Fusing Sounds and Finding Rhythm

Ricky Romain and **John Robertson** talk to **Fergus Byrne** about the unspoken language of **Kanekt**

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There's something particularly fitting about meeting musicians Ricky Romain and John Robertson at The Tiffin Box in Axminster. Named after the multi-tiered Asian lunchbox that brings together a curated variety of dishes, the café is also a treasure trove of homemade food, teas and coffee. Reflecting the lunchbox's tradition of community and nourishment, it provides a natural setting to discuss the unique origins and philosophy of John and Ricky's latest musical project, Kanekt—itself an organic fusion of multi-dimensional musical genres.

We sit at a table in the corner beneath a glowing standard lamp, surrounded by shelves of books, pottery, and warmth, drifting into an easy conversation about the musical genres that Kanekt embraces. The band brings together disciplines that include classical Indian sitar, rock and jazz guitar as well as classical violin, clarinet, bass, and percussion. Born out of a collaboration between Ricky on sitar and pianist Andy Goldberg after John produced their album *Variations*, the new venture took root after Andy decided to move on to focus on another project.

Kanekt's sound is a captivating blend of various musical worlds. 'Once the piano was gone, it opened up so many tonal areas which the piano had covered,' explained Ricky. They introduced the clarinet and violin, developing a wide range and depth of musical possibilities. As musical director and producer, John understands the need for space within musical performance. Electing to use an old-fashioned jazz guitar because its 'rounded tone' is quite different from the sitar, he points out, 'We play in unison and try to actually make space for each other. It's really about being disciplined.' The result is a sound that is both layered and spacious.

Kanekt is also about pushing the boundaries of their own musical influences. While Ricky explains how 'the strength of Western music is harmony and counterpoint, while the strength of Indian classical music is rhythmic and melody,' John cites their version of the Charlie Mingus standard *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* as an example. The song is basically 'a melody with some very complicated chords,' says John. 'But I thought, wow, that sounds like it could be played by a sitar, because it's so melodically proven.' Although it's now part of their repertoire, ironically, it only came about because one of their first gigs was at a jazz festival.

One of the most profound aspects of Kanekt's music is its ability to evoke emotion without lyrics. Both Ricky and John appreciate the seemingly 'hardwired' human response to major and minor chords, suggesting that music can access emotion on a pre-verbal level. As he is also a well-known visual artist, Ricky shares an insight into his own creative process, stating, 'the compositions for me are very visual. I have a very visual internal world.' He explains that pieces often come to him with a story or imagery attached, such as one composition that reminded him of the composer Erik Satie, which then somehow morphed into Toulouse Lautrec. Another was inspired by the Indian story of Rama and the boatman. These visual connections help him to 'remember the feeling of how the piece should be.'

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Ricky recalls how it was through the Beatles and Ravi Shankar that he first became acquainted with the sitar. Shankar's influence on the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was what drew him in. 'I was sitting in a mate's car off Oxford Street listening to the radio and heard this album for the first time and was completely blown away,' recalls Ricky. 'I became obsessed with Shankar. I realised I completely understood this music. It made perfect sense to me.'

Working in antiques and using the deposit money for a flat he was about to move into, Ricky bought his first sitar in a Sufi bookshop in London's East End. By chance, the owner suggested he meet Punita Gupta, a legendary sitar player and teacher who was due to play a gig there the following evening. Ricky became her student, renting a room in her house and becoming a part-time driver and roadie. 'All of the Indian musicians who came to this country came to her house,' says Ricky. 'I learned an awful lot just by being in their presence.' For Ricky, the music became a home for all his emotions, driving him to explore and create layers of musical journeys.

In a similar vein, John Robertson's first introduction to music had a comparable impact. While learning piano at school, he realised he completely got the structure of playing and couldn't understand how other people didn't see what he saw. 'Piano was obvious to me,' he explains, 'I found it

fairly easy.' Then he started to play guitar 'because guitar was cooler.' In the early days, he was often in and out of lessons, but says the best training came when he first joined a band. 'The first band I was in was a reggae band,' he says. He recalls an experienced Rastafarian musician telling him to play 'this one chord every eight bars and not do anything else', and he had to do that for two hours. 'And it was really good training because it got me into ensemble playing, where what you do on your own might not be that important, but when combined in an ensemble, it becomes something different.'

Leveraging their individual strengths alongside Karen Wilmhurst on clarinet, Sudhi Salooja on violin, Steve Scott on bass and Stu Steadman on percussion, Kanekt creates something entirely new, often starting with a melody and allowing the harmony and rhythm to develop around it. This approach, as Ricky explains, is a way to honour the diverse musical knowledge within the group rather than trying to simply replace a missing instrument like the piano.

For Ricky and John, live performance is the vehicle that drives the emotional experience for both the audience and the musicians. With a background of playing alongside artists like Grace Jones, The Selector, Joss Stone, Morcheeba, and Alice Cooper, John states, 'I'm a great believer in live music.' While there has been a great deal of coverage about how the internet and streaming have changed how musicians can earn a living, John adopts a more philosophical perspective, saying: 'There's another way of looking at it. Has it not just returned music to where it was historically and where it should be, which is a part of everybody's community experience? And musicians are not going to get paid more than any other skilled craftsmen in the community. We are part of people's daily lives. And yes, people will listen to it online, but they will also go and see it live.' Reflecting on his first live performance after Covid, Ricky agrees, 'It was one of the most emotionally powerful experiences, I felt really privileged.'

As locals drift in and out of the Tiffin Box and the rest of the day beckons, both Ricky and John address the philosophy that drives their feelings about the future for musicians in a world so dramatically changed since they first began playing. 'They're going to have to return to the way it was,' says John, 'to play live, like when the majority of musicians were within their own communities, playing live and doing other things.'

Also citing community as the basis for the progression of new musicians, Ricky agrees, 'It becomes even more important to put yourself out within your community. You've got to establish your foundation. It has to then come from your community, like putting a pebble in the water and letting it ripple out from there.'

In a world haunted by a potentially alarming future of fakery and insecurity, John sees only one way: 'You've got to do what you do with utter sincerity. Yes, listen to all the stuff around you. But do what you love, and then find the people who love what you do.'

Kanekt, with John Robertson, Ricky Romain, Sudhi Salooja, Steve Scott, Stu Steadman and Karen Wilmhurst will be playing at Shute Festival at Axminster St. Mary's Church, Silver Street, Axminster EX13 5AH on Sunday, October 12th. Doors open, 4.30pm, performance 5pm. Tickets £15/£12 on the door or online at: www.shutefest.org.uk/booking.

Kanekt. Photograph by Robert Golden.