

Super Attirail Band

Morricone meets the Mustaphas in stories that have no words. What's not to like? **Chris Nickson** introduces a French band you really should know.

Some bands can exist for years, occasionally blipping on to the radar. But all the time, they keep ploughing their furrow, deepening and broadening it, creating something unique and wonderful. France's L'Attirail are like that. 23 years together and twelve albums released. That's quite a CV. And everything instrumental, an exploration of music from the Balkans to the Mexican desert. And behind it all is the vision of one man: Xavier Demerliac, multi-instrumentalist and composer of all L'Attirail's material, expanding his ideas on the recent *La Part Du Hasard*, a very cinematic 19th Century journey through Mexico with a bunch of gamblers. For far too long they've remained one of the quiet secrets of music, although they certainly deserve more acclaim. Maybe this new record will help them achieve it.

"In fact, the idea of the train on the new album arrived during the recording," he explains. "When we were working on it, I found old family photos on glass plates (1920s) taken by my grandfather who worked as a railway engineer. There were pictures of steam locomotives, repair shops, railways, etc. The scenario is built gradually but for me it is very important to have one to finalise the arrangements and the artwork. In addition, I hear the titles of the pieces; they give an indication of the meaning of these stories without words. I also like to blur geographical and time markers because this also allows the listener to build his own space and time."

But none of this detail is on the cover. That only lists the titles and musicians. It's for the listener to create their own narrative, a very deliberate move by Demerliac. After all, it's far more powerful to let some hearing impose their own tale on the music.

"In general, I do not want to say too much about the covers to keep the mystery. I especially do not want to block the imagination of the listener."

It's a long way from the young man who grew up learning trumpet near Brest, in Brittany. Yet in some other ways it's not such a great distance at all. Even then, "I did not really like playing this instrument and my only good memories are related to the conservatory orchestra. I preferred to spend hours composing jingles on the family piano. At fifteen, I sold my trumpet and

bought my first electric guitar. I set up a first rock band in high school, then a second at the university in Paris; nothing very convincing. After, at the beginning of the '90s, I played in an experimental rock band that took pieces of Captain Beefheart. It was a joyous anarchy, but I needed to go through it. Later, with L'Attirail, I returned to the brass through the trombone piston, an instrument much more suited to my personality (and my lips) than the trumpet."

Along the way, Demerliac developed an unlikely group of influences, ranging from the cinema music of Ennio Morricone and Nino Rota to the global madness of 3 Mustaphas 3, all of whom are there at the back of L'Attirail's music.

"I like Rota and Morricone for several reasons: I like Italian cinema, I like instrumental music and I like this ability they had to invent a musical universe independent of the modes", he says. "Ennio Morricone invents a music that everyone today associates with the western, whereas in reality he drew very little from the musical traditions of the end of the 19th Century. For 3 Mustaphas 3, it's something else. This is probably the first group I listened to (probably *Shopping*) which mixed different traditional influences with the Western contribution (bass, drums, guitar). A lively music with rock ingredients but that made me travel much more than rock itself."

And there's one more unlikely personality hiding behind the band's music: "I must mention JJ Cale who remains the musician that I have listened to the most for 35 years. I really discovered the guitar with him. Not a week without listening to one of his albums. His playing and his nonchalant voice continue to enchant me and always accompany me in my road trips. I do not really like guitar heroes and with JJ Cale I found the perfect anti-hero."

With the pieces in place, L'Attirail came to life in 1994, when Demerliac teamed up with Jean-Stéphane Brosse.

"He was the accordion (Rota) and me the guitar (Morricone). After more electric experiments, we found ourselves on this idea of L'Attirail. The desire for a very acoustic music far from the sound walls we had known in experimental rock. And then the opening to Eastern Europe and the Balkans. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, I

started to visit the former Eastern bloc and I went to Central Asia with the Trans-Siberian. The open spaces and the distant Europe that opened to us forged the music of L'Attirail, a bridge between our Western culture and the rest of Europe that had been artificially cut off during the Cold War era."

Soon they were a quintet, and for the last fifteen years, the line-up has remained fairly stable (Alexandre Michel, Xavier Milhou, Eric Laboulle, and since 2009, Sébastien Palis, Clément Robin, Chadi Chouman). But the constant thread has been Demerliac composing all the music throughout the band's career.

"For composing and recording, I am quite solitary, and the musicians come to record at my place, according to the real needs of each album," he observes. "In fact, I build the pieces as and when. Records that can spread over a year. For concerts, I'm part of a collective and I rarely put myself forward. We're a real family. We always enjoy meeting, working, talking, eating and drinking – a bit."

For the band's first decade, Demerliac's music generally looked towards the Balkans. Then came a shift as he turned his gaze west, especially to the open spaces of the Americas.

"After building an imaginary music of a great fantasy Europe, I felt that I wanted to go elsewhere," he agrees. "And I thought *Kara Deniz* (2007) would be our last album influenced by the Balkans. I have always loved the wide open spaces for their perspectives and the feeling of being 100 percent in nature. I've lived for almost 20 years between countryside (Picardy) and sea (Brittany). Besides, I am a true enthusiast of westerns, of those where there is a real relation between the man and the grandiose nature. For me, a solitary and nomadic rider of the 19th Century is a forerunner of the road trip. I also like this kind of western because it fantasises a world of freedom disappearing in favour of an industrial and consumer society. Calexico's approach influenced me and I felt a lot in common with them. They also come from rock and they expanded their geographic space by incorporating more traditional and rural cultures from another country than theirs. I really like their first albums and they had a lot of instrumental pieces at the time."



Photo: Serge Vincenti

So many of their albums deal with journeys of one sort or another, by different forms of transport, and that's another reflection of the composer, Demerliac feels.

"And of course it's a music that makes me travel. I really think that every human being has deep inside him a need for space and perspectives, and that this is repressed today because the majority of us live in closed and confined spaces. If our music helps to fill this gap it is a real satisfaction for me. Many people tell me that they listen to L'Attirail in their car when they are driving... it makes me happy."

The music is very visual in its evocation of landscape and travel, quite cinematic, and their videos are small, gem-like films – take a look online at those they've made for *La Part Du Hasard*, which tell pieces of the disc's story without a word of dialogue. But the connection between film and music is perfectly natural to Demerliac, although it "was built without premeditation, except the influence exerted by some composers. Immediately after our first album, I was contacted by Emilie Deleuze, a director making her first feature film, and our first soundtrack was made like that. It was the same with other directors like Patrice Leconte afterwards. I think that gradually and unconsciously my way of composing has been influenced by all these uses of L'Attirail by the cinema. I understood that music should not smother the image. It can be full of many small arrangements and twists but never become talkative. I also understood that it was better to tell evolving stories,

raise with several small improvisations and different instruments and timbres rather than exhausting in long choruses. Sometimes I compose a piece with certain images in mind and find several years later that same piece in a film with images similar to those I had imagined. It's very disturbing but I feel like I'm in my right place. We play a lot of cine-concerts (mainly on silent films of the '20s) and it's really the logical continuation on stage of this strong link between our music and the image. And I'm currently working on John Ford's last silent western, *Three Bad Men*."

With one exception (*Kara Deniz*), all of L'Attirail's work has been instrumental, far ahead of the rise in instrumental music that's spread across Europe in the last few years.

"Making instrumental music today is still a priesthood, far from mass culture," Demerliac says, "There have been more favourable periods, classical, jazz ... and the Shadows became famous without singing; I have a fondness for the Shadows. Thanks to film music, instrumental tracks (including generics) are part of the collective memory. And fortunately there is the traditional music with many instrumental genres that can be very popular if not very media-friendly. But I know the gateway to music for many people is singing. Songs tell stories; so I always told myself that we also had to tell real stories; composing songs that evolve without being unnecessarily complex, with a variety of timbres, rhythms, tones etc."

"On our albums, each piece must have a special place and the album itself must be a complete journey with fast moments (the

rhythm of the trip), breaks, surprises, anxieties. Staying away from fashion does not matter, and acoustic music ages better than others in terms of sound if they are well produced. But as we don't get rich with instrumental music, music to the image is a way to make a living for some of us. Personally, apart from L'Attirail, I make music for television series and I also do a lot of sound illustration."

Apart from east and west, Demerliac also looks north a little as well. "I must conclude just by mentioning my great interest for your country. I love English literature and your cinema that almost disappeared. And if there is one thing that I regret, it is the great era of the English automotive industry of an incredible manufacturing quality (1950s and '60s in particular). But luckily, for the old English we really find all the spare parts, which helps with the Morris Minor I'm restoring. I was in Cornwall a few months ago for the first time, I went back in love with the place and I will return – with my Morris Minor."

It's all too easy to describe music as taking you on a journey. All too often, it ends up as a trip to nowhere. But with L'Attirail, it's definitely true. More than a journey, in fact. With an album like *La Part Du Hasard*, you're on an adventure, without a single lyric being sung. That's a touch of alchemy, something you can go back to and discover something new, time after time. Really, not a word of a lie.

<http://lattirail-groupe.com/>

