

The power of music



Chill-out is without a doubt the most widespread musical phenomenon of recent times. The soothing tones of this extremely popular and versatile genre can be found anywhere, from Ibiza's famous Cafe del Mar beach hotspot to shopping centre lifts, and it seems to appeal to everyone, no matter what their regular musical diet. Countless compilation CDs vie for attention on supermarket shelves, while ex-hardcore techno skinheads suddenly discover the joys of love and understanding, grow some dreadlocks and swap taking pills at Pacha for playing bongos on the beach. However, not many people can claim to have witnessed a live improvised performance, featuring original international instruments and set in a purpose-built sound dome in, of all places, Alcalali (a tiny inland village north of Alicante).



Text and photos by Glenn Wickman

Last Wednesday (August 16) saw about 25 curious spectators, including young and old, Spanish and foreign, sitting cross-legged in Nestor and Michele's La Cúpula centre at nine o'clock at night, prepared for a unique mystical musical journey. Opposite us, and armed with an array of largely unknown, ethnic and downright bizarre instruments, were seven musicians, consisting of the hosts and a group of Belgium friends. Complete silence fell on the dome, as a gong was sounded and we closed our eyes to let the imminent wave of sound wash over us. My semi-conscious daydream was shattered by a terrifying overtone chant by Nestor; a deep-throated resonating gurgling that takes years of practice and consists of singing two or more notes simultaneously. Throughout the concert, various types of overtone chant intertwined with each other and were used to establish the underlying melodies, culminating in the fifth section, where all seven musicians used the technique to cover all existing registers and create a vibrating wall of sound that made the hairs on the back of my neck bristle. The concert was split into sections, each one relating to one of the world's elements: earth, wind, water, fire and the fifth one, ether, the element that according to Greek philosophy binds all the others together.

Each 'song' featured its own particular instruments and effects. The water section included ocean baskets (South Pacific and West Africa) and rain sticks (South America and the Amazon) to recreate the sound of waves crashing and dragging pebbles back along a tropical beach. The fire part - my personal favourite - featured a more aggressive sound, and a powerful visual aid was used in the form of a friend of the couple walking up and down outside the large oval windows of the dome with fire chains. The most impressive instrument, however, was a wooden table fitted with strings and a series of strategically placed small wooden pyramids. According to Nestor, this is a three-in-one device, incorporating a monochord - invented by Pythagoras 2,600 years ago and forming the basis for all modern music scales - the Japanese Koto, and the Indian Tampura. This unique device was played by Michele, who counteracted her husband's low, dark humming with a more light, positive overtone chant, creating a magical yin and yang effect. The accompanying musicians changed instruments according to the needs of the particular piece, with each one playing a variety of roles in the overall story. Tibetan and Nepalese bowls, Australian didgeridoos, North African Ndus, various types of drum... Even Michele and Nestor's children took part in one piece, playing drums and maraca-like objects, while the

youngest danced freely and happily between the 'band' and the audience. Appreciative spectators wagged the fingers of both hands at the group instead of clapping. I was later told that this is done to avoid breaking the fragile energy field created by the delicate sound, 'a universal deaf/mute appreciation sign that is common practice among more civilised audiences, such as the Japanese', in the words of Nestor. Another astounding observation was that none of the instruments or voices were amplified; the acoustics in the dome carried and spread out the sound perfectly, allowing every single note to reach our ears in its purest form, without any kind of manipulation. Audience participation was encouraged in the final piece, a famous mantra used to 'earth' the audience after the journey, a vital part of any mystical experience. According to Michele: "There are two sounds to this exercise: 'ah' and 'om'. It is known that between these two sounds, you can find every single note you need." I must admit at this stage that I also closed my eyes and took part in the widespread 'ah' and 'om' humming, but I failed to register any of the promised spiritual effects. Perhaps the knowledge that I was there in a professional capacity got in the way. The general consensus after the concert was that it had been a positive experience. Laura, from la Vall de

Lagar, and Carmela from Madrid described it as 'very interesting and relaxing. It is a great way to get in touch with your inner self'. Margaret from Alcalali said the experience was 'fantastic. I've been to several of these concerts, I love the energy and the feeling of the music'. Days later, I was given the astounding news that none of the music was rehearsed or planned: the entire concert was improvised. That is surely the mark of musicians who genuinely feel the music they perform. There are various CDs available of Nestor and Michele's music, professionally recorded and presented in a luxury case and including extensive linear notes on the various pieces. Various interesting and alternative activities take place at the dome, including an upcoming seminar on cosmology hosted by Nestor's brother on September 23 and 24. 'With the permission of hip hop, RnB, jungle and Crazy Frog Contact Michele Averard and Nestor Kornblum at: Centro La Cúpula (Cami La Racona, 03728 Alcalali, Alicante). Telephone 96 648 23 12 / 686 942 033 E-mail: info@harmonicsounds.com Website: www.harmonicsounds.com