

By Koen Van Meel, January 27th 2014

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We almost stopped believing it, but *soft power* works. At least in the musical sense, in the way that guitarist Ruben Machtelinckx and reed player Thomas Jillings display here. The way they assemble their own compositions with pastel colors combines the qualities of the best of the ECM-catalogue, the poetry of Nick Drake and the graceful suppleness of old Jimmy Guiffre recordings.

The ground layer of the music is laid down by Machtelinckx, who has opted for the baritone guitar, which has a lower register and a wonderful warm sound. This is the natural habitat for his subtle and impeccable finger picking. With nothing to hide behind, the harmonic foundation sounds very pure, without becoming minimalistic. Machtelinckx possesses the technique to play melody and accompaniment simultaneously, without resorting to transparent virtuosity.

In this way he leaves ample space for Thomas Jillings. Blowing softly on the alto clarinet and tenor saxophone – even hoarse on the sax and with a lot of wind in his tone – the danger lurks of sounding like caricatural “atmospheric” *lazy* jazz, but for Jillings careful isn’t equivalent to lifeless. On the contrary, the soft dynamic and lyrical tone are a choice that add to the tension of the music. Proof of this can be heard in his pained tone on *Tune Out* and in the drawn out tension of *Allemaal Goed*.

But even more than in the individual playing, the sound is made in their interplay. Like Siamese twins, the two musicians are constantly finding each other, only to fly off afterwards. One moment, Jillings is playfully meandering on the subtle currents of Machtelinckx's guitar, the next moment they are perfectly in sync in a metrically free rhythm. They don't make a big fuss about this subtle control, it seems to be the most normal and natural thing to them. At least that's how it sounds.

Their avoidance of showing off can also be heard in the way they approach harmony and rhythm. Here as well, it's all in the details, with seamless harmonic shifts and an essential articulation without cutting too deep. Skating and floating, Jillings and Machtelinckx move through their own compositions, with all freedom at hand's reach, without needing to use it forcefully.

Those who let their attention dwindle will experience the music as a uniform stream. Those who take the time to sit down and listen are rewarded with the depth of the music, until the cd reaches its final track, “So it Has Come to This”. When no one still expects it, Jillings and Machtelinckx go out with a burst of energy. The piece starts off romantically, but gradually a new sound emerges.

Machtelinckx's guitar is layered and submitted to effects, gentle at first but becoming increasingly dominant. Jillings's tenor sax is also layered and after a while the music is allowed to cut free from harmony to take the form of perfectly controlled noise. The real blow comes when the sound is suddenly cut, the cd abruptly ends and the listener is smacked into the wall. Still, even with this dramatic turn, "Onland" remains an album full of dreamlike music, philosophical rather than naïve.