

An artists' collective sprouts new music in Belgium

Andrew Cronshaw talks with Piet Maris and Sarah Baur
about Choux de Bruxelles.



Bands tend not to last long. It's not just the usual, and often euphemistic, "musical differences", but can be many other things - the individual members' lives move on, families grow, the band finds itself declining into a loop of shortage of new ideas and repetition, enthusiasm wanes, the gigs dry up, or it becomes just too expensive to carry on. Brussels band **Jaune Toujours**, though, has been active for three decades and their latest album is *Vertigo*.

"Actually we already passed thirty years with the name Jaune Toujours", says leader, singer and accordionist **Piet Maris**. "But let's say the foundation of the nowadays configuration, including Mathieu the drummer and my brother Bart on trumpet, that was around '96, so it will be thirty years in 2026,"

We're chatting on the stand of their **Choux de Bruxelles** collective at WOMEX, the annual world music convention and showcase event that moves to a different city in Europe each year - this time in Manchester, UK - and it seems a good time to discuss some of what I mentioned in my review of the album here in RootsWorld.

I ask about the influence of the lively backbeat of ska in Jaune Toujours' music. How did that come about?

"Hard to answer. I always have been a big fan of ska, but it's only since... I think when we went to Førde festival. I had this compilation - I think it was Proper who put it out - *Deep Ska*, a four-volume box of old stuff. Skatalites and a lot of the real old stuff. I adored it. And as a youngster I was a big fan of Madness. I didn't start from the very beginning to be into ska for my own music though. But playing with Mec Yek, with the Roma people, ska was an easy way to make a backing track for that sort of music, which has the lead fiddler playing on the one, the others on the backbeat."

I guess on the accordion it's a natural thing to do a ska rhythm.

"I think so. But I didn't realise it until Førde, like twenty years ago, I realised "Ah, yeah, that's a good thing, there is some DNA we have which is ska-linked. We developed it throughout the previous album, but I think on this one we put it a little bit more bluntly, more explicitly."

Piet's talking to me in English, his third language. As a Belgian from the Flemish part of the country, his first language is Dutch, but he learned the basics of French at school and then living in Brussels meant using it more and more. His songs use all three, often mixing them within a song. *Vertigo* is mostly in French and English, and in my review I said I felt, to this Anglo at least, the English didn't have the same flow that the French appeared to; in songwriting terms it seemed explicit rather than elusively poetic. But then, it probably works fine for listeners whose first language isn't English. **Sarah Baur**, Piet's partner in life, art and Choux de Bruxelles, who has been dealing with other things on their WOMEX stand, confirms that French-speakers like it. "They think it's unusual. And for us it's international English, it's not really pointed towards English-speaking people".

Piet and Sarah are the prime movers, and Jaune Toujours is the centre of the creative and organisational collective and label that Choux de Bruxelles has become.

"Well, the reason we have other bands is the coincidences that popped up", says Piet. "Like bumping into the singers of Mec Yek; we met at the end of a Jaune Toujours concert. Or meeting Yamen, the trumpet player of 3'Ain, at a demo where we worked together. It's complementary to what we do with Jaune Toujours. I mean, these are not mini-Jaune Toujours, they're bands with an identity of their own."

But using the resources where appropriate from Jaune Toujours.

"Yeah, and there's an exchange. For instance with **3'Ain**," (pronounced 'tri-ain', and comprising Yamen Martini on trumpet, Otto Kintet on bass and Piet on accordion) "we manage to do something we hardly do with Jaune Toujours, intimate instrumental music, whereas with Jaune Toujours you have the singing, with Mec Yek with singing in Romanes, a completely other style. But it's shown that diversifying, putting out some extra projects, was good for the ecology of the artist collective. Also in terms of releases; in between the last two Jaune Toujours albums, *Europeana* and *Vertigo*, we did the 3'Ain release and another from **Mec Yek**. So more or less every year we have released an album, so every band can have its moment, its momentum."

So those are the three main bands?

There's a new one now. The bass player of 3'Ain has a jazz quintet, and we took it on our label, at his request actually. It's the first time we've done a project of the label which I'm not in. That's as it should be. And there's a very young project: Viggo, our son, put out some titles and we took it on the label as well. It's in a way different from the Jaune Toujours and the other bands' universe, but on the other hand if you listen well you feel some connection to what we do." You're developing a kind of family tradition!

"I think so, yeah, the heritage!"

There's also the accordion band...

"Ah yeah, yeah! We still have that. And there is another, **Ik en den Theo / Moi et le Théo**; a children's project. That's because they asked us to do Jaune Toujours for kids, and we did, but at that point I thought, 'Why just make a derivative of Jaune Toujours and not make something of its own?'. So we started out this duo, and it's more mobile and affordable. Because children's programming budgets are not so large. And the kids are amazed, by live music. Sometimes they ask us 'Where is the tape recorder?' or 'Where's the button you push?' Or it's their first concert ever. We do a lot of schools, and the eyes go wide, like 'What is this?' And the teachers go like, 'Hey, calm down, because we have to look after them the rest of the day!'"

"And the band of accordions still exists. We do a lot of street parties and things. And then there's a small trio, a marching band, that we do with my brother Bart and Theo. A lot of times we had requests, 'Do you have something mobile, acoustic?' And so we developed that, and it's our laboratory. Because we don't rehearse, we just improvise. It works and it's nice to do."

Jaune Toujours does rehearse, in Choux de Bruxelles's base-space. He describes how it develops material.

“Well, this latest album has been made from a lot of improvisation between the three of us - the bass player Mathieu, the drummer Theo and me. We work a lot together, jamming, and out of that most of the songs - all of them actually, apart from one one that I wrote on my own - have been made this way, and then we added the horns, giving Bart and Dirk some ideas and suggestions, and they started working on it.”

Sarah is a film-maker and designer, and she’s responsible for the sleeve designs, videos and other graphics. For the *Vertigo* CD pack Piet wanted something that suggested a fanzine from the ’90s, and Sarah took to her scissors for an analog typography text cut-up that, while suggesting that era, brought it into the 2020s with colour and a dazzle that suggested the album title. For the videos she says,

“Sometimes it’s an idea of mine, and I explain it to Piet and he adds his ideas. And what I really love about working for Jaune Toujours and the other bands is that they trust me completely, which takes away so much stress, so I feel very free. For the videos we usually choose one song from the album that we put a little bit more money towards, and hire a cameraman and it’s a bit more elaborate, with actors and that sort of thing. For “Dimanche” on this album we did that. For the other ones it’s Piet, me and our son Viggo, and we do it on a phone or whatever.”

Doing design and videos largely in-house helps, but Choux de Bruxelles operates on a shoestring; I ask if it gets any funding.

“As a collective we have yearly funding from the Flemish authorities. Of four people we have one full-time. For promotion of some releases we can get support from the authors’ unions. It makes a big difference; it permits, per album, to make it a little bit more expensive. But we’re very grateful for this funding, because it’s money that we wouldn’t get out of the concerts and sales.”

And of course getting those concerts and sales has become harder for musicians.

“I think every musician can tell that it has become harder to book proper gigs, to get the music to the possible audience. We have all the technical devices and formulae but in the end it’s harder now to get music towards an audience that would really be into it. There’s no doubt that people are really into this kind of music, but there are barriers. The only exception is radio, I think, where people can get to discover something which is not defined by the algorithm. But you have gatekeepers at the radio as well. We do radio but it’s more the alternative circuit. Now and then we hit some national radio. In Belgium, on the French-speaking side, we have big support from Didier Mélon on *Le Monde Est Un Village* on RTBF, but the other chains are pretty hard to reach. On the international level, through the World Music Chart Europe and Transglobal Music Chart we get... like we had this Japanese radio guy here this morning and he was like ‘Oh, I have the album and we play it on the radio’.”

“We really worked hard on this album, I’m proud of it, we really put our hearts into it, and now it’s a question of getting this music to audiences. We were very happy to play the sold-out concert at Ancienne Belgique for the album release, but whereas normally we would have several dates in a row, it was only that concert, and now we’re working on spring. I feel it’s starting to move, and so I’m pretty positive about where we’ll get. We have some shows in Germany confirmed, and it’s picking up a little bit again like we really wish to have it. Before Covid I already had the impression that the whole live sector was closing down a bit, and it really closed down with Covid. Just after Covid we thought, ‘OK, everybody will be eager to have live music’. In a way yes, but in another way everybody had got new habits - the sofa, the television - and I have the impression that only now is it getting a little bit more back to normal. It will never be normal again, but back to something that you think ‘OK, yes, this can become something; people eager to discover something, to get into live music again’ and I think that’s happening now, it’s kind of starting up again, and for us it’s like a renaissance.”

Find about more about the music and art collective [Choux de Bruxelles](#)
Read Andrew Cronshaw's review of Jaune Tourjours' [Vertigo](#).



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