

Cyminology As Ney

Cymin Samawatie: vocals; **Benedikt Jahnel:** piano; **Ralf Schwarz:** double-bass; **Ketan Bhatti:** drums, percussion

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“As Ney” is the ECM debut of an unique band. The subtle yet dynamic, softly-pulsating music of Cyminology (formed 2002) takes its cue from the sound of the Persian language. “This was the turning point for us,” says singer Cymin Samawatie. “When I began singing in Farsi, the music of the group started to become unified. There are still elements from different kinds of music” – including chamber jazz, open improvisation, modern composition, art songs, minimalism, even a distant hint of bossa – “but once we brought in the Persian poetry, it seemed to bring everything together. Farsi is a soft language and has a unique melody in itself, it already gives you a sense of direction. And the changing meters of the poetry influence the rhythm and the time signatures.”

Cymin Samawatie writes most of the band’s music, as well as song lyrics which, in the tradition of Persian verse, can be interpreted on several levels: are these love poems or do they hint at wider, spiritual, concerns? And she looks also at words from masters of the tradition including, on this recording, Rumi (1207-73) and Hafiz (c.1325-1389). Cymin incorporates, too, verse of Forough Farrokhzaad (1935-67), Iranian modernist poet and film director, a strong feminine voice, whose cry for personal freedom takes on a particular poignancy in the light of political developments of the last 30 years. Cymin would sooner celebrate positive aspects of Persian culture than dwell on present-day restrictions, but her very profession, lead singer of a band, is not one currently available to Iranian women in their homeland.

Born to Iranian parents in Braunschweig in 1976, Cymin was raised bilingually and bi-culturally, spending summers in Iran. In Germany, as a teenager, she raced through musical idioms in search of a mode of expression. At 13 she led a choir, at 17 had an acoustic-grunge duo with Ralf Schwarz on guitar, singing self-penned songs of alienation. She studied classical music in Hannover, specializing in percussion and piano, and jazz in Berlin where, at the Hochschule der Künste, her teachers included American jazz veterans David Friedman and Jerry Granelli. She credits Granelli for encouraging her to improvise with Persian poetry, and to set it to ‘non-traditional’ music.

It’s not a coincidence that Samawatie begins the album with a setting of Jalaluddin Rumi’s “Song of the Reed-Flute”, from the compendious “Masnavi”: “Listen to the song of the reed-flute / Lamenting its banishment from its home / ‘Ever since they tore me from my reed bed / My plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears / I burst my breast, giving vent to sighs / To express the pangs of yearning / For everyone who is far from his home / Longs for the day he can return.” If Cyminology’s music is still, broadly, “contemporary jazz” - jazz experience being common to all members’ backgrounds - it also aspiring to regions beyond it.

It was in Berlin, where ‘multi-culturalism’ is an everyday reality, that the Cyminology group came together. Pianist Benedikt Jahnel, born 1980 in France, grew up near Munich, moving to Berlin in 2000. Amongst his teachers were John Taylor, Kenny Werner and Richie Beirach.

Jahnel has already toured with international musicians including Charlie Mariano and Phil Woods, and is active with three other bands, his own Benedikt Jahnel Trio, and the groups max.bab and the Kaktus Sextett. Cyminology grew out of the collaboration between Samawatie and Jahnel, with both of them providing repertoire. “When Benedikt brings a piece to the band, it’s generally ‘composed’ in all its details,” Cymin says. “My approach to songwriting is more open and the work changes as we play it. Sometimes Benedikt will play what I write, and sometimes he’ll find something much more beautiful, which I welcome, of course. And Ketan, our drummer, I never tell him what to do. He’s got such great ears and is so imaginatively responsive.”

Ketan Bhatti, born in New Delhi, India in 1981, grew up in Bielefeld. Playing piano from the age of 7, and touring as a drummer since he was 14 he has been active in projects from reggae and triphop to jazz as both musician and producer. Ketan recently produced music for Nuran Callis’s play “Home Stories” at the Schauspiel Essen and for Schiller’s “Die Räuber” at the Volkstheater in Vienna. He is the newest member of the band, replacing Cyminology’s original drummer Sebastian Schmidt in 2004. Ketan describes himself as a sound-oriented drummer, and he is as alert to the textural implications of the poems Cymin sings as to the concentrated interaction with his fellow musicians.

Like Cymin, bassist Ralf Schwarz, grew up in Braunschweig, where he was born in 1971, and played organ and guitar before switching to double-bass and electric bass a decade ago. Through lessons and workshops with players including Ron Carter, Steve Coleman, Mark Dresser, Mark Helias, Richie Beirach and Billy Hart he has had the opportunity to refine and develop his skills, and his discerning choice of notes is a key component of the total group sound.

But much of Cyminology’s learning has been done on the road. For a young band this is already a well-traveled one, and the group has clocked up thousands of road miles with concerts around the world. Their itinerary in the last year alone has taken them across the USA, and to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, the Sudan, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. (Cymin’s liner photos document aspects of the Middle East tour).

Prior to “As Ney”, Cyminology released the privately-pressed “Get Strong” (2002) followed by “Per Se” (2005) and “Bemun” (2007) both on Double Moon Records.

The new album was recorded in Oslo’s Rainbow Studio in April/May 2008, with Manfred Eicher producing. “As Ney” is launched with a celebratory concert at Berlin’s Werkstatt der Kulturen on January 22, followed by dates in Germany and Switzerland including Glarus (January 31), Zürich (February 1), Kassel (February 12), Essen (February 13), Karlsruhe (February 15), Bremen (February 19), Hamburg (February 20), Osnabrück (February 22), Nürnberg (February 27), Munich (February 28), Penzberg (March 1), Schloss Elmau (March 3), Fulda (March 4), Stuttgart (March 6) and Cologne (March 3). For further details see the tour pages of the ECM site at www.ecmrecords.com or Cyminology’s own site, www.cyminology.de

CD booklet includes 28-page two-language booklet with all lyrics in Farsi and English, plus photos by Arne Reiner and Cymin Samawatie.