

By Guy Peters, January 24th 2014

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There he was suddenly, just over a year ago: Ruben Machtelinckx and his record *Faerge*. A subtle, cinematic record that can easily be ranked among the best of recent Belgian Jazz. And outside jazz as well, as the word became an ambiguous term. It only took him a year for his next release, *Onland* of the duo Linus, which is Machtelinckx and reed player Thomas Jillings, and even better, he's done it again.

Once again you could make the unforgivable mistake of only giving it half a listen and assuming what you hear is superficially pretty, but unsubstantial and hazy music. It's true that *Onland* is very gentle and accessible, almost obliging, but to stop there would mean you pass by a piece of work clearly made with attention to detail and nuance, with a warm and pleasant sound (thanks to Christophe Albertijn, who was responsible for the recording), and which sometimes feels like a musical thesaurus for terms like "beautiful", "elegant" and "refined".

From opening track "Dit" on, it becomes apparent that this is music free of cheap effect, of easy scoring, of tricks and techniques that might work on the radio, but fail elsewhere. This is confidential communication between two friends who have nothing to prove to each other and who can talk openly and thoughtfully. *Onland* is lyrical but not bland, sensitive but not sentimental, accessible but not lazy, sweet sometimes but not sugary. It is sweetness with a hint of something indistinct. A taste which is less pleasing, less soothing, but equally recognizable. Something between doubt, consolation and that unavoidable melancholy.

Machtelinckx (baritone guitar) and Jillings (sax, clarinet), both founding members of Jillings' eclectic project An Expedition into the Mind of Sgt. Fuzzy, play with a great sense of subtlety impressive melodies that often come unexpected and clear-cut harmonies that point to a focused like-mindedness. It shares the delicateness often heard in *Faerge* by leaning towards a meditative folk tradition. For example, the combination of the guitar picking and the fragile saxophone in Jillings's "Tune Out" is something that could be heard in a small indie film, and the compact "Schaterhout" shows some more relief.

A disapproving listener might claim there is not enough variation in *Onland*. But maybe that could be the ideal moment to re-evaluate and reflect. It can be an enormous relief to hear an album that doesn't want to be proof of a packed eclectic library. Here you can imagine how Machtelinckx and Jillings, with an obsessive attention for measure, have traced out their piece of land and

consequently decided what to do with it.

Jillings's rustling air reaches its high point in "Herzog" (if it is dedicated to the director, he should consider himself lucky), which creates a sort of *sfumato*-effect, enveloping the contours in a intangible haze, in which the beautiful, constantly shifting melody creates a successful and even emotional effect. The aptly named *Schets* (Sketch) presents one of the rare moments in which you hear a certain impure element in the wind instrument, as if to make clear that plain beauty in and of itself is not an option. *Onland* isn't a pretty picture, it is a story with its own atmosphere and logic.

Equally remarkable is the final track "So it Has Come to This", a little starchy at first, a bit more uncompromising than the other tracks, with heavy bass sounds that nestle almost uncomfortably against the tenor sax. But then the piece transforms, it allows more shades of light to enter, the guitar lets itself be heard a bit more, almost inaudibly effects are used, it recalls *Faerge*. It becomes more open and more splendid, and acquires an electric melancholic charge. You may think using this technique only once is not enough, but it's precisely through postponing this Dirk Serries-like wave, that you can achieve such an effect, such a release.

There will be people for whom it's not exciting enough, who don't find enough of a challenge. But there will also be people who are tired of so much shouty and stressed music, who are still ready to hear remarkable beauty which presents itself without warning, in an everyday disguise which is enough to mislead, but not to scare off. For them, but also for jazz fans with open ears, *indie* fans who enjoy the pastoral and the melancholic, fans of *Duyster*, Jan Swerts and other minimalistic headphone beauty, *Onland* is a worth a chance.