

BONGO JOE

Artist: Tout Bleu
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Otium, the second album by Geneva's Tout Bleu is a singular vision made up of a dizzying array of things, from electric folk to Krautrock, glitch techno to dubbed-out postpunk, chamber rock to synthpop. It experiments with a pop sensibility, transmits its creators' passionate social conscience with calm and charm alike, and finds the project evolving from the primary vision of Simone Aubert to a functional band unit.

On the evidence of *Otium*, we're catching Tout Bleu at a really exciting point in the band's evolution. Released on Bongo Joe Records, which also has its base in Geneva and which, like Tout Bleu themselves, is at the heart of the experimental music scene in the city. Names on the label roster including Massicot, Hyperculte and Orchestre Tout Puissant Marcel Duchamp are directly linked to the TB family tree; others such as Cyril Cyril and AMAMI make the region weirder than the unsuspecting might suppose.

The shape of the musical underground in Switzerland, and Geneva especially, is vital to what Tout Bleu do. Cave12, the foremost Genevan venue for avant-garde music, is also crucial to the project having begun in the first place. Aubert cites the importance of Swiss experimental music veterans including Joke Lanz and Dave Phillips, artists who may be more sonically

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extreme but who, in a supportive and close-knit scene, still act as peers.

The flip side of this is the unmissable spectre of capitalist excess, hardly unique to Geneva but more glaring in this seat of international finance than in most cities. This only strengthens Aubert's determination to keep existing in a way that pushes against such bloat - in *Otium's* lyrics, which with a general economy of words call for we the people to remain courageous as the world spirals towards doom, and in the way *Tout Bleu* go about their business.

When Aubert began making music under this name in 2018, *Tout Bleu* consisted of her alone, but was not intended to remain that way. Two solo live performances only strengthened the Swiss performer's belief that creativity is best achieved through cooperation, and *Tout Bleu*, released towards the end of that same year, saw Aubert joined by drummer Nicholas Stücklin, violinist Agathe Max and POL, an electronic musician who's been a fixture of the Genevan leftfield scene since the 1990s. The four members combined heady drones, rhythms both manmade and non-organic, and Aubert's ghostly singing manner to fine effect - albeit unlikely to pass for a pop record to the average listener.

On *Otium*, this has changed, along with much of the musical personnel: POL remains, but Stücklin and Max make way for Naomi Mabanda (cello) and Luciano Turella (viola). Before, Aubert considered *Tout Bleu's* process to begin with textures, upon which her cohorts added further sonic layers, rather than songs in the strict compositional sense. Now, what you hear can justly be called arrangements, with the group looking to emulate and update the full-cream lushness of a 1970s Abbey Road recording. It's a testament to POL, who as on *Tout Bleu* is this album's chief producer, that this has largely been achieved through digital editing, with sections recorded remotely for the most part - yet over nine songs you'll hear the wavy opulence of the Mellotron and timeless phasing and reverb tricks.

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Ere De Rien opens the album, its jazzy postpunk bassline anchoring the more freewheeling string parts and electronic sparkle. *Baleine* builds, over seven minutes, from sparse instrumental arrangements to a looping, loping synthesized folk part (a folk music influence colours sizeable parts of the whole album) that links the electronic and the organic. *Constellation* leans closer to the former mode: melancholy keyboards shimmer and POL assembles crisp, glitch-adjacent beats, while Aubert's vocals yearn. *Rucksucre* gets in its groove with the kind of determinedly repetitious swing that Stereolab perfected in their prime.

A retreat of sorts from tuneful insouciance takes hold mid-album, with *Entre Les Mots* basing itself around drones - as did much of the *Tout Bleu* debut - and *Ce Sera* a sinister, crunching, discordant oddity. *U22* begins as a measured post-rock instrumental, switches into creepy minimal synth and then drops in a funky bassline and curious vocal yelps. POL's glitchy rhythms, Mabanda's elegant viola back up dubby, layered vocals on *Otium* the track - and *Otium* the album ends on a troubled-sounding note, reflective of how Aubert sees the world today, with *She's Lost*.

Tout Bleu may have taken a turn for the accessible with this latest release, but there's no suggestion that Aubert craves success for its own sake - its title, a Latin word describing leisure time used for improving activities, is pointed in that respect.