

LIGHT AT THE EDGE OF TOWN



WAYNE FLASK (roughtrade@wayneflask.com) meets hot 'side-project' KOI, but does not discuss shampoo.



t's a chilly evening of an otherwise uneventful Tuesday. Sat in a flimsy looking chair Wayne

Camilleri, arms crossed, watches as another, younger musician – a passer by maybe? – plugs one of his tracks into an overwhelmingly bassy sound system that soon drowns any attempt at discourse.

I stand there, fixing the chap's guitar case, tagged with numerous stickers that

include those of other Maltese bands, giant multinational brands who produce the tools of the trade, and even a local fish and tackle shop. We are, you might have guessed, in what Wayne calls *workplace* and what many refer to as *toyland*: a music shop.

The demo is over after three minutes. "Well done, Andie Boy," says Wayne, careful not to paternalise, nor patronise. The other half of KOI, Errol

Sammut, compliments said chappie on the use of guitar arrangements – not sure how he baptised them – and makes for the cigarette case. »

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“It will be mine,” Mike Myers famously recited in 1992’s *Wayne’s World*. Tall, tattooed and with enough experience to be considered as a veteran of our music scene (not that he will ever look stale) Wayne Camilleri still drools, but only occasionally, for a new guitar. Nowadays, he makes guitars work for him full time while the Big Band Brothers and session music for Tribali and Airport Impressions are but three ways how to keep him busy after hours (his omnipresence has recently seen him likened to a prostitute, but not that he’d worry).

As things go, partner in crime Errol Sammut carries with him the lifelong attraction for denim attire, better control on his hairstyle and trademark aviator glasses. Commonly known for fronting Airport Impressions, Errol is one of few vocalists in the island endowed with proper English diction, and a rare songwriting prowess. Couple that with uncontrollable bouts of music creativity and you’ll stop wondering why he and Camilleri are in league together. Having already shared the stage in 2003 as part of the grungy Sourmash, they’re not new to each other either. This time their new side project KOI sees them explore wider plains uninhibited by notions of style, structure, production or even management. Let alone the radio stations, which nonetheless played a role in bringing some deserved exposure to a project that could have otherwise been dismissed as a garage gig.

Sat in a corner of this enormous music shop, Wayne and Errol trade knowing glances with each other before launching into their first reply.

“I knew Wayne was working solo on this instrumental project, something that did not involve a full blast commitment maybe, and he sent me some demos of his. I tried a vocal track on what would eventually become *Tears in Your Eyes*. I sent it back to him... you know how it is, I started to like it. Then we started looking at other songs we had written together,” he explains.

“The project is a bit more consolidated now, there’s more rhythm. We threw a song to the radios and I hope this year we’ll have an album,” he adds curtly.

The new project owes its name to the koi fish tattooed on Wayne’s arm. “We still wanted a meaning from it. We chose *Knowledge over Instinct* – it’s what makes us different from animals. It holds well for our music too, there’s a certain depth in our lyrics. We don’t really want to talk about love and all that stuff. There’s a positive energy but we look at depth, and hope.”

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Eight years after their first linkup, the two have also changed a lot in the way they work together. “We’ve worked together since 2003. Then Errol left for Ireland and formed Airport Impressions upon his return. We are totally different in the way we work. We used to fight a lot more at the time, but nowadays we’ve matured and we totally understand each other. These days we do it with more respect, there’s also a bit more freedom in the way we talk to each other. It’s challenging because we both want the best out of one another. We’re not really looking to play it safe, otherwise it wasn’t really worth the challenge to create something different.”

Despite the members’ familiarity, KOI doesn’t have a precise identity. They are reluctant to talk much about a style, or pattern, that defines the band.

“I don’t think we can really describe what we sound like,” says Wayne. “The songs sound worlds apart, very different from each other. I can genuinely say we don’t pinpoint our influences and we don’t have one single direction. We didn’t try to do something that can be harnessed – our music, our songs, they’re born in that manner. We’re in a situation where we have around 30 songs and we don’t know which ones to keep and which to get rid of.”

With all the time they spend writing and refining, you’d be forgiven for asking whether KOI is an outlet for a lot of material that doesn’t make it into the bigger band’s work. “We are a lot less mainstream. I won’t say there are certain formulas that won’t work for Airport Impressions, but KOI doesn’t have such restrictions. If a track doesn’t need vocals it can go

without it. We aren’t fussed about writing songs for the radio.

Well, somehow a song did make it to the radios but I’m sure there’s a few tracks that won’t,” says Errol, with Wayne smirking in agreement.

“I wouldn’t say it’s a way out of our solo projects. Errol has Airport Impressions and you can say he built it

from scratch. KOI is just two musicians who are lucky enough to have a studio and they meet up, having fun writing songs,” says Wayne.

Two of their demos that landed in my mailbox a week or so before our Tuesday evening rendezvous point at entirely different locations. The ambitious *Raincheck Boulevard* evokes nostalgia for Echo and the Bunnymen and early Killers descended from Boy-era U2, with its harrowing guitars and synths that lend the song a sullen, dark town atmosphere. On the other hand, *Give it*

All Away brings Errol’s penchant for balladry to the fore, this time, however, he is not strumming about love.

“*Raincheck* is something we’re quite pleased with. That’s where we’re going. We believe it’s something very original.”

Insisting they are not willing to write or even arrange songs for the radio, they acknowledge time is not a commodity these days. Airport Impressions are busy promoting their first album and most of the time, Errol has to find ways around the situation. How much does it hamper their efforts?

“Airport Impressions are in full blast right now. We think a lot about the effect it has on KOI,” says Wayne. “I have no problem with AI, I’m an occasional session musician with them too. We just work perfectly around it, I think... do we, Errol? Having our own studio has a lot of advantages. We can experiment, work on our own ideas in isolation and then lay out things properly in one day.”

Unless their creative flurry is held up by force majeure, KOI will release their album in the next few months. “It will be a different album than what we do with our main project. Unusual I would say, no real rules, no real pattern. If vocals don’t work for a track then we’ll just do without. We’d never do that in the other projects. Hopefully the album will be ready in summer. And we have a new single coming out soon.”

Curious parents, two or three of them, are circling outside the glass door waiting for the trombone lesson in the adjacent room to come to a close. Andie Boy, meanwhile, is still inside the shop, patiently waiting for the two seniors to provide more advice, and maybe, the odd smoke. A day at the office? Frankly, none of them can be slated for alternative employment. **m**

