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Thee Silver Mt. Zion Memorial Orchestra
and Tra-la-la Band
05.23.06
Maria am Ostbahnhof (Berlin)
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Thee Silver Mt. Zion Memorial Orchestra and Tra-la-la Band, in an old concrete workshop called Maria in the woods on riverside in East Berlin, are builders and destroyers, a construction busy taking itself apart, a melancholy howl disappearing into the evening; watching them is watching one of the most vibrant forces in music right now, even

though it may have seemed their most interesting ideas first broached in the studio long ago.

They don't so much take the stage as pool there, like water; not only does the element figure in its music, in sound and theme, but it's a good way to imagine what's on this early summer night at Maria am Ostbahnhof, near the old eastbound rail station. Mt. Zion is deep water, fluid, sometimes cool and slow. Currents of sound eddy through, gritty grains of sand in the teeth, graceful lines spooling from intertwined violins, cello, bowed double bass rolling over muscular guitars welling underneath, building waves suddenly dense and menacing, packing a wallop, crashing overhead. Then the whole thing slips away into the cracks in the ceiling, and you wonder how it ever gained such force, since you can't put your hands around it.

Currently on Constellation Records, the Tra-la-la band originally sprung from the fertile Montreal music scene in the late 90s as an offshoot of Godspeed You! Black Emperor. Records like *He Has Left Us Alone But Shafts of Light Sometimes Grace the Corners of Our Rooms* feature spare pianos and A.M. radio snippets, analog tape wizardry. On tour now supporting *Horses in the Sky*, there's much more by way of vocals (which I was surprised to hear, as I hadn't heard the record yet); the word is guitarist and lyricist Efrim Menuck is more used to singing, and his cracking, breaking country is a welcome element to the avant-garde and big noise. Also, they play and sing in a circle, facing each other. Everyone sings.

strolled onstage and picked up a guitar. The vibrato lasts a few minutes, and then another guitarist, Ian Ilavsky joins the circle. The violinists come next, bearing bottles and bottles of water. Both, naturally, are beautiful each in their own way, Jessica Moss angular and dark, Sophie Trudeau with a defiant haircut and softer demeanor, an underestimated campus activist. Both play, for whatever reason, in bare feet.

It stops. "We're the Thee Silver Mt. Zion Memorial Orchestra and Tra-la-la band," the droll Menuck says. "This is our 69th show ever." There's a space. "We've played a few times in Berlin. We've never managed to win you over, and you've never managed to win us over. Maybe tonight we'll fall in love."

Thee Silver Mt. Zion begin this affair with "God Bless Our Dead Marines". Somewhere Mt. Zion are described as contemporary protest music, and though they are much more than that--they've sounds that have no time and place, that will always surround the heart--this spirit is something that binds the band together somehow, and something the crowd is ever made mindful in little ways. If this is our Ohio, then great. "The electric chair, the electric chair," spins off over a marching beat, with strummed cello and slow but increasingly relentless, pressing violins and an electrified drone. Listened to at home, Zion sounds are timeless, perhaps crestfallen. This band doesn't tour so often, but it is the way to get the whole system of what they're about. Moving in a circle, raising these tired, suddenly uplifting voices. More simple and sincere than Zion's crafted jacket-art and pop-art-pencilscratch handbill sleeves, which are effective in their own right but, I suspect, will wind up like Pavement's or Throbbing Gristle's or the Fillmore's; cool, well-crafted artifacts. Not so, what their creators make of an evening--which is a spark of hope in the dark.

From the fun and playful (a line about how punk rockers would look in crowns running around Buckingham Palace) to ambivalent, even as sound drifts apart in pieces, Mt. Zion is about staying together. "This is a song called Mountains Made of Steam," Menuck says, squinting. "It's about dreams that sink into water. You can still see them, but they're murky." There are strings and waltzy harmonics. Artful, rising feedback. It's a lament - somewhere there's a soldier, somewhere a mother. It is an orchestral piece breaking apart. "Should we throw our hopes in the ocean?" A few weeks from now will mark the 2,500th American death in Iraq, and heaven knows how many torn sons and families in Sadr City or Najaf. A sound so vast you can get lost and never come back--it just keeps going and building. "Some hearts are true," Menuck's voice cracks later in the night, echoing earlier lines--When the world is sick, can't no one be well; but dreamt we was all beautiful and strong. There's a line written on one of A Silver Mt. Zion's earlier records: "Destroy all dreamers with debt and depression." No doubt debt's everywhere these days. But tonight's a reminder that in music as in larger things in life, ain't all destroyed yet, and that's a good thing too.

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