

PREVIEW OF EARTH VS. E-TOWN – CANADA 05/05/2015

By Yannick Znayew

When it comes to urban life in Canada, Edmonton is about as cold and isolated as a city can get. With less than a million people and around 300 km. away from the nearest metropolis, its density pales to the rustic surroundings of a prairie wasteland covered in snow for more than half the year and with temperatures that can dip to less than -40°C. On a couple occasions recently, the surface of Mars was warmer than in Edmonton.

But the city also boasts a world-class symphony, several art galleries, a thriving theatrical and music community and a calendar full of festivals throughout the year. It's also home to a small but dedicated electronic and experimental scene with performers wanting to be heard, not only in a city weaned on country music and classic rock, but outside its Canadian borders as well.

That's where a project dubbed "Earth vs. E-town" comes in. Taking place at Bohemia — a tiny club on the eastern edge of the city core — on Tuesday May 5, "Earth vs E-town" features Edmonton performers who will improvise live with the works of international performers, many of whom composed their pieces specifically for the event.

All five non-Canadians eagerly responded to a call-out to have their stuff heard at the event, even though Edmonton hardly has the popularity clout of North American centres like New York, Los Angeles or even Toronto, Canada's largest city. As far as they were concerned, city size and geography didn't even figure into their motives.

"As a long-term resident of Leytonstone in Northeast London, having grown up and lived here for 20 of the 21 years of my life so far, I have always felt as though I lived as part of a relatively small, close-knit community," says UK-based James Shearman of A Raja's Mesh Men, whose work will be accompanied by Edmonton noise trio Motonogo.

"It is perhaps this kinship with this small populace that not only attracts me to work with artists from more obscure locations around the world, but also removes much of the social stigma and questions surrounding cultural relevance that might trouble some."

"Sound is travelling air," adds Dutch composer Belch Kitchen, who's paired with software creator Abram Hindle, operating under the handle of Skrunt Skrunt. "I use found sounds and words from all over the world as inspiration and source. Population numbers aren't important to me. Fifteen years ago, I played in tiny towns in the south of Germany. Fascinating!"

Similarly, the Edmonton performers aren't drawn by the novelty of being paired up with a performer based outside of Canada. They're more curious about how their talents can fit in with the mix of sounds that international acts are bringing to the table.

"I'm much better at audio programming than video programming, so I am out of my comfort zone already, says Hindle, who found the Belch Kitchen composition so densely layered that he balked at adding his own sounds, opting for a more visual approach. "The pressure of not wanting to disappoint both another artist and the audience is apparent."

"I am completely jazzed at the whole concept behind the gig," adds Dale Ladouceur, who's ranked among some of the world's best Chapman Stick players according to stick.com. "I seek out placing myself in these kinds of situations where you don't know the people you're working with and you don't know what's going to happen."

Ladouceur, who will play live with Theremin player John Armstrong to the music of French audio artist nobodisoundz, is hoping to surprise not only the audience, but herself as well in what may materialize onstage. “Too much powerful creative magic has happened in those situations for me to ignore. It works as long as you go in with open ears, and heart.”

For his part, nobodisoundz is excited over prospects surrounding the show. “I think this is a good idea to create this event between Canadian and European musicians,” he says. “Maybe some new projects will be born, new directions to be released.”

Only Edmonton-based clarinetist Don Ross and Japanese composer tamayurakurage have worked together before when they collaborated on a piece called “We Must Prevent the Collapse of the World,” an anti-nuke piece that includes disturbing images of Hiroshima. A technical glitch prevented them from playing the piece in its entirety at an Edmonton concert in January, so Ross hopes audiences get to see the whole presentation at “Earth vs. E-Town.”

“Tamayurakurage creates such lush electronic textures, with such a feeling of space in them, that I feel I can fling myself and my clarinet into them and ride the various currents and waves around without any kind of apprehension or doubt,” says Ross. “The beauty of the landscape as it passes by is too absorbing to be caught up in thoughts of performing.”

“Don Ross is a great musician,” adds tamayurakurage. “Pop music and subculture don't have borders in particular. We can share art beyond a state and a race.”

While Edmonton might be under the global music radar, some acts wholly acknowledge that Canada can't be ruled out as a major player in music that challenges the genre boundaries.

“When I think of Canada's relation to my own experimentation I think of the experimental musicians Aidan Baker and Leah Buckareff who make up the ‘doomgaze’ duo Nadja,” says Shearman. “They inspired me to begin one of my own solo projects in exploring the sound palette of guitar drones linked to defining a bridge between doom and drone metal music and further afield genres.”

But still, another artist found the prospect of having a composition played in a small club in the middle of a freezing and remote locale amusing.

“All I know about Edmonton is that it's a small city in cold weather, almost ice-coloured as silver, baby-blue and white,” said Italy's Alessandra Zerbinati of Lametàfisica (whose work will be interpreted by performance artist Trixie Moon) to Vue Weekly. “I didn't know they had an experimental music scene, but I guess you have good places to buy cigarettes, ice cream and mittens.”