

Intergalactic Spaces: A Profile of Carlo Mombelli

Christine Lucia

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The lights dim. A movement mid-stage. Wires trailing, a small group of people ambles towards the spotlights, round the mikes and music stands. 'Welcome to The Prisoners,' says a voice in its midst, head waving and bobbing this way and that, hair flying, testing the microphone and flailing his hands at the sound mixer who sits immobile mid-audience, twiddling knobs and staring at the stage. 'We're glad to see you all here tonight.' The speaker bounces around, backwards and forwards. 'Thank you for coming.' Nodding at the others on stage, chatting to one quickly. 'This is ... I'll introduce you to the guys later.' The speaker knocks on the mike again, plays a few dribbles on his guitar, stares into the audience peering for the sound engineer. 'Mark? Okay? You got us?'

The others are ready with drums, sax, trumpet. A normal jazz combo. But who is this fragile woman with a trombone nimbling around stage front, stage left, as if she were there by accident? Is she part of the band? She stares at the floor, drops her waist suddenly forward, sweeps the stage with a head of Afro-braids, then throws her body back again, eyes closed, instrument ready. We watch her, mesmerised.

No matter who you play to, no matter what you feel like, Carlo Mombelli says later, you have to play as if this were the last concert on earth.

The casual intro. The darkness. The pacing band. The waiting audience. The bassist never stops walking – left, right, left, right – seems to be getting very agitated. Suddenly: 'a-One, Two, a-One-two-three-four' and we're off into a sound that grabs your ears shakes your body spins you along like a top phwhee!! you have no idea where you're going and the guitarist never stops playing as he touches a pedal on the floor stamps it once twice three times so we are looped in sounds that collect multiply whirl around and then the drummer joins in so they are all looping us jazzing us jamming against each other fast fast faster than you can possibly take it in and suddenly it's all in unison high above the

ground yes the ground has been taken away under your chair and you're riding somewhere into the night above the theatre above the houses above the city above the universe. Wheeee!! Phew! YES!

I never had formal composition or bass lessons. My education was a record collection; my training a garage band I put together every Saturday. We would have practised every day, but we were all still at school.

The first piece stops. The bassist, too, finally stops moving and his head sinks down, then it suddenly lifts up as the final chord stretches out like a piece of chewing gum. His whole body is thrown backwards by the effort not to make that chord end, his guitar clutched as if he were strangling it. Finally, everything stops. But what is now looped inside your head like a buzz-fly doesn't stop. You are still moving with the sounds. It's magnetic; it's a drug. All you want is more. More. Let's hear it again. We clap. Hard, harder, longer. "Thanks very much, thank you. Thanks. Thank you. Right. And now. Oh. That was 'Bass Spirits'. We're gonna do one for you now called 'Sunlove.'"

I have been experimenting with a loop machine in order to sample my playing in real time and then bring it back while I play, so for example, you might hear four bass players at the same time. It's all recorded in real time while we perform, so a mistake or a note played out of tune will come back to haunt me.

Carlo Mombelli, leader of The Prisoners of Strange, paces around, talking quietly half to himself half to the audience. "Where's my tape recorder. Oh: yes!" He pretends he's lost a vital item for the next piece. "There we are. This is our next piece, and it's called 'Sunlove'." The piece begins, or seems to. Anyway, sounds are winding up again, slowly, tenderly. "Featuring Siya Makuzeni on voice and trombone."

There she is, stage left. They called Bessie Smith the diminutive bombshell: small but deadly. Siya looks as if you could knock her over with a breath. No bombshell, surely? Can she sing? Can she blow us away? Ten minutes later, ten slow, languid, bursts of

violent energy later, the song she sang still cradles our whizzing ears, rocks them into another place. It's not sleepy; the music's too good for that. We are in another world, and Siya is there, walking away from us as if we didn't need her any more. She is our drug. Don't stop! Come back! We are knocked out, taken away by Siya's husky improv, her sexy trombone solo.

What is this music? Is it jazz? She seems to spin the music out of nowhere. But we can see she has a score – they all play from scores.

My earliest deep experience of music was at the age of eight, when my mother took me to see the ballet Swan Lake. From that day on I knew that I would be a musician.

The next piece has already begun. Sneak a look around you. Audiences at concerts of The Prisoners of Strange are strange themselves, and perhaps that's where the name comes from. We're prisoners of their sound. Young, black, and Hillbrow. Old white, and Parktown. Classical music junkies. Students. We have nothing in common but being here, mesmerized by something we don't know how to name.

It's jazz, I suppose, because I play with jazz musicians.

That's almost as far as Carlo Mombelli will go on the subject. What do the jazz buffs think? 'It's not really jazz in the way I understand it,' says one. 'It's avant-garde jazz, I suppose you'd say it was fusion of a kind, anyway it's totally unique,' says another. 'We just love playing with Prisoners,' says the band. Siya was schooled in jazz and has been through everything since: overdose, over-exposure, overseas, over the edge. 'Ya. I've probably learnt more from Carlo than anyone else I can think of,' she shrugs. 'What I like about playing with him is he's very disciplined. You know what you're doing even when you don't.'

Isn't this an odd way to think of jazz, though: something that disciplines?

I can't tell you. All I know is that to be part of The Prisoners of Strange you have to be an exceptional improviser: an improviser with something to say; a voice. An improviser that plays on the edge of wrong.

Carlo Mombelli doesn't like talking about his music in interviews. He prefers talking about artistry, or bass guitar teaching, or Zen. *A fast listener, having the ability to create silence so that music fills that space.* I drag more out of him. It feels like a terrible desecration, uncovering a secret we're not supposed to know. But I have to find out. *In this group we work with textures and colours as well as ensemble composition. I try to keep it honest, unpredictable and (I sigh with relief) beautiful.* I'm glad my questions are gently pushed away. Yet they still hang there.

The band is in full swing again. An atmospheric piece now, without regular rhythm. Sounds are building up slowly in fragments, with lots of silent spaces between. Carlo strolls slowly around, looking for things. He has a battery of small percussion instruments behind the amp. Tinkling bells hang from a stand. He brushes them with a feather touch. A sound of water in the background. Is this a tape? No. The drummer has left his kit and is pouring water slowly in a thin stream, into a container. Marcus Wyatt leaves his trumpet propped on a stand and goes to a turntable. Later in the piece some strange crackling music starts up, an old 78 of Mimi Coertse singing Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. Carlo picks up a small metal sheet: CHUBB SECURITY in black letters across a crude yellow ground. He waves it and sounds of distant weather, or someone, or something approach. The drummer is now back in his seat, getting the band into a groove, a build-up. A wildness erupts and grips us for several minutes in aural chaos. When it stops the silence is like a wave, but before we can think, the opening sounds begin again. We are drifting on a soup of post-Romantic German Lieder, tinkling bells, a tape loop of basses, a radio voice, fragments of jazz tossed between players. The tune gradually winds to a stop. Another, much calmer silence. The sense of nostalgia is palpable. Before the applause erupts we are caught in a prison of inconsolable loss.

I'll tell my musicians, I'm the boat moving slowly up the river. Lloyd and Marcus you are the animals that inhabit the banks of the river, and Siya and Sidney, you are the spirit of the water. And then I set up a loop and we play.

Mombelli started out as a teenager playing music like Weather Report. *Even though I was playing piano music of the classical masters, I was listening to rock bands like Led Zeppelin, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Pink Floyd and Jimi Hendrix.* Later he took in Frank Zappa, Egberto Gismonti, Jarrett, Haden, Garbarek. But Jaco Pastorius remained the ultimate, from those early days. After Weather Report Mombelli's mother went out and bought him an R70 Epifone electric bass. He was sixteen. Mombelli is still so much in love with bass he makes it feel alive, something to be nurtured, soothed like a baby, driven like a top-of-the-range sports car. So much part of him he gets almost obsessive. Another great influence was Johnny Fourie. Carlo remembers his first gig with Fourie. They played the usual standards. It was a big deal. Carlo played his heart out, showing off, longing for recognition. 'Wow, you can play fast,' was all Johnny said afterwards. *It was a lesson I'll never forget.* The last piece before interval is a song Mombelli wrote for his daughter when she was five. Her halting voice on tape begins the song, looped around with gentle bass accompaniment. In Afrikaans she sings her dream of Christmas presents. Her voice rises and falls with slow hypnotic sweetness. We smile into ourselves as the unfolds, willing to accept a child's sense of expectation. But this is not the first time I've heard the song, and it cloys the second time. I know what to expect.

How does Mombelli keep his audiences on the edge – right or wrong? He composes all the time, that's part of it. And scores his music carefully. And presents it beautifully, as if even the score itself was a treasure he'd just discovered. No question here of playing the same thing over and over. You listen to something new all the time: 70% of every concert is something you haven't heard before.

Many of my compositions have evolved out of improvisation. I take the sketched improvisations and tweak and balance them in a similar way that an artist like Alexander Calder creates his mobiles. He made them out of glass, china, iron ware and aluminium

and each mobile had a perfect balance even though each object was different in size, shape and weight. After I find the balance, I notate the final product. I get surprised every now and again after seeing it on paper.

The last piece has finished and the audience is clamouring, more, more. Carlo Mombelli and The Prisoners of Strange are a tight-knit band. The basic group hardly changes, just a small pool of people Mombelli likes. They rehearse, they play in tune, they always give something unexpected, they seem to go all out. Improvisers that play the right notes, on the edge of wrong. *You have to play as if this were the last concert on earth. It may be, you never know.* Mombelli has the ghost of a smile, as our interview draws to and end.

The encore is ten more minutes. A generous artist, whose musicians on stage hang on his every word, every look, and seem to be in their element. They are beaming, looking down, pretending to collect their instruments, but obviously well pleased with themselves. There is no arrogance, and there are no histrionics, no gimmicks. Carlo feels the response of audiences, understands where he's taken them to, but he enjoys the success, the feedback.

In 1985 I put together a group that I called Abstractions with Johnny Fourie and Jo Runde playing guitars, and Neill Ettridge on drums. We had a regular gig every Thursday.

Mombelli and Prisoners play wherever they are asked: the Bassline, the Wits Theatre, the Grahamstown Festival, alternative venues like Groot Marico out in the bundu with hippie Afrikaners and music under the stars. Gigs for The Prisoners are more regular than most groups. They're known for originality in a time of cloning. But is it jazz? I trail out of the theatre after Mombelli. It's getting late.

I can't really explain. The people are jazz musicians. The venues we play are mostly jazz venues. The people who enjoy my music are not only jazz lovers, though.

Mombelli walks towards his car, staggering under the weight of instruments and amps. It's my last chance. I ask again. Mombelli stops, puts down his load, head bobbing, shoulders bent, peering at me with a look that says, 'get out of here.'

Let's just call it, Intergalactic Space Music.

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