

**DENIS COLIN & LA SOCIÉTÉ DES ARPENTEURS 'subject to  
live'** (Chant du Monde / Harmonia Mundi)  
*France - USA*

**Denis Colin** (clarinette-basse & compositions)  
**Benjamin Moussay** (fender rhodes & electronics)  
**Julien Omé** (guitare)  
**Philippe Sellam** (sax alto & soprano)  
**Antoine Berjeaut** (trompette & bugle)  
**Sylvaine Hélyary** (flûtes)  
**Fabrice Theuillon** (sax baryton & soprano)  
**Stéphane Kerecki** (contrebasse)  
**Thomas Gimonprez** (batterie)  
**Eric Echampard** (batterie)

**Etienne Bultingaire** (Sonorisateur)

## **LA SOCIÉTÉ DES ARPENTEURS (Sébastien Gazeau 2010)**

What kind of game is Denis Colin playing? After spending twenty years or so with a trio, now he has decided to set up the group, Société des Arpenteurs (Surveyors' Society). Temporary craze? Midlife crisis? Craving for power? Such an interpretation would show a lack of knowledge of this man who has used the bass clarinet, an uncommon instrument with a large expressive range, as his key to enter the musical world.

Subject to Change. The title of this new birth certificate could not be clearer: Denis Colin is subject to change. We had felt the wind was turning during the previous years with two revival albums in which voices had made the Great Black Music enter a world until now labeled "French style" instrumental jazz.

Hard blow for those who like small boxes! The master surveyor is thinking big and shaking up the fixed ideas. What right does this beanpole of a guy, who spent so long in the groove of open music, not to say free music, have to dare three-and-a-half minutes of deep funk, overflowing with groove, as appetizers?

The clarinet player probably had not dared to confront his relationship with music so directly. The music. All the music that is meaningful and that is played somewhere with sincerity. All the music that has crossed his life, in any case.

In this album, Denis Colin takes a broader point of view. Not mischievously. With the format indeed – as many as ten musicians—but this is not the first time he has worked with such a large group. He began with the Celestial Communication Orchestra, and his most likely way of improving his inspiration was by dipping in the most remote areas of his memory. And it must be assumed that, being over 50, he is more self-confident.

Subject to Change: a jazz record! It is rather an echo of an era that some consider futile. An album without blinders resonating with all the liberalities of this furious era. We thought we could rely on our familiar landmarks, but everything is turned upside down. We can pick out, in between the melodies, some memories of Africa, of America, of more distant lands. The Far East perhaps?

Here we capture some memories of the electric Miles, later on we catch a glimpse of Albert Ayler. His burning projections. There, the underground tremor of the Black Continent is hanging on and doesn't give up Led Zeppelin's riffs. We hear voices. They don't exist but we could swear that he was hearing them while writing the notes on paper. It is a hymn. A generational stand. Covert advances for a multi-voice reading of our contemporary musical history.

A direction, a real coherence stays in the core of this musical syncretism. Forget about passing in force, there is a sign of naturalness and elegance in the composer's body movements. We would like to say that, behind everything, this is a work in the shadow of the forerunners, of the inventors of the style. We can think of George Russel, of Gil Evans. Why refuse to name them, as they are the ones he is dissecting and re-transcribing?

It is about the human formula behind the curtain of the music. We are beyond the expected frame of improvised music played within a group. The orchestra's dynamic is based on the strong contrast generated by a series of purely instinctive phrases and delicate superimposed arrangements. This powerful material plunges us into the twists and turns of introspection soon followed by new horizons of supernatural energy.

Subject to change reconciles our souls of schizophrenic consumers. At a certain point it is really as if jazz does not exist any more, only its vehicle is left. Denis Colin is driving with regular gas, the one of a 54-year old observer, firmly rooted in his era, who has just crossed the second half of a twentieth century that doesn't stop ending.

The world of some artists is revealed solely in the heat and the moment of the concert. Here and now.

## 'With DENIS COLIN'

Discussion with Sébastien Gazeau, on April 26<sup>th</sup> 2010  
in Fontenay-sous-Bois (France).

*Compared with your previous albums, especially those in trio, Trois or Fluide, Subject to Change seems rougher, perhaps more accessible as well...*

The problem I had to face –that also explains my first solo album recording (*Seul*, 1990) – and I am still facing, is to find the tuning between the instruments and the music. With the trio, I think we succeeded. You have to understand that the bass clarinet, in jazz history, is still considered an imported instrument. And this reality is even more evident when you play in a trio, whose archetype remains double-bass/drums/ saxophone or trumpet. Thus, I had to invent an appropriate rhythm section for the bass clarinet, playing more softly than the saxophone or the trumpet. I thought the cello/zarb/clarinet trio was great, but then we had to find a distinctive sound for this configuration. That's what we achieved with *Trois* in 1992, and then *Fluide*, released in 1998. This whole period lasted for 10 years until the producer Jean Rochard pointed out that we had an original sound and pieces, but in the end, there was a lot of unknown! Therefore, he suggested that we put a more common element into our music. We could think of changing our way of playing (we were still progressing), so I had to look for this opening in my musical background. Unlike what some people may have thought, *Trois* and *Fluide* were not critiques of other music, but a way of tuning with our instruments. As I was still listening to Led Zep, Coltrane or Hendrix, I could not imagine that this was not hearable. I was naïve!... Anyway, we turned to Black American music. This led to *Something in Common* in 2002. Then there was *Song for Swans* in 2006, which continued with this direction, but this time with only one singer, Gwen Matthews

From this point of view, *Subject to Change*, shows a turn at least as important as the opening to the Great Black Music?

Even more important! After seventeen years in trio, I turned to more common instruments – bass, drums, guitar, keyboard, trumpet, saxophone, flute – while going back to my own music [*Something in Common* and *Songs for Swans* were mainly composed of revivals (editor's note)]. It was actually the reverse process of what happened in the early 2000s, except that this time, my signature was well enough defined and I could choose a more classical instrumentation. But this is still a problem for me because of my lack of practice with that type of rhythm section. But this phase of adaptation is still fascinating.

*The title looks like a profession of faith. Should we hear a personal concern or a message in it?*

This recording is personal in testifying to my own experience, but my intention relates to everybody as we are all "subject to change". Our lives do not really look like a magnificent oak, but rather like the twisted tree that has grown on the head of the figure of the album jacket. Our lives fit within all sorts of constraints and don't take the perfect shape we had imagined or wanted. I believe that the sap is still circulating and that we have to recognize this motion. It is a question of perception and of receptiveness to what is happening. As long as we are alive, we are a wealth of new things. In this respect, this album is a manifesto.

*A manifesto implying some demand of oneself*

Demand and work! To what are we going to be available? We have to do our best to distance ourselves from our obsessions. For me, it could have been from the illusion that "we are playing forever", in other words thinking that once played, things are final. On the contrary, I'm trying to follow a lifelong trend, without foreseeing what is going to happen.

*This is precisely what you have done in creating the Société des Arpenteurs, whose Subject to Change is the first recording...*

The trio we were forming with Pablo Cueco and Didier Petit had already opened to others when we made the quintet, then the "Dans les cordes" [In the strings] ensemble, and then the nonet, etc. But, each time, it was the pivot structure. In the Société des Arpenteurs, I now invite musicians to play my music. And I keep up with the vagueness. It is an open society: we do not know very well where it begins, where it ends, if we are part of it or not! The internal organization is a bit mysterious, but the whole is clearly turned towards the outside...

*As a result your position has changed as well. You have become a kind of great organizer as well, perhaps taking more of a back seat than in the previous albums?*

I like to play a music that is telling. So, when I call together eleven people or an album, it would be as well to take advantage of this and highlight each personality and what the group can tell. But I don't feel set back since I sign all the pieces of *Subject to Change*, but my approach to writing has indeed evolved. What kind of playing do I propose? This is what is the most important for me. In jazz, the music I have listened to the most, I noticed that I loved above all that the musicians have an effect on the ensemble sound. Coltrane, for instance. From the moment when he manages to set up his signature, the novelty is not only his solo choruses but the quartet sound. It's the same thing with Miles. This idea of sound has always guided me.

*What is defining this way of playing? Did you tell the musicians about it?*

It is something very delicate, difficult to express with words. Directing a group like this is still for me a construction site of thoughts, and I don't know up to what point you should say things explicitly. Everything is so prone to interpretation, to distortion.... I prefer sticking to the way I'm writing music and I'm interpreting it to direct the ensemble. On that point also, I keep on with a kind of vagueness, adjusting the number of people according to the concerts, therefore changing

the arrangements, the order of the pieces, the soloists' places. The aim is to stay alert, not to recite one's lesson.

*You say you're looking for a music that tells, but would you say that your music, and especially what we hear on this last album, is visual, that it is playing with a whole range of colors?*

I don't associate my music with colors. But if I propose to Sylvaine Hélyary on flute a moment of improvisation, it will not be the same than if I had proposed it to Antoine Berjeaut on trumpet. Because they don't have the same signature, they don't have the same musical references. That is what I have at my disposal to organize the ensemble. Now, I would like to highlight more and more what each one can bring. But for that, you need time and accepting to be surprised. Even if, in reality, I would prefer to be the one surprising them!

*Are you thinking of enlarging your society to make a big ensemble?*

Of course, but it depends on the means I shall be given. If an organizer wants to hear us as 15 or 20, I will do it with pleasure...

*This recording possesses the features of orchestral music. It's like a single long piece composed of several movements, which, by the way, raises the question of why you have abandoned this consistency on stage by drastically changing the repertoire, the form...*

For me, there are indeed four ambiances on this recording, like four movements. But in my opinion, it is essential to recognize that music is not affected by the same constraints if it is played in a recording studio or on stage, in front of an audience. I became aware of that listening to Miles Davis' albums, whose studio ones have nothing to do with the ones recorded live. He goes particularly far within this distinction, and this is probably his greatest contribution to modern music, this intelligence that led him to develop his pieces in front of an audience with a

phenomenal freedom. I am not a specialist in this field, but I don't think "classical" music composers are making this distinction, are proposing different interpretations according to the situation. I think it's a great pity.

*Maybe it's the specificity of jazz?*

The conditions of listening are really different! During a concert, there is something resembling a ceremony. People leave their house, lash out the price of a ticket, sometimes they pay a baby-sitter.... They go out! And all that to listen together to people doing the stuff, to see the musicians' bodies whose posture will of course be different from the one they have when playing in a recording studio or at home. The musician needs that, and for the music lover, it is a listening moment completely of his own. On stage, there is a certain profusion of energy that, cut on a record, may seem obscene since there is no reading of the musician's body, it is not possible to understand what is going on. This is also true for a symphony music concert. When you are in the audience, it bursts out, it's beautiful, so beautiful. So, if you put it on your stereophonic system, it's too much. It nearly hurts...

*Subject to Change was released in October 2009. Since then you played it quite often on stage within very different layouts. With the passing of time, how do you listen to it today?*

I don't often listen to my own recordings, and never as a whole. But I do occasionally to try to understand what I had intended to do. I don't want to comment on it, but I feel I managed to keep with what I wanted before entering the recording studio, the little rag and very dynamic aspect. I wanted the excitement at work to be felt. It is easy to use special effects in a recording studio, but for the music lover, the pieces become smooth, often boring. On that point, I think the goal was reached: in this recording there is a feeling of a kind of life that escapes us.

*You also seem freer musically. The groove of certain rhythms, the almost rock energy of some pieces, and, all through the album, an obvious pleasure of playing.... The two previous albums also have a similar musical gratitude (to the Great Black Music, to Hendrix, etc.), it seems that now you totally accept all these influences?*

There are indeed very multiple influences on this album. It is characteristic of the twentieth century, and even more today when we can feel deeply touched by music coming from far away without leaving home. But you need time to integrate these influences. Regarding accepting them... It is true that people are talking about it a little, they are wondering what I'm doing, if I'm getting too comfortable. Those questions don't really upset me, except if the people accusing me take advantage of this to put me out of circulation. This is the less glorious aspect of our job, but it is nevertheless a fact that I sign this album with my two hands, and even my two feet!

*What comfort would it be?*

This criticism is based on the idea that there are degrees of playing and listening. I am deeply against this point of view. On the other hand, I believe there are different stages of perception. Music lovers totally unaware of the rules of music can listen to *Subject to Change* and like it. Others can know a lot in this field and also get something out of it. There is no hierarchy in which to place them, it is only a problem of point of view. When you are listening, you are always on the first degree (A "expert" cannot refer to an "ignorant" listener because he has forgotten the way this last one is listening... For me, what is important is that all music lovers, with or without musical knowledge, can feel my music.

*A permanent feature on all your albums is an apparent concern for words, particularly through titles.*

I feel that it's important for the titles to be evocative, to reflect a form of interiority. They are not jests for me, as it is often the case with French jazz, perhaps in reference to traditions you can find in the blues.

*Words are also singing...*

My relationship with the bass clarinet has to do with singing. That is what I had in mind in choosing to stick to a single instrument, in order to use it in the way you work with your own voice. If I had played several reed instruments, I could have played on the colors, but I didn't want this. Of course, all of that is a fantasy: the bass clarinet stays the bass clarinet, but both in my playing and in my writing, I am looking for a certain voice. Chicago blues for *Malachi*, for example, has something to do with a German *lied*, a song developing without refrain, without going back on itself, only with an entrance and an exit. This progression ends with a kind of scansion. It is very important for me that melodic writing is inspired by the singing. But, for now, I have not yet associated my music with words, except in taking Rimbaud's poem, "Veillées".

*Is this a path you would like to survey?*

In the near future, I shall try to integrate words into my music. I will start in French, because I am in this language, even though I don't balk at doing it in English. But I don't feel enough at ease with English to work on the prosody that is necessary to have a right melody. It is like speaking a foreign language, you have to understand where the accents are falling if you want to be understood.