

The Belgian Rock In Opposition lifers return with their first album for a decade

By Julian Cowley

Univers Zero

Lueur

Sub Rosa CD/DL/LP

In the late 1970s, when Univers Zero were starting to reach out to an audience beyond their loyal but limited local following in Belgium, members spoke openly about the music they themselves liked to listen to: Captain Beefheart, Peter Brötzmann, Igor Stravinsky, Krzysztof Penderecki, Third Ear Band and, especially, a relatively obscure early 20th century composer named Albert Huybrechts. Broadly speaking, those were influences that helped Univers Zero to fit neatly into the Rock In Opposition alliance alongside Stormy Six, Samla Mamma Manna, Etron Fou Le Loublan and Henry Cow.

One Sunday evening in March 1979, Univers Zero performed on the same bill as those musicians from Italy, Sweden, France and the UK at the New London Theatre in Drury Lane, under the banner “Five rock groups the record companies don’t want you to hear”. Drummer Chris Cutler, who played a key role in organising the event, subsequently remarked that Univers Zero proved to be the most divisive of the groups on the bill, eliciting the least applause, yet selling more records than anyone else on the night. That fact suggests that certain members of the audience found their music too challenging, even perhaps bewildering, while others were intrigued, recognising that this Belgian group were offering music that expanded the familiar horizons of rock in ways that would reward committed listening.

Roger Trigaux, who played guitar in the earliest incarnation of Univers Zero, remarked that their music was “not something ‘new,’ but something that exists in its own spirit”. Trigaux departed in 1980 to channel his own musical vision into the avant rock group Present, which he nurtured and directed until he died in 2021. Univers Zero disappeared from view during the late 80s, but since resurfacing at the close of the 90s the Belgian outfit have continued to develop their distinctive identity, without compromise or dilution, under the guidance of drummer Daniel Denis, who from the start had shared writing credits with Trigaux, and is now the sole remaining member of that initial line-up.

Lueur (French for glimmer or glow) is an absorbing new album that offers a mature reduction of the Univers Zero sound, a concentrated distillation served up ten years after their last offering *Phosphorescent Dreams* and 50 years after the group’s formation. Early on, the term chamber rock was attached to

their work, not least because in those days the instrumentation included violin and bassoon, with Trigaux sometimes switching to harmonium. Daniel Denis now contributes keyboards as well as drums. He is joined by his son Nicolas Denis, playing bass, plus guitarist Nicolas Dechêne and clarinettist Kurt Budé. Overall these 11 pieces do retain the conversational intimacy of music performed by a chamber ensemble, but the shifts in manner and mood negotiated by this group have far more dramatic breadth and emotional depth and complexity than the cosy label chamber rock might suggest.

When Nicolas Denis sings on “Sfumato (Part 1)” his voice oozes vulnerability yet remains firmly embedded within its instrumental setting like some soft-bodied creature within its shell. Listeners familiar with This Heat’s first album may perhaps draw a comparison with Charles Hayward’s vocals on “Not Waving”, integrated within its instrumental context, yet hauntingly precarious. Univers Zero have always shown an exceptional capacity to conjure up palpable atmospheres and to orchestrate shifts of mood. This has in the past prompted comparison with the artistry of film score composers, and enthusiasts for that increasingly popular genre might well find the group’s discography rewarding.

But generic considerations have never been a priority for Daniel Denis. From the outset Univers Zero have aimed to tap into a broad range of potential emotional responses. On *Lueur* they sometimes sound buoyant and assertive, brimming with confidence that is reflected through formal clarity, engaging melodies and rhythmic vigour. But at any moment that self-assurance may wane, to be superseded by a prevailing air of uneasiness and anxiety. More often such states coexist within their shrewdly calculated arrangements, with the clear cut architecture of their music unsettled by eerie and suspenseful atmospheric intimations.

The short opening track “Migration Vers Le Bas” is indicative – metallic and percussive in character, but with an off-kilter loping stride, and shrouded in warped reverberations, as though glimpsed in a distorting mirror. It’s a provocative way to open an album. And “Coda”, still shorter, is a no less provocative way to close. A forthright and energetic instrumental that might, in other hands, have been contrived to draw listeners into the album at the outset, it peters out after just over two minutes, leaving a brief, vaporous trail of mutated reflections that seems, contrarily, not to arrive at some conclusion but to beckon us back to the beginning.

The spirit of Univers Zero has essentially remains unaltered, and long established followers of the group will find this music deeply satisfying. But *Lueur* is an excellent introduction too, artfully conceived and beautifully realised throughout. It’s an encapsulation of Univers Zero’s consistent approach to making music, an amalgam that resonates with qualities that are recognisably human, in their regular oddity and apparently straightforward complexity. ●



Glow motion: Univers Zero