

EVIL GENIUS: BITTER HUMAN

Review by JOHN CAVANAGH (October 27, 2015 – BBC Scotland, Radio Six International)

“The rich sonic world of what are usually considered orchestral instruments holds incredible possibilities for the adventurous minds of musicians not playing in huge symphonic forces. Unfortunately, some beautiful “voices” of the orchestra get overlooked in any small group ideas and confined, mainly, to providing texture behind the most popular instruments in big ensembles or, worse still, become the butt of jokes. Viola players and trombonists will certainly attest to that! Meanwhile amidst the lowest registers of the brass department, there’s the tuba. In the early days of jazz, these figured heavily, as the double bass literally didn’t cut it on the recording equipment of the era, but soon double basses came to prominence and the tuba went back to galumphing around, providing weight in orchestras and brass bands with few notable exceptions, i.e. the Tuba Concerto by Ralph Vaughan Williams at one end or the comic creation Tubby the Tuba at the other. Clever arrangers used tubas skilfully in pop records by, for example, Blood Sweat and Tears or the early Chicago Transit Authority albums, but as a lead instrument in pop, the tuba really doesn’t make the spotlight very often. Enter Evil Genius, a virtuosic trio who’ve placed the tuba playing of Stefan Kac centre stage. Their album Bitter Human is a shining example of originality in the new releases I’ve heard this year. Kac’s fellow trio members are Max Kutner on guitar and Mike Lockwood, playing drums.

The album combines post-punk angularity with nods towards jazz/improv and rather funky grooves too. On listening to some of the swiftly changing and unusual structures of these pieces, you may not be surprised to learn that one third of Evil Genius (guitarist Kutner) also plays in lineups with surviving members of Frank Zappa’s bands (The Grandmothers) and those who provided set and setting for the splendidly wayward talent that was Don Van Vliet/Captain Beefheart (The Magic Band). Sure, it would be possible for three sharp-minded musicians to make complex music of an academic, beard-stroking nature, but Evil Genius take things further with their sheer melodic invention.

If you enjoy the aforementioned post-punk style, if you appreciate, for example, This Heat from the past or the sort of artists who record for Cuneiform Records in the present, your ear may well be tuning in to the same wavelength as these three highly creative musicians and Evil Genius could prove both an enjoyable and inspiring listen.”