

The Debut of “Winter Solstice” and “Summer Solstice,” the Discovery of Trip’s Synesthesia and The Invention of the “Astrology Jams”

At one of the first practice sessions at Ned’s House, Trip walked in with a bundle of folders. He handed each band member two, one labeled “Winter Solstice” and the other “Summer Solstice.” It was sheet music written by hand, but apparently finished. With an all-too-serious look on his face, he addressed his bandmates. “Guys, these are two new pieces I’ve written especially for this band. I’ve actually scored everyone’s part, even Bert’s and the drummer’s, although it’s just the basic beat for them, I expect you guys to, um, embellish. But the other parts are scored, with breaks for solos where you’ll be on your own, but with scored parts to be played *pianissimo* for a set number of bars, which will be the length of the solo.” He even said *pianissimo* softly and in a cheesy Italian accent for emphasis.

Olly looked at Trip in bewilderment. “Dude, that sounds so, like, stiff. What gives? This band *jams*.”

Trip was as surprised as everyone else that of all the people to offer any criticism, it would come from Olly. But then again, coming from Olly it didn’t have any possible negative intentions, so Trip paused for a second, sighed heavily and replied. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’m just really proud of the way each part is written and want it played just so, at least for now. I’m open to suggestions. And like I said, I wrote in places for improvisation, for everyone to do their own thing.”

Olly was absentmindedly looking at the sheet music. “Yeah, and, like, if the soloist is ripping it up, we should let him go, and of course if he’s like, y’know, laying eggs, then we should cut him off, just like we already do when we jam.”

None of them had ever heard *the principal of the jam* stated so

bluntly, and it caused each of them to shift nervously as they remembered the occasions on which each had done either. The only sound in the room was Olly humming the new melody by sight-reading, oblivious to what he'd just said. Of course, Olly made fewer mistakes on stage than did the others, and he'd said it unthinkingly, so it didn't impact him the same.

All of them occasionally had times when nothing went right, when the fingers just didn't find the right notes and the musician just wished it would end. But since they were all working together, supporting each other, somehow, someone would send a signal and the song would come back around and the musician was saved from his own (at least temporary) ineptitude to find himself comfortably back in the groove.

Suddenly Bert laughed as he looked at everyone holding the sheet music that Trip had presented. "Guys . . . I'm the only one in this room who has a music stand."

While everyone else stared at each other, Mike had his folder open on top of his unusually tall amplifier, and was actually looking at the music and starting to play it. Everyone fell silent to listen to the bass part; to feel the bottom groove of the song. Trip began to play along and the others sight read their parts while those two played.

Having heard the bass line and lead guitar, the others had an idea of what the song was about and were preparing to play it. They played it roughly once, then again better while Trip sang. By the end, everyone's hair stood on end. They instantly knew that "Summer Solstice" was a great song and would become a Too Cubed anthem.

"OK, so that was 'Summer Solstice.' This other one is 'Winter Solstice.' I had the idea for these like a year ago, the day we picked up Olly at the airport for the first time. It's taken me a year to work this all

out.”

“And you didn’t tell anyone about it, you just worked it all out to present to us to play?” Stan was bewildered that so much work could have gone into this without so much as a hint that it was in progress.

“When did you do it?”

“Well, I used them as my Division Two project, my Hampshire thesis. I just scored these two and called them ‘Two Compositions for Two Guitars, Bass Guitar, Piano and Two Percussionists.’ My teacher wants us to perform it with my Division Three piece, but that one will be written for four parts. It’s without drums, for a reason. It’s a palindromic fugue, so you can play it backwards and forwards and the parts follow a pattern, kinda like A-B-C-D-C-B-A. I figured I’d toss the drum part over to Mister Mathematics to solve on his own. And to be honest, while writing the ‘Solstice’ pieces was OK for me alone, I couldn’t have done the fugue without Bert’s help.”

Bert blushed in gratitude as everyone looked at him. Softly, and with the sincerest affection, he said, “Thanks, Trip, thanks a lot.”

Stan was surprised. He simply hadn’t paid attention to what Trip had been doing, aside from helping write music for Max’s songs. He’d wondered why there weren’t any new tunes, until Stan realized that Trip was pursuing *The Concept*. He gained an instant new and heightened respect for Trip’s imagination and compositional power. “So, two pieces, ‘Winter-’ and ‘Summer Solstice,’ plus a palindromic fugue? What’s that called?”

“‘Underground Palindrome.’”

“‘Underground Palindrome.’ Wow. That’s heavy. That’s beautiful. When can we hear it?”

“It’s pretty much done, but Bert’s still helping me transcribe it perfectly. You think you can write a palindromic rhythm?”

“Yes. I’m sure I can.” Stan was not to be outdone, and the project fascinated him instantly. “That is such a cool idea, Trip.” He looked admiringly at his bandmate.

The exchange made the band members proud of their comrades, and they felt tingles of excitement from the creative and cooperative energy all around them.

Bert said, “Hey what about the other one? Let’s hear that one, too.”

“OK, this one’s kinda tricky, I stuck with basic C Major for ‘Summer Solstice,’ but this one, ‘Winter Solstice’ is in A Major, or technically, it’s in F Sharp Minor, see that, guys? This song starts with some really trippy keyboard stuff, y’know, dark, dark middle of cold, cold winter- See? Everyone else is resting for the first sixteen bars. This is while Bert does a keyboard intro solo, which I’ve only outlined the notes of the main melody. Like this-” he played the melody on his guitar “-and you can just take off with something, I was thinking organ, but, y’know, whatever you want is cool, and I think you should mix it up when we play it live.”

Bert responded, “OK, I got it, something like this.” He pushed some buttons on each of the four electronic keyboards he faced and began alternating the theme, first in a standard organ then processed through a weirdly compressed chorus-like sound. “Fuck,” he said, “Y’know what would be perfect? I mean, we need this, is a Hammond B-3 with a Leslie speaker. I can do something like it with the synth, but that’s what we need.” He stuck with that sound, then took a sample and made it repeat like a slowly diminishing echo while he gradually came in with the theme on piano. On the sixteenth bar the rest of the band joined him. Max was studying the sheet music intently and began to play his part hesitantly, because it was quite complicated and more difficult than

the pieces Trip had written for the songs they'd been practicing. He hit more than a few wrong notes and felt a knot forming in his stomach. He looked up to apologize to Trip, who simply mouthed the words, "Don't worry. You can do it." Max felt grateful that Trip believed him capable and focused more closely, and it started to feel right. The various bridges and jams which they would develop over the years were still a long way away, but they got the song down by the third try.

"So, yeah, this was mostly all done last fall, but I wanted to use it for school first, to see how it went. I figured I'd bust it out for everyone when we got back together after the holidays. The first party here seems like the most fitting place for their debut, wouldn't you say? Let's see if we can't work out the transition so that we can play them together for the first time, too, in a way that will suggest what they can be. I kind of see 'Summer Solstice' as kind of like 'Estimated Prophet.' An up-tempo song with kind of a weird edge, y'know, all reds and oranges. But 'Winter Solstice' is kind of like 'Eyes of the World' 'cuz it's really intense and while literally about darkness it actually has a more hopeful message of impending light, pale blues and light greens. I think they stand on their own, or could be played together, or could be played as part of a sandwich set. But for their first time out, I'd like to play them together."

Stan was a little unnerved by the direct Grateful Dead comparison. "You think they sound like those songs?"

"No, I think they create the same atmosphere as those songs. We've talked about creating the atmosphere. Single set versus double set show format. The function of 'Drumz' and 'Space' as both a rest and a deepening of the experience. Controlling sound, stage lights, house lights, ventilation- everything. The Total Tripping Experience. We'll have our own spin on each of these things. If there's anything the Dead

forgot or didn't get to use 'cuz it hasn't been invented yet, then we'll use that, too. Like Lou says, computer-controlled lights. Just no flying pigs."

"Right, no flying pigs." Stan laughed. The reference was to Pink Floyd's "Animals" Tour, which coincidentally both Trip and Stan had seen in New York, where that band employed giant inflated farm animals with frightening and grotesque anatomical features (which it turned out were additions inspired by the aftermath of the bitter David Gilmour - Roger Waters feud) suspended above the audience. The pigs were particularly hideous in that their testes were oversized and dangled obscenely from the inflatable porkers' undersides.

As the laughs subsided, Stan looked intently over at Trip, who raised an eyebrow, inviting Stan to ask the question he sensed Stan wanted to ask. "So, Trip, what's that, that you meant when you said 'Summer' is reds and oranges and 'Winter' is blues and greens? I mean, how do you come up with this great shit? These pieces are, uh, like, *genius*. I can't wait to hear 'Underground Palindrome.'"

"Uh, thanks, Stan, but, like, whaddya mean? Of course those songs are those colors."

"Of course?" The room had fallen totally silent, everyone was listening intently to their exchange. "Whaddya mean 'of course'?"

"Y'know, the colors . . ." Trip was mystified why Stan didn't understand him. "When the song is right, the melody or whatever part, it looks as good as it sounds." He stated it matter-of-factly, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

But everyone else had no idea what he was talking about. Stan crossed his eyebrows and shook his head ever-so-slightly a few times, his body language for he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Trip, did you like dose or something?"

"Oh, when I dose it becomes that much cooler. It's like a light

show; if the music is louder it looks cooler.”

Bert squeaked excitedly, cleared his throat, then slowed himself down, drawing a deep breath. “Trip, you’re a synuh . . . no, uh, *synesthete!*”

“A what?” All eyes turned from Bert to Trip, then back again.

“A synesthete. You experience synesthesia.”

“What?” It was like there was a tennis match.

“Uh, synesthesia, is, uh, you have extra sensory experiences most people don’t. You can see music.”

“What, you guys can’t?”

Stan interrupted. “What do you see?”

“When I hear music, or sometimes like when people talk, Olly’s voice really did it to me at first, now not so much anymore, it’s like, uh, the edges of my vision get colors. The louder or more intense it is, the, y ‘know, brighter it is. You don’t get that?”

There were some slack jaws and gaping mouths. “Uh, no . . .” Stan was wrapping his mind around this.

Bert offered some more information. “Yeah, guys, synesthesia is like experiencing the world in like two ways at the same time.” He paused. “I think. Um, I remember now, Franz Liszt and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov disagreed about which colors the various keys were.”

“The higher keys are lighter and the lower ones are darker.” Trip said it with that awful condescending tone he only rarely but devastatingly used, like it was just the most obvious thing in the world, and he couldn’t understand why anyone could have any other answer, and if they did, they were obviously a total idiot.

“What colors are the notes?” Stan was shocked.

“The same as the xylophone.”

“The xylophone?”

“Yeah. The Fisher-Price xylophone.” His face suddenly dropped. “Th- that’s why they make it that way, isn’t it?” Trip’s voice had lost the condescending tone, and instead had changed to that of someone who’s most trusted belief has suddenly come into legitimate doubt, like he’d been told by a relative that his father wasn’t really his father. Way worse than learning that there is no Santa Claus. There was silence, then Trip continued, “You mean, you guys don’t get that? I mean, that’s how I know when a piece of music is really great; when the colors and notes all match up and both sound and look good together. Like Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony and ‘I Wanna Hold Your Hand.’ Really? You don’t get that?”

“That sounds totally fucking cool. I *wish* I got that.” Stan stared at Trip in amazement, as did everyone else.

In a tone of awe and admiration, Bert said, “Dude, it’s a gift. It’s like perfect pitch. Some people just got it. And the ‘Solstices’ do that for you?”

“I, uh, guess so, now it’s hard for me to, like, y’know, *imagine* it. It has to be happening. I know it used to distract me when I was a kid, and I’d, like, fall down.”

“That is fucking excellent. I wish I could see what you see.” Olly was smiling broadly.

“Yeah, like I just saw like lilac and pale yellow when you spoke.”

Max shifted uneasily. Until this moment, he was the only one with a gift with a scientific name: Absolute pitch. Virtuosity like Trip’s, Olly’s and Bert’s, songwriting creativity like Trip’s and Max’s (as well as the others’), vision like Stan’s, is not quantifiable in the same way. Sure, they could measure Olly’s leaps and call that a gift, but that one didn’t matter to Olly or anyone else except it was fun to watch him when

he really got going on stage. It was more dance than athleticism, and dance is another such unquantifiable endeavor and talent. It was easy to say that Max couldn't do what Trip could do, and vice versa, and that's why they were in a band, just like the rest of the guys, but Max was still a touch jealous that his gift was no longer the only one. "I always hated those xylophones. There isn't one of them that's tuned right. They always sounded like shit to me."

Stan was also jealous, but for a slightly different reason. He knew he wasn't a songwriter, but he still needed to be something else: The Big Idea Guy, which he was. He'd been thinking about the show "format" for months, about what to do in the second set. And just when he needed it, he got an idea, and he knew he had to put it on the table, plus blow by Max's comment. "So, guys, I've been thinking about the second set. I've been trying to think of something to do middle of the set, something like 'Drums' and 'Space,' but not." He had everyone's attention.

He took a deep breath. "Here's my idea: Astrology." He was thinking on the fly. "We have twelve loose *formats* for jams that happen mid-second set. Like, I'm a Virgo, and I don't think anyone else is, so that would be one that I do. Like it's not a specific theme, it's just Virgo 'cuz I'm doing whatever. And Trip, you're a Scorpio, right? So you handle that one. And we always play the sign that we're in on that night, y'know? To, uh, *conjure*, that night. But it will still always be different."

Trip was trying to grasp it. "No, a guitar alone making noise is boring. I like the idea, in general, but while we're on this one, like, I would want it to be really powerful, because Scorpio is totally a power sign, and so I'd want both you and Olly to back me up, just like really heavy drumming and then I just jam on top of that, thinking maybe a little Santana-esque, you dig? That'd be more fun."

Olly was nodding with his whole torso his eyes wide with excitement, “Yeah, *brah*, that’s it, the Scorpio jam, totally!”

Bert was jumping up and down. “Guys, guys! I’m a Gemini, right, which is an air sign, and, like, I could make wind sounds, and wind on the water makes waves, right Olly, and Olly could make wave sounds to segue into Cancer which is a water sign, think about it, is anyone a Cancer?”

When noone responded, Stan said, “Well, that’s bound to happen, there are only eight of us and twelve signs. But what you said gives me an idea. How about we do an oceans kinda thing, like waves with or without wind, and then like whale sounds? Those are fun to make with both guitars and synthesizers and would definitely be very trippy.”

“Yeah, cool. Hey, we better write this shit down, I’ve already forgotten what I wanted to do!” Trip was reaching for his notebook. The air felt electrically charged.

This was undoubtedly one of the most important moments in Too Cubed history. Not only did Trip debut “Winter Solstice” and “Summer Solstice” and describe “Underground Palindrome” to the band, but the show format and the mid-second set “Astrology Jam” features were created, plus the discovery of Trip’s synesthesia. All of these pieces played integral roles in the Too Cubed experience from their inception to the sizzling end.