

after the publication of Multatuli's then controversial novel *Max Havelaar* said that 'recently, a certain chill has gone through this country, caused by a book'. Birney makes various references to this classic of Dutch literature: in his mother's new friend's pantry the narrator finds 'the sea chest from my father's passage to the Netherlands'. He continues: 'I opened the chest and saw all sorts of paperwork inside: books, piles of papers, letters, photos and files.' This is reminiscent of another package, which also came from Indonesia, 'Scarfman's package' from *Max Havelaar*. Droogstoppel, one of the narrators from that book, says, 'There I found treatises and essays', followed by a list of subjects. While large parts of the 'Package' are woven into *Max Havelaar*, parts of the father's manuscript are published in *De tolk van Java*.

In his manuscript, which he tried in vain to publish, Arend describes his youth and the period up until his forced departure to the Netherlands. Forced, because he was blacklisted by Sukarno, the first president of the independent republic of Indonesia, a country in which he was now unsafe because he had murdered countless Indonesian freedom fighters. This message is central to the novel and the narrator confronts his mother, who has very little interest in Indonesia, and his brother with its content, raises questions and provides commentary. One part, almost 200 pages, in which Arend recounts the events from 17 August 1945, the day on which Sukarno announced independence, until he leaves Indonesia on a ship bound for the Netherlands, is included without interruption or commentary from the narrator. It consists of sometimes detailed descriptions of horrific crimes – on the side of the Indonesian freedom fighters too. For that reason, and because it is written from the perspective of the Dutch army, the losers, it can be compared with the atrocities in Curzio Malaparte's 1944 novel *Kaputt*. Malaparte, too, opted for the perspective of the losing party.

Those responsible for the Dutch war crimes in Indonesia have never been prosecuted and the Dutch government will have to adopt a new position with respect to that period. While historical research leaves no room for doubt, Birney presents a more complicated and less straightforward take on the entire issue – that is the task of literature. Questions of whether Arend wrote the truth and whether

his memories are correct pervade throughout the book and in the discussion between the brothers. Here, too, Multatuli offers a clue, as the question is not whether all the details are true, but what effect the book has on readers. After the story of Saijah and Adinda in *Max Havelaar*, Multatuli writes, 'But I know *more*. I know, and I can prove, that there were *many* Adindas and *many* Saijahs, and that *what is fiction in particular is truth in general*.'

But *De tolk van Java* is more than a contemporary *Max Havelaar* or a Dutch version of Malaparte's *Kaputt*. Birney has now published fifteen novels, essays and anthologies and this may well be his most important book, in which he impressively unites all the themes of his previous work. It is only fair that he has won two Dutch literary prizes for it.

JAAP GRAVE

*Translated by Anna Asbury*

Alfred Birney, *De tolk van Java*, De Geus, Breda/Amsterdam, 2016. The English translation, *The Interpreter from Java*, is to be published by Head of Zeus, London.

## Music

### Turning Windmills and Exploding Ships

#### Popular Music from the Low Countries

*Writing about music is like dancing about architecture*: that well-known witticism attributed to various celebrities is generally used by musicians to put music journalism and criticism into perspective. Or to brush them aside, as in the case of singer-songwriter Elvis Costello, who in no uncertain terms added '*It's a stupid thing to do*.' Fortunately, those words did not prevent Lutgard Mutsaers and Gert Keunen from compiling *Made in the Low Countries*: a fascinating book in the Global Popular Music Series at Routledge, a prestigious publishing house that specialises in academic books and periodicals.

Or were the comments by Costello and co. still in the back of the compilers' minds when they contacted academics from Flanders and the Nether-

lands to contribute to this reader? For *Made in the Low Countries*' main focus is not on the music as such but rather on the broader context in which it is made, historical and social developments seen alongside sociological and economic processes. That is what the Global Popular Music Series sets out to do: in its statement of intent the study of local music is first and foremost characterised as an 'immensely precious key to understand different cultures and economies'.

In *Made in the Low Countries*, André Nuchelmans's piece 'Upstart among the Arts. The Rise of Rock into the Dutch Subsidy System' is an example of how the attitude of the Dutch authorities has fundamentally changed with regard to pop (musicians): from "'Get a job" was the message at the social security window' in the early 1970s to 'a club circuit unique in the world' in the 1980s and later on.

Cultural sociologist Gert Keunen's contribution starts from a clash between the ideal son-in-law Jonathan Vandebroek (Milow) and the somewhat more caustic Tom Barman (from the rock band dEUS) to describe how a new 'zone' has arisen in the Flemish (music) media and concert and festival sector. In between the two classical poles Mainstream/Commercial and Underground/Alternative, there is now the 'Alternative Mainstream', that combines artistic credibility and 'authenticity' with a mass audience – without selling out to 'commercialism'.

This distant, academic approach doesn't work to the advantage of all the articles included in *Made in the Low Countries*. Whereas Nuchelmans's and Keunen's well-written and lively contributions are nimbly able to lead the reader through rather dry institutional information – and in passing still present a good picture of the music worlds of the Netherlands and Flanders, respectively – other authors get stuck in the jargon of reports and statistics. At such moments this book, with hardly any illustrations and a graphic design that at best can be termed 'respectable', is a hard nut to crack.

Even so, the reader does pick up some interesting information from the drier articles as well. For instance, in 'From Thrash to Cash: Forging and Legitimizing Dutch Metal' we learn how the heavy metal genre, despite a lack of artistic recognition, was still able to get government grants for the export of Dutch music. Viewed in that light, it comes

as no surprise that precisely in that country, in Eindhoven in 2013, 'the world's first 3-year training degree in metal music production called Metal Factory' came into being.

Riveting from beginning to end are the articles in which the authors reveal apparently time-bound phenomena to be crucial phases in pop history, without reverting to 'those were the good old days' or the exoticism of 'how crazy we were back then.' Two examples.

In his piece about pirate broadcasters who introduced commercial radio to the Netherlands from ships in the North Sea, Ger Tillekens does not withhold the juicy details (a bomb attack on a ship by a rival broadcaster!). But more importantly is the convincing manner in which he demonstrates that the focus on youth and appeal to targeted groups around such a broadcaster partly shaped the social upheavals of the 1960s. Moreover, the influence of those long-gone pirate radio stations continues to be felt in today's media landscape – if even only because the highly personal presentation style of that era's disc jockeys is still in vogue today.

Something similar applies to 'This Must Be Belgium', in which Pedro De Bruyckere provides a historical context and traces the effects of the long-maligned New Beat genre (a form of 1980s electronic dance music). 'The craze cultivated DJ culture, foreshadowing the rise of superstar DJ's of the 1990s and beyond', writes De Bruyckere. Moreover the genre which he calls 'truly unique and born out of the love of music and dancing' created a fruitful breeding ground for further electronic music production and for a few years turned the eyes of the world to Belgium, 'that's been far more innovative than people give it credit for'.

The pieces on pirate radio and New Beat also show that *Made in the Low Countries* can hardly be considered a classical history of pop music in the Low Countries from 1955 to the present, and it doesn't offer a survey of the most important artists either (only the chapters on Herman Brood and Golden Earring qualify as such). Instead, the authors pay – sometimes a little too much – attention to specific partial aspects. That too appears to fit the bill of Routledge's Global Popular Music Series: 'uncovering the wealth of studies flourishing in so many countries [...] is by now no less urgent than considering the music itself'. Anyone writing

the 'definitive' history of Belgian and Dutch popular music has little to fear from this book, but is certainly a treasure trove of information, also due to the reference section at the end of each article and an extensive 'Selected Biography' at the back.

Despite its somewhat fragmentary impression, there are some interesting themes running through *Made in the Low Countries*, such as the relationship of the music from the relatively small Low Countries to the overwhelming Anglo Saxon tradition, and the way in which music from Belgium/Flanders and the Netherlands expresses a regional/national identity (e.g. the insightful piece by Lutgard Mutsaers about the ultra-Dutch song 'The Windmill's Turning'). Those two themes often intertwine in this book, especially in the article by Geert Buelens about the language in which artists from the Low Countries sing. Dutch has never become an international pop song language and that is partly due to the morphology of the language itself – even according to those who have had the most success with it.

Still, it is possible for Flemish and Dutch artists to create masterpieces in their mother tongue, as proven by Raymond van het Groenewoud, born and bred in Brussels of Dutch parentage. He is interviewed by Geert Buelens at the end of this informative book. In that piece, which is well worth reading, the singer-songwriter is compared to Elvis Costello ('I don't really understand him [...] he comes across as academic', Van het Groenewoud responds) and Serge Gainsbourg. What Van het Groenewoud has to say about the latter, might possibly contain the key to making good music: 'He removed the pompous aspects of the genre he came out with. He just did what he felt like doing [...].'

And yes, that might even be *dancing about architecture*.

PIETER COUPÉ

*Translated by Scott Rollins*

Lutgard Mutsaers and Gert Keunen (eds), *Made in the Low Countries. Studies in Popular Music*, Routledge Global Popular Music Series, New York/London, 2018, 229 pp.  
[www.globalpopularmusic.net](http://www.globalpopularmusic.net)

## More Than Ideal Grandchildren

### The Jussen Brothers

The impressive success enjoyed by the Dutch piano brothers Jussen has many sources, aside from the fact of the quality of their playing. In some respects their careers resemble those of every young exceptionally gifted musician. Born in 1993, Lucas won the important *Rotterdamse Pianodriedaagse* in 2001 and three years later Arthur, who was born in 1996, was voted the young musical talent of the year in the Netherlands. That talent did not come from strangers: their father is percussionist in the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra and their mother gives transverse flute lessons. The children, just like Janine Jansen, Lisa Jacobs, Noa Wildschut and other highly talented Dutch music child prodigies, went through the established contemporary channels of concourses, concerts, interviews, debut CDs, media appearances, music awards, plus lessons from a foreign celebrity (in their case Maria-João Pires).

In the Jussen brothers' case, other influences were also factors, some of which were very Dutch while others much more archetypal. Two great talents in a single family just happens to attract more attention than one and elicits stronger sentiments than two people from different families. When their first CD was released with great fanfare in 2010, containing works by Beethoven and on which the brothers could be heard playing both separately and together, it provoked strong feelings among quite a few of those who bought the album (at the time I was working in a CD store) reminiscent of grandmothers watching their grandchildren shine in the local children's choir (I am not exaggerating). The thing that both reinforced as well as put those emotions into perspective, was the fact that despite their talent and entrance into the bigtime music world, the teenagers were able to maintain



The Jussen Brothers