path and feels connected to the underground. No wonder he gets on so well with Jim Jarmusch, who is trying to come to grips with mainstream culture, but is having an increasingly difficult time finding financial backing for his films.

Van Wissem's romance with the lute coincided with his move to the United States in 1994. He had been burning the candle at both ends in Groningen, in the punk bar he ran at the time. So he fled to New York, where for the first year he led an entirely spiritual life, virtually cutting off all contact with the outside world. One day he read an advertisement by a certain Pat O'Brien, an experienced lute teacher who once began as a guitarist and had been a student of the legendary bluesman Reverend Gary Davis. Van Wissem had ventured taking lute lessons once before at The Hague Conservatory, but it had not been a success.

When he took up the lute, Van Wissem was considered a village idiot. His instrument was so unhip, many people looked down their noses at it. Hollywood associated the lute with Robin Hood, academics considered it somewhat elitist. 'Just as I was making a concerted effort to boost its image and get *kids* interested in it,' according to the musician. 'That's why I used them in my soundtrack to the video game *The Sims Medieval*. That was totally at odds with what a baroque purist would have done. I want to do things to bring lute music up to date and not play the same piece by Bach for the thousandth time. Something like that no longer challenges me.'

Jozef van Wissem's musical taste varies from blues to post-industrial music and from baroque to avant-garde, but he refuses to slot the genres into any sort of hierarchy. To him, playing the lute is a contemplative activity that, certainly on stage, invariably results in a kind of trance. His concerts are intense and intimate events in which dialogue with the audience is of paramount importance. 'The audience must get the feeling I am playing solely for them. It sometimes has such a profound effect they shed tears of emotion.' Van Wissem has performed more than eight hundred lute concerts worldwide and likes to compare himself to the medieval troubadours or itinerant bluesmen. Unlike the harpsichord, the lute was a light instrument that could

be taken anywhere, which enhanced the spread of lute music throughout Europe. 'I don't get why today's conservatories elevate it into something so special, because the lute used to be everywhere: at the court, in pubs, people's homes,' Van Wissem states. 'I want to fetch it from the museums and give it back to the people.'

That explains why Jozef van Wissem also ventures among the audience while playing. In one respect, he wants the lute to be regarded as an instrument that can hold its own with a concert grand piano, while at the same being one on which he can experiment.

'The pieces I play sound different every night, because lutes resound differently in different spaces', he says. 'You can't just buy an instrument like this anywhere. All my lutes have been especially designed and built for me by Michael Schreiner, a perfectionist who spent a great deal of time considering how they ought to sound and which guarantees an exceptional acoustic experience. You'd best not spoil it with any electronic gadgetry.'

DIRK STEENHAUT

Translated by Scott Rollins

www.jozefvanwissem.com

Religion

Lutherans in the Low Countries

Self-Imposed Thresholds and Calvinist Clout

In 2017, it is 500 years since Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The movement for reform that Luther set in motion got off to a rapid and forceful start in the Netherlands. It was above all in the cosmopolitan trading metropolis of Antwerp that the influence of this church reformer made itself felt. German merchants brought not only goods with them, but also new religious ideas. Luther also found an important foothold in the Augustine monastery that had just been established in Antwerp. Several of the monks had studied with their fellow monk in Wittenberg and started propounding his views from the pulpit. However, the emperor Charles V and his central government reacted with a series of increasingly stricter edicts denouncing this as heresy. In 1522, the monks of the Augustine monastery were imprisoned. Two obstinate monks who refused to retract their erroneous views were burnt at the stake on the Grand Place in Brussels in 1523.

The vigorous repression by the central government and the dismantling of the Augustine monastery in Antwerp were serious blows to the young Lutheran reform movement. A small Lutheran community remained in Antwerp, which maintained contacts with Wittenberg. Small groups of believers met in private homes. However, some Antwerp Lutherans wanted to take it a step further and set up a real underground church organisation, but this clearly met with resistance from Martin Luther. He informed the Antwerp Lutherans that secret preaching and secret baptisms and marriages were absolutely not allowed. According to him, such activities were reminiscent of the work of rebellious sects, and in his view they were the work of the devil. Believers were however allowed to gather together in the privacy of their homes and quietly celebrate their faith. Those who were not able to resign themselves to this had to move to another place where it was possible to practise