



FREDY STUDER/HAMID DRAKE/MICHAEL ZERANG: DRUMMIN' CHICAGO (FMRCD160-0505)

Fredy Studer (drums, cymbals, gongs, metal, multiple percussion), Hamid Drake (drums, cymbals, metal, frame drum, tabla, multiple percussion), Michael Zerang (drums, cymbals, gongs, metal, darabuka, zither, tambourine, whistles, bells, multiple percussion)



«Let us now pass from the zoo of reality to the zoo of mythologies, to the zoo whose denizens are not the lions but the sphinxes and griffons and centaurs. The population in the second zoo should far exceed the population of the first, since a monster is no more than a combination of parts of real beings, and the possibilities of permutation border on the infinite.»

Jorge Luis Borges, The Book of Imaginary Beings

Projects involving multiple drummers have gotten something of a bad reputation in recent years, in part through their unfortunate association with drum circles, men's groups and the like. But the stereotype of a bunch of guys in the park hunched over djembes and congas, searching for their inner children by whacking away in pseudo primitive ecstasy misses one of the key aspects of the all-percussion jam – its range of possibilities.

Part of the reason for that is that percussion has long ago ceased to be limited to hitting things – indeed, percussion is much more than percussive. Drummers rub their instruments, creating fricative sounds. They stroke their drums, evoking hums, whines, mumbles and other voicings. They are attentive to the surface tension of skins, and with subtle manipulations, using fingers, palms, sticks, elbows, or feet, they change the pitch of their drums; hence, they have at their disposal all sorts of melodic devices. With an extremely wide range of percussion instruments and traditions to choose from around the globe – and virtually every musical culture makes use of some sort of percussion – multiple-percussion, as a practice, makes use of a huge number of timbres. The character of percussion music, is thus anything but narrow or static.

For example, one need look no further than the Art Ensemble of Chicago, who introduced the notion of «little instruments», an idea devised by bassist Malachi Favors, no doubt influenced by Sun Ra and his Arkestra, who during a rather brief, but fertile Chicago period had explored the potentialities of multiple percussion. Chicago is a key place for such experimentation, be it in the African drum elements introduced into otherwise quite mainstream early piano trio music by King Fleming and Andrew Hill, or the more adventurous investigations of Mr. Ra and Roscoe Mitchell.

So it makes good sense that Fredy Studer chose to record this multiple percussion project in Chicago. Of course, it helps that the other two percussionists are Chicagoans. And it doesn't hurt that, like Studer, they're among the greatest drummers on the planet, or for that matter that they've devoted a healthy chunk of their time in the last fifteen odd years to playing together as a duo.

That's something Hamid Drake and Michael Zerang do every year to celebrate the coming of the winter solstice, and it stands as one of the most eagerly anticipated events on the Chicago cultural calendar. It's also been the foundation of an astonishing musical relationship, one that has served them well in many other contexts, whether playing in a trio with tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson or motoring the Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet, which they did together from 1997 until 2003, when Hamid left to pursue other collaborations.





Studer, of course, is no stranger to percussion summits. He has participated in Percussion Profiles (with Jack DeJohnette, Dom Um Romao, and fellow Swiss Pierre Favre), the percussion ensemble Singing Drums (with Nana Vasconcelos, Paul Motian, and Favre), and the drum quartet Four In Time (with Daniel Humair, Fritz Hauser, and Favre). He is also part of the present percussion trio Schulkowsky-Studer-Baron (with Robyn Schulkowsky, and Joey Baron), and the duo with Pierre Favre, to site just a few examples of Studer's experience collaborating with and leading other percussion masters.

Neither is Studer an outsider to the Chicago improvised music scene. Indeed, he's played in town numerous times, as a member of his powerhouse Hardcore Chambermusic trio Koch-Schütz-Studer, and later as a resident of the Windy City, during a four month at the artistic atelier of the city of Lucerne, which is Switzerland's sister city of Chicago (and is also Studer's birthplace and hometown).

During Studer's Chicago sojourn, he had the opportunity to hear Drake and Zerang in their winter solstice concerts – three of them, each commencing at 6 AM – and it was at those early morning concerts at Link's Hall that the concept for Drummin' Chicago was born.

The recording, which took place over the course of one day and night, covers an enormous breadth of stylistic terrain, from heavy textural improvising to deep and inventive grooves. In some places, the three musicians contribute in extremely different and readily audible ways, while elsewhere their personalities merge into a startling group sound. For the former, take the opening track, which is a feature for Zerang's amazing friction-percussion on snare drum, set against Studer other-worldly evocations on a giant gong, played with a mallet that's outfitted with a superball on its end (rubber rubbings), and finally Drake's infectious reggae rhythm on drum-kit. Impossible to say what kind of music «North Damen Trance» is – it's got electronic elements, the gooey feel of a hot dub plate, and some elastic vocal effects that might be described as sonic salt-water taffy.

«Empty Bottle Flow» includes a performance by Drake on tabla, an instrument he studied but now rarely plays. On «Six Hands,» the Chicagoans play much the way they do in their solstice events, Drake on frame drum and Zerang on darabuka, but the overall sound is something completely new, given the presence of Studer, who plays in total sympathy on cymbals sounded with plastic tubes. The trap-set trio that gives the CD its name is short and sweet, a rolling ball of energy, while Drake and Studer face off on kits with Zerang's pennywhistle on «Candlestick Whistle,» a shortie whose title is a reference to yet another Chicago free music venue. On the disk's closing track, individual percussion approaches meld into shifting densities of brushwork. Somehow, it's a perfect statement about the coming together of these musicians that the program starts with them so very distinct and ends with them so completely unified.

In this music, we have entered the second zoo of Borges' remarkable book, the zoo of imaginary beings, ones not dependent on the prescripts of nature, but defiantly mutant in their grafting together of differences. A monster is no more than a combination of the parts of real beings, Borges explains. It's true, a satyr is no more than a human and a goat, a griffon simply an eagle and a lion. This is music assembled in a similar manner, disparate elements merged into a new kind of beast. Drummin' Chicago is, in the best sense of the word, a monster. The possibilities of permutation explored by Studer, Zerang and Drake border on the infinite. Hooray for the boundless, populous, freaky zoo.

John Corbett, Chicago, April 2005



- 1. NORTH DAMEN TRANCE 12.04**
 Fredy Studer: Big Gong
 Hamid Drake: Drum-Set
 Michael Zerang: Scratching on Snare Drum,
 Bells
- 2. DRUMMIN' CHICAGO 2.18**
 Fredy Studer: Drum-Set
 Hamid Drake: Drum-Set
 Michael Zerang: Drum-Set
- 3. EMPTY BOTTLE FLOW 8.37**
 Fredy Studer: Drum-Set, Metal
 Hamid Drake: Tabla
 Michael Zerang: Zither
- 4. PRIMA MATERIA 4.09**
 Fredy Studer: Drum-Set,
 multiple Percussion
 Hamid Drake: Drum-Set,
 multiple Percussion
 Michael Zerang: Drum-Set,
 multiple Percussion
- 5. SIX HANDS 10.12**
 Fredy Studer: Plastic Tubes on Cymbal
 Hamid Drake: Frame Drum
 Michael Zerang: Darabuka, Tambourine
- 6. BLUE ELBOW 5.22**
 Fredy Studer: Drum-Set, Metal,
 multiple Percussion
 Hamid Drake: Drum-Set, Metal,
 multiple Percussion
 Michael Zerang: Drum-Set, Metal,
 multiple Percussion
- 7. CANDLESTICK WHISTLE 1.40**
 Fredy Studer: Drum-Set
 Hamid Drake: Drum-Set
 Michael Zerang: Whistles
- 8. THREE VOICES 3.53**
 Fredy Studer: Drum-Set, Metal,
 multiple Percussion
 Hamid Drake: Drum-Set, Metal,
 multiple Percussion
 Michael Zerang: Drum-Set, Metal,
 multiple Percussion
- 9. MOVEMENTS ON SKIN 6.30**
 Fredy Studer: Brushes on Snare Drum
 Hamid Drake: Brushes on Snare Drum
 Michael Zerang: Brushes on Snare Drum

