

Review Cuneiform Records - TILT - The Great Harry Hillman - 2017

Switzerland doesn't produce many musical acts compared to other European countries, but the ones that do emerge are always of the highest quality. Whether it's the arty metal of Celtic Frost and Coroner, the witty pop of Yello, the clattery punk of LiLiPUT, or the airtight funk grooves of post-jazz ensemble Nik Bärtsch's Ronin, Swiss passports are a virtual guarantee that the music will be smart, engaging, and highly enjoyable.

The Great Harry Hillman is a Swiss post-jazz quartet—composed of Nils Fischer on reeds; David Koch on guitar and effects; Samuel Huwyler on bass; Dominik Mahnig on drums—from Lucerne, a lakeside city in the country's center. About the name: Harry Hillman was an American hurdler who received three gold medals at the 1904 Summer Olympics, memorable as the first Olympics held outside Europe, in St. Louis. The Great Harry Hillman, the band, formed in 2009 - 105 years after Hillman's victory, a landmark noted by the band - and in 2015 won the 2015 ZKB Jazz Prize. And yes, you're correct to assume that a European jazz band named in tribute to American athlete Harry Hillman is not your 'normal' jazz band adhering to staid standards. Since forming, this band of energetic Millennial musical iconoclasts have played nearly a hundred concerts, performing at jazz festivals and touring extensively across Northern Europe. They've recorded two previous albums, 2013's self-released Livingston and 2015's Veer Off Course, released by the German label Klaeng records. Now they've joined the Cuneiform Records roster for their third release, Tilt.

The Great Harry Hillman's music combines jazz, rock, and improv into a subdued, layered, yet thrilling sound that will appeal to fans of bands like Radian or Tortoise, as well as modern jazz artists like Mary Halvorson and Nik Bartsch's Ronin. Mahnig's drumming is light but emphatic, his snare ticking like a fine watch as he sets up shifting rhythms that clatter and bounce. Koch's guitar work is often as much about atmosphere as riffs, though he can get loud at times; at the climax of "354°," his guitar is a Sonic Youth-like clang, as Fischer erupts into long screams. Huwyler's bass is almost dubby at times, maintaining a subtle but powerful presence that gives even the group's most abstract pieces ["Agnes fliegt"] a solid core. And while Fischer is often playing the most overtly melodic role, he's just as happy to step into the background and simply comment on the others' interactions.

The Great Harry Hillman thinks of itself as a collective, with nobody dominating the creative process and everyone making their voice heard. "We have music from all four band members on the album," say the musicians, who speak as one. "Everyone brings tunes, fragments, et cetera, and we finalize every song together. Everything is a collective decision at the end." This philosophy has helped them to create a sound like no one else, one that has gradually mutated over time while retaining its essence. "Although we all have different backgrounds and work in different genres, it is very important that we are always open to any kind of influences from each of us."

Their open-mindedness and exploratory spirit extends beyond the music to every aspect of their existence as a band. Their live performances have energy and a sense of fun that keeps the complexity of the compositions and interplay from feeling dry or academic. And the same goofy exuberance can be seen in their band photos—which cleverly continue allusions to sports—and in their wildly creative YouTube videos. The 360° video that they created to accompany Tilt is an artistic and technical tour-de-force that one viewer compared to a Danny Elfman movie. The Great Harry Hillman know that while music is an art, fueled by internal creative fires, they also know that music, like sports, is also entertainment, and like sports requires skill, practice, determination and an enjoyable, winning performance to succeed.

The songs come wrapped in obscure titles like "The New Fragrance," "How to Dice an Onion," and "Moustache," and those are just the ones in English. While they flow seamlessly together, each piece has its own identity. "We wanted every song to have its own strong mood," they say. "It was not the idea to feature extended solos, but to feature a strong sound as a band."

The album also has a strong live feel; while the sounds are electronically manipulated at times, this is music made by four men in a room. This is made most obvious on "How to Dice an Onion," which ends with laughter

and studio dialogue. "We thought a lot about how we could put the energy and vibe we create live into a recording, and it turned out very well," say the band.

Indeed. Tilt is The Great Harry Hillman's best work to date: a quiet but powerful album by four thoughtful musicians who are more than capable of rocking out when they feel like it, but would more often than not rather wrap the listener in delicately constructed sonic webs of indefinable beauty. There are no gold medals in music (unless gold records count), but The Great Harry Hillman deserve a spot on the artistic podium for sure.