

The Utrecht festival's far-reaching programme ranges from protest chants to birdsong

By Hannah Pezzack

Le Guess Who?

Various venues, Utrecht, Netherlands

Ornate black candles drip wax over the bar at the restaurant LE:EN in the Rotsoord neighbourhood. Onstage, Ak'chamel are barely visible through a smoky haze, illuminated by fluorescent pink and blue lighting. Wearing flowing robes that appear to be made from woven grass, the psych duo's faces are obscured by masks. Accompanied by recordings of croaking frogs, they move through the crowd, ringing silver bells. "We're from Texas! The land of shamans and cowboys!" one of them proclaims. This is new age nightmare music – chanting, ritualistic screeching, traditional Mexican drums and a whaling trumpet combine into a psychotropic concoction, channelling the sublime vastness of the Texan desert.

Unfolding throughout Utrecht, Le Guess Who? is renowned for its far-reaching programming. With venues including medieval churches, theatre halls and art galleries, all corners of the small Dutch city have become engulfed. Balancing out international artists with local favourites, the line-up is diverse in every sense. From 78 year old Ustad Noor Bakhsh, the masterful Pakistani benju player, to the club-wise abstractions of Dominican-American DJ/producer Kelman Duran, the focus is on divergent and often challenging acts chosen by star curators – for this edition: Stereolab, Nala Sinephro, Heba Kadry and Slauson Malone.

Despite attending for many years, and working within the music community of Utrecht, I always encounter the unexpected at Le Guess Who?. For the 2024 instalment, this takes the shape of collective Zenith's collaboration with the Palestinian sound platform ZILZAL. Presented as part of the U? sub-festival and hosted by Uncloud, DJs 00970, gbw9, RAGASA and Noise Diva were invited to express their "current mental situation" amid the continued bombardment of Gaza. At the Pieter Baan Centre, a former prison and forensic psychiatric observation clinic, an intense listening session takes place. A standout is gbw9, who plays an eviscerating fusion of protest chants and blacker than black spiralling noise.

At TivoliVredenburg on Saturday night, ESG are on unbelievably tight form. Comparable to a gigantic shopping centre, with an Escher-style maze of escalators leading to the various floors, Tivoli (as it is shortened) is comprised of five concert



BITOI

halls, with each specialising in a different genre. It takes me a while to locate the Ronda room where ESG are delivering their last ever European performance. Slapping out a signature cocktail of heavy yet stripped back Latin-inspired dance funk, their energy is infectious. As the overly sampled and instantly recognisable track "UFO" lands, the audience erupts, the first row accompanying the polyrhythmic break with maracas handed out by the band from the stage. It's a palpably triumphant moment for the outfit and a personal, bucket-list opportunity to catch the late 1970s forerunners to the hip-hop revolution.

On Sunday, searching for a soothing interlude, I stumble upon BITOI (Bass Is The Original Instrument), a project initiated by Swedish-Ethiopian composer Cassius Lambert. Playing the bass guitar and electronics, Lambert is joined by a choir consisting of Alexandra Shabo, Lise Kroner and Anja Tietze Lahrmann. "The lyrics will be strange to all of you," he explains. "Because the words are based on the phonetic pronunciations of bird sounds." The three women's voices are unreal, gliding together in an alien harmony, trilling and tapping their throats to achieve a warbling effect. Singing in this ancient avian language, transposed for human ears, BITOI evoke a folkloric sound as timeless as it is utterly unfamiliar. ●