



mother tongue and the thorn in its side

BRIKKUNI HAVE MOVED THE GOALPOSTS OF FOLK. NOT A SINGLE 'AJMA' TO BE HEARD. WORDS WAYNE FLASK

H

is eyes scour the scene in front of him. They could pop out of their orbits at any second. An array of even, white teeth glares out at a largely unsuspecting audience. His weapon of choice: the mother tongue of the refined diction, bent on stringing together ruthless rhymes and strategically placed sayings.

Behind him, the rest of the naughty boys play a sophisticated brand of mischievous folk tunes, crafted to the

minutest detail to accompany Mario Vella's imposing stage act.

This mini-orchestra has brought together well-known if disparate faces from the alternative scene, blending together in a very rare act of skilful musicianship and a surgical, piercing use of Maltese, comparable to Italian satirist Paolo Rossi and his band of *real* musicians. Their debut album, the aptly-named *Kuntrabanda*, launched in November 2008 to a hungry crowd, tackled prickly topics such as illegal immigration, homosexuality and small-town gossip, while seemingly denouncing the apparent backwardness of local mentality on politics and religion.

Such was the strength of the album that, barely two months after its launch, the band's gig at the MITP saw people turned away at the door of the sell-out venue. In November, while the music scene was busy putting on its

mascara for the MMAs, Brikkuni triumphed in *L-Ghanja tal-Poplu* with one of their non-album tracks: *L-Ufficcju*.

It would be dismissive to discount them as the latest heralds of protest music. Their compositions reflect the poetic wit and enchanting linguistic skill inspired by Genoese songwriter Fabrizio de Andre, today a sorely missed legend; their music, a cross between the French *chanson* and Goran Bregovic's bustling Balkan folk; their concerns, social, political and very Maltese.

On this night, therefore, the sight of Mario trudging up a staircase with a messy Chinese takeaway and subsequent skid marks on his beard has a slightly uncanny effect. "It's not as dodgy as the one I tried in Hamrun," he vouches.

Danjeli Schembri, keyboardist and composer, plays host tonight, while Michael Galea, drummer, complains of a busy weekend schedule. Fre Abdilla, recently drafted in on bass, walks in casually wearing a Driph tee (Matthew Cuschieri and Steve Delia, both on guitars, together with Maria Pia Meli, complete the line-up).

"Musically, I don't think we did anything *that* new, because the influences are all there and can be picked out rather easily," says Michael. "I'm saying we were not too innovative. Like most others, we have a lot of influences; maybe our pool is wider. Maybe the advantage is that we managed to make them ours, and introduced them in Malta. But if you look around Europe, this style has been familiar for ages."

"The singer-song writing composition is at the base of the whole

process. Our influences come in during the arrangements. I think the composer side stands out more, and that's why the album sounds a bit more personal," says Mario.

The intensity of their lyrics on society, though, suggests an underlying anger, a sort of non-sociological attachment to the Maltese society of *Kuntrabanda*.

"I guess we'd have the same impulse if we lived in Oz or Italy. So it's not strictly a Maltese issue. There are rarely any people who are 100 per cent satisfied with their surroundings. Except for Danjeli, that is," says Michael as his band-mates chuckle away. "Otherwise there is always something irritating. Maybe in Malta we are a bit closer to certain issues and we experience them first hand."

Kuntrabanda's considerations on national identity and the local political class seem to attack a conservative social base that, try as you will, still has its roots firmly entrenched in the ground. So, when Oliver Friggieri claims there is a need for parochialism in Malta, I ask, are you up in arms?

"He's probably right as far as social interaction is concerned. People have become distant, even physically. This is because the globalised media is setting trends, making lifestyles hectic. The majority of the lyrics on *Kuntrabanda* (*Fil-Bar, L-Assejju z-Zghir, Kontra Kollox u Kullhadd*) veer away from the small-town mentality. But there's ample about the other spectrum as well. I love the paradox."

"Well... I see Mario as very conservative," says Michael.

"Up to a certain point, yes. For me that balance is important. I've had enough of fierce liberals who can't tell their mouth from their arse. It's great to be open-minded and stuff – it's just that, more often than not, open minded ends up feeling like a sorry attempt at trying to be something that you inherently aren't. Maybe that's the point, but I'm not putting my name on that. Genuine innovators are welcome. We don't get to meet too many of them very often."

"I'm conservative too in that I like to live my Mediterranean lifestyle," says Danjeli. "Many people try to escape it, trying to go for something global which, frankly, doesn't make sense. Our only limitation is that of living in what I call a golden cage. If you want to do anything in Malta, you really can."

Tellingly, Brikkuni's main strength is the use of their biggest limitation – a language that cannot be exported. "We ignored that factor completely when we started off. The foreigners aren't our market. Making it big abroad was never our aim."

Their singer's claim to conservatism almost puts the whole interview in a new light. So, are those seeking a liberal message looking in the wrong place?

"No, there's a liberal vein to our message, but we are not just saying 'f*** the establishment and its conventions' and stopping there. There are many things in Malta that should be criticised but that doesn't mean there's nothing to praise. Many people have just pigeonholed the album in the protest songs category. It's true, they're protest songs, but there's more to it than that," says Michael.

"Brikkuni is not trying to lecture anyone in sociology. The message isn't apolitical either, but we're not against Malta and the Maltese. On the contrary, we do love our country. We oppose certain mentalities that bother us. That's all. We'd like to think of our music as 'Maltese' in spirit."

That Maltese spirit, and our national identity, is an

issue often tackled in *Kuntrabanda*. Mario's "*It-Torok rebhulna fin fin*" in *Kontra Kollox u Kullhadd* hints at our 500-year-old "foe" winning over Malta through a Trojan horse worthy of note – kebab outlets. Rather than a swipe at xenophobia, Mario points out how the globalised world has made it easy to create a relationship with so-called enemies in a short space of time.

"The stances on national identity are nullified. Identity isn't preserved by eliminating the possibility of influence but by exposure without loss of the true essence. Our habits – for better or worse – define us as Maltese more than any flag or property will, our clumsiness and manner of overdoing things, our relentless appetite for taking the piss and continuous moaning. In fact in the album there's a strong dose of..."

"...your constant moaning," interjects Danjeli, silencing his band mate amid roars of laughter.

Michael assures me that the next album will not focus on the same theme as *Kuntrabanda*. Mario, on the other hand, is happy they didn't write an album with a set of hip statements. "That was ok when I was 15, 16 – now I've had enough."

Maltese identity also comes under the lens of the opening track, *L-Assejju z-Zghir*, a diary of Ivorian refugee Moussa Debidaouda's odyssey to and in Malta. Stinging statements abound, among which a laconic "black doesn't go with anything" and a reminder of the tough realities frowned upon the newcomer's face, whether at work in a limestone quarry or in Malta's nightlife Mecca. No prizes for guessing what their line of thought is.

"For me, this [xenophobia] is the stupidity of a few pockets of people. Their fear of the current situation is only creating more boundaries," says Danjeli. "That said, I'm also aware that not everyone in the band agrees with this view."

Mario takes another angle. "I think the economic and media homogeneity is killing Maltese identity, not illegal immigration. The idea of trying to imitate the American or European model is leading to the death of our identity. This is happening across Europe too, not just here. Have a look at Italian TV... On the other hand I accept that illegal immigration is causing a logistical problem, but it shouldn't be regarded as a problem in any other aspect."

Sitting back in the largest of Danjeli's armchairs, Michael seems eager to shift the direction of the interview towards the sound, rather than content, of Brikkuni. The production of *Kuntrabanda*, recorded over three weeks at Temple Studios, deserves its own corner of merit.

"David Vella's experience gave us a lot of input. He gave the album more strength by removing a few things. I personally saw him giving a lot of attention to our songs, not just pasting chunks together. At first I was a bit apprehensive, it was my first studio experience and I was scared he would be circling over me. But he's far more relaxed than I had initially considered him to be," says the drummer.

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"His clinical objectivity will collide head-on with many of your concepts at first. But then we realised this was an asset. It's good to have someone with that objectivity, keeping our egos in check."

Vella's creativity has seeped in and settled comfortably with Brikkuni's arrangements, even if it involved the use of ordinary sound effects such as light bulbs, cooking pots, creaking doors, that created the likeable Brikkuni cacophony. Michael's idle, seemingly random, drumming on the burlesque *Kollox Suggettiv* is one example of how they use their instruments as extensions of their humour, as are the frequent yet welcome forays by the violin (Roberta Attard), the clarinet (Ruth Abela), and the horn sections. Overall, *Kuntrabanda* is the work of a musically mature band that can sound like the Shadows (*Willie Vassallo*) one moment and turn to ska (*Rendikont*) the next.

My personal favourite is *L-Eletti*, a painful commentary on the state of local politicians and their lackeys in the media. It's a rare protest, clashing head-on with the all too familiar image of well-shaven youths who would die just to sit in rows behind politicians at mass meetings, ready to applaud when beckoned.

Mario Vella's spontaneity can be rather thought-inducing, even though his habit of creating or wading into useless polemics with fellow musicians can occasionally land him in a bad light. His latest unprovoked lash saw him claim "I'd rather get an injection in my gums than listen to Tribal!"

"I've already explained that," he says, without losing his composure. "Nothing against Tribal. It's just that I can't fathom how people can waste precious time writing chill-out music. I don't get the concept."

Danjeli, his toothy smile stamped on his face, suggests Mario is prone to tripping over his own tongue.

"I'd say I've nothing to lose. Everybody keeps harping on about how a big mouth will lose you any possible opportunities. But since I don't see any – I can't see what I should be missing out on. I haven't lost anything so far."

He is a rare breed – cocksure yet capable of keeping mediocrity in check by being verbose about it, just so he doesn't trip over himself one day. And with the band having enough material for a second album, you might turn a blind eye to Mario's petulance and wait for the goods.

In the meantime, their primary artistic concern has been satisfied. The bar has been raised.



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