



**'STILL** STILL is a moniker of Simone Trabucchi of Invernomuto and Hundebiss Records, previously known as Dracula Lewis. After a one year break from music, Trabucchi got inspired by Jamaican and Ethiopian electronic sounds. Entering this great legacy of music, he found a way to give a voice to Italy's colonial past. The result: tripped out, cosmic and challenging electronic music, that has been released by PAN. At the Eastern Daze festival, STILL will feature three vocalists, Devon Miles from Nigeria, Freweini from Erythrea and Keidino.

Mikołaj Kierski

**mk** You grew up in a town called Vernasca – you often described it as depressing. Do you think that your childhood pushed you towards becoming an artist?

**st** Actually, it wasn't that depressing, except in the winter and in the early morning. Vernasca forced me to improve my imagination. Everything was difficult to get. When you finally obtained something, you grabbed it and kept on fantasizing about it, and started building things around it. It makes you definitely more creative.

**mk** At the age of 16 you started as a promoter in underground punk and hardcore; there's this crazy story about you bringing numerous punk bands from all over Italy for an event in Vernasca which resulted in people getting scared and in the end the police got involved...

**st** It was different back then. Everything was mail based – and I mean *actual* letters. It was the way to promote an event, and to invite people. When you are a punk band and you are invited by mail, it's a serious thing, and you feel appreciated. I was kind of isolated from the whole scene, so I had this idea to invite everybody to Vernasca to play because I had never seen them live.

At the top of the town there was an old church where a group of youngsters organized rock shows in the summer. One year a gig got cancelled and one of those guys asked me: "Hey, you are into music, right? Maybe you can organize something?" I guess he thought about a band from my high school, but he said: "You're free to do what you want!" So I sent 50 letters to bands that I knew at that time. Surprisingly, 20 of them answered and 13 came! I didn't expect it, and it was kind of random, but it's a good memory because it actually worked. It's was a nice feeling that things happen because of me!

**mk** Fast forward: some years later you were living and throwing parties in a place called Arrighi in Milan. It was a huge abandoned, squat-like building, yet you all were very well organized and neat. Do you think this attitude made those secret parties so popular?

**st** They were definitely something new. The context was different compared to what was happening at that time; it was not a standard squat; neither it was a club. The people that came had a good feeling, they were experiencing something underground and unpredictable. There is a club experience but this is not clubbing, there is a noise show but it's not a standard noise show and so on. Those parties were simply fulfilling a demand. Anyhow, we wanted to create a nice social environment and brought stuff that was not coming to Italy at all. Everything was DIY so people felt familiar. There was no fake hype, everything happened kind of naturally. Of course, the parties were well organized because we all lived there and we didn't want problems. At one point we moved it to a couple of clubs but it was not the same, so we stopped. That's why I don't like to organize shows anymore. I felt comfortable with the situation then and I can't recreate this now.

**mk** When and how did you switch from punk to electronic music?

**st** Actually very late but it happened naturally: I stopped playing

guitar, and I started singing in a band; later I began experimenting with vocal effects and with electronics. I completely stopped playing in bands, and playing in general for one year. After that break, I started experimenting with a broken mixer, which I liked because it was more intimate. That's where Dracula Lewis started, although it was without voice in the beginning. The real change was when I started performing.

Another big influence was meeting Griffin (Pyn) and Robert (Girardin) – they were doing pretty much the same thing as me, but they were more frontal on stage. They did also songs, which interested me as well. At one point experimenting with sound came to an end, so I tried to make songs, singing on top of it.

**mk** I understood the STILL project is related to the *Negas* project, a project by you and Simone Bertuzzi, that was screened at Unsound. How did you develop an interest towards Haile Selassie, who plays a role in the movie?

**st** We were listening to a lot of dub and reggae at that time. And Selassie is a big figure, a messiah basically, in this music. At the same time we were anxious about finding a way to speak about Italy's colonial past because it's a kind of unheard story, which Italy is officially trying to hide.

It's related also to a story my grandparents told: during the World War II there was a celebration organized in Vernasca for a soldier who went to Ethiopia to fight and who came back with a wounded leg. The fascists and the villagers did a big bonfire in the middle of the main square. There was a puppet that was made to resemble Haile Selassie and it was burned down.

Actually, there are still traces of a fascist propaganda in our language. For example: *Negas* is Ethiopian and Eritrean for *emperor*, whereas in slang Italian it means *funny or ugly looking gay*. Through reggae we understood that it had another meaning; that's why this project is so deep because it took us on a trip. *Negas* kicked off when we invited Lee Perry to Vernasca to do a counter ritual of the bonfire. Then we got an invitation from the Italian Cultural Institute in Addis Abeba. And then we found the money to go to Jamaica... We entered a loop and we're still in it somehow.

**mk** Were you aware of Italy's colonial past?

**st** Most Italian citizen aren't. But I was, because my great-grandfather went to Africa during the first Italian big crisis, after World War II.

You know Ethiopia was actually never a colony of Italy (*it was a protectorate; and the only African country that never was colonized, ed.*). Italians tried twice to conquer but they never made it, Ethiopians and Eritreans are still proud about that. Anyway, Italy did very bad things there.

**mk** How would you describe your time spent with Lee Scratch Perry?

**st** He's beyond reggae and dub. It's just a medium to deliver his message. Our meeting was one of the best experiences I had in my life, honestly. If you're an artist you have to be like him. He has a vision and his own world. If you want to interact with him, there is no way to talk – you can't ask him a question and pretend that you're

getting an answer. Maybe he's going to answer, but the only right way is to enter his world. You have to understand a lot of codes, a lot of jokes and you have to let him be crazy – but I don't think this is pure madness, it's more of a pure beauty actually. Sometimes he even didn't recognize me, but it's not like he's mad. He's super smart and bright. And he's old. That's the only thing about him I'm sure of.

We tuned in his world by creating a playground for him. There was a big sound system, a monument for the people who died during the war, with remotely controlled fires. We told him that every time he would scream "Fire!"; we would let the fire out. There was also his son who played some tracks for him.

Actually, the first time he was supposed to be there, he didn't show up. He came up the second time and said that he was aware that he was supposed to be there the first time, but it wasn't the right moment. When he arrived, he jumped out of the car and started right after. We didn't explain. No directions. He was just being himself. We played with the codes that he understood so we managed to communicate very well. That's the best part about this project.

**mk** When did you develop interest in digital dancehall?

**st** I was never a big fan of dancehall. When we were in Ethiopia we met this guy called Benjamin who comes from England and lives there. He did a mixtape of instrumental dancehall, which I found very interesting, if you would remove the vocals. Bill Kouligas (*of PAN records, ed.*) did also a mix of instrumental dancehall, which was even better. It comes from the same source as dub and reggae but it's even crazier.

That was the starting point to collect dancehall records. In the States I randomly went into a cheap record store and found tons of cheap dancehall 7"es. Also in Vancouver I discovered a secret shop full with crazy tunes. It was at the time that I stopped playing as Dracula Lewis, but through this music I wanted to play again. At that point, I found a drum machine that I wanted for a long time so I booked a studio in Vancouver where I did half of the recordings for this record.

**mk** You worked with 6 African-Italian vocalists for the album. How did you meet them? Is there a profound reason for it?

**st** When I sent the tracks to Bill, he said: "Ok, let's do a record but the tracks would be better with vocals". I was super stressed about this. I wanted to be on my own, I didn't want vocalists. I asked Miss Red but she said that it wasn't dancehall, and that she couldn't sing on that. Also other artists, whom I thought they would relate to this music, were like "WTF is that?!" I was super depressed about this, I started thinking that maybe this stuff is bad. I didn't know why Bill liked it. But he was really supportive, he never gave up on this project.

Then I realized that if I could tell a story, it would be more interesting than asking random vocalists. Stories are why I'm doing this music. I'm just not a producer who makes beats, and who asks a random MC to sing on top. There's supposed to be a deeper meaning. So I wrote some lyrics, and translated them into Tigrinya, which is Eritrean language. To find people who could sing it I went to a bar, called Rainbow Bar, in the Ethiopian-Eritrean area of Milan. A lady called Elinor runs it, and I asked her whether she could help me. She's a central figure for that community and in one week I had an agenda full of appointments with people who wanted to sing. Some of them needed time, but others, for example Freweini – who sings on *Nazeret* and who was on stage last night – even said "I don't want to listen to anything, just put the mic on and go to the other room". 20 minutes later the tracks were ready. Never touched those vocals. Amazing! Other guys said that the music was different to what they knew, but they liked it. They were feeling good on the tracks, it was not a struggle.



I met them all in that bar, except for Devon. I was invited to play at Club Adriatico, and there a friend told me about a friend who's a good vocalist. We met, and in the studio it felt as though we were playing together since a long time. When he heard the music he said "this is crazy, but I'm going to make it because this is a challenge."

**mk** What do you think about labeling your music as *dancehall*?

**st** It's pretentious. I even asked Bill to remove the word *dancehall* from all the promo. Everybody is doing dancehall now, even Ed Sheeran! It doesn't make any sense... I didn't want to be associated with Equiknoxx or The Bug. They are great musicians, but musically it's something different and they are telling another story. I think there is a lot of misunderstanding about any music that is not techno – and about techno as well. Simplification of music is one of the worst things happening right now. When the record came out none of the reviews mentioned Jamaican or Ethiopian artists... Never. They could only refer to Equiknoxx because it was released by an English label and to The Bug who is British. The colonial thing is still there, so heavy. They can't drop the name of a Jamaican musician, artist or composer.

The potential of instrumental dancehall is huge though. Those producers were amazing composers, simply great electronic musicians. But their names are not there. It is the singer's name that is mentioned. Nobody knows who Computer Paul was... There's still a lot to be unfolded there.

**mk** It's crazy that you arrived to the same ideas of bubbling without being aware of this kind of music. What was your reaction to the discovery of this genre?

**st** Tape bubbling is basically sped up dancehall. It a bit too funky for me, too cartoonish. The idea is amazing, and the story is fascinating. You take a 7" and play it on a Stanton record player – you can't do it with Technics – at 78 rpm. You have to push 45 and 33 at the same time, and then it sounds like a banger. Discovering it was amazing because it give my collection of 7" a completely new dimension. Suddenly I had twice the amount of music. I'm still going to play that stuff, maybe I'll play it live as well.

**mk** Let's talk about Hundebiss Records. You released music from a wide range of artists. Is there a common denominator that you see between all of them or you just don't care and put out the music that you respect?

**st** The common denominator is by period. The first four releases have for instance a common denominator. The catalogue can be divided into several chapters. Generally speaking, the releases present my idea of folk, I'd even say naïve music somehow which is what I like. That's the common denominator between Aaron Dilloway and Lil Ugly Mane and Kelman and Primitive Art and Stargate.

**mk** Thanks for the interview!