THE SEDUCTIVE DRIFT OF A BASSLESS TRIO: VMV

by Alberto Popolla

VMV Trio - *The Search of Meaning*
Vincenzo Di Gioia (alto saxophone, piano)
Marco Cutillo (guitar)
Vito Tenzone (drums, piano, keyboards)
Inner Urge Records, 2026

Jazz has seen many trios come and go: from the agile and fruitful refuge of Benny Goodman to spectacular formations that left an unmistakable mark on the music's aesthetics, such as those of Keith Jarrett, Bill Evans and Oscar Peterson, all the way to the more "modern" The Bad Plus or The Necks, to name only a few. Although a reduced line-up might appear to imply an impoverishment of expression, a stripping-down to essentials, the few examples just mentioned categorically disprove that idea. On the contrary, it is often precisely in a trio that remarkable heights of effectiveness, intensity and passion are reached, with an intoxicating palette of colors generated by only three musicians. Yet in almost every case there is one element that seems, in some respects, indispensable: the presence of a bass, or of a harmonic instrument capable of taking on its role. There are very few examples of trios without a genuine low-frequency engine.

In the case of the young Apulian VMV Trio and their debut album, *The Search of Meaning*, we are faced with precisely such a line-up: alto saxophone, guitar and drums, a combination that immediately arouses curiosity and surprise. That curiosity is heightened by the fact that, in recent developments in international jazz, the role of the bass seems to have grown increasingly important, often carrying the groove that anchors the music to the ground and in many cases replacing part of its harmonic function. Choosing to do without a low-frequency propulsion system inevitably affects the overall character of the music, creating in itself an innovative factor - or at least a line of research that sketches out an unusual musical landscape.

Illustrious Precedents

It should be said that there have been examples of bassless trios in the past, first and foremost Paul Motian's trio, which from 1985 successfully made its way through the jazz scene both on record and on stage, with Bill Frisell on guitar and Joe Lovano on saxophone. Among more recent releases, the splendid *Lebroba*, issued by ECM in 2018 under drummer Andrew Cyrille's name, deserves mention, with Wadada Leo Smith on trumpet and, once again, Bill Frisell.

There is of course no reason to compare our Italian trio with these giants, although the three musicians from Apulia display instrumental excellence of a very high order. Still, certain shared traits can certainly be identified: a sense of suspension, a floating quality free from anchorage, an unstable balance that nevertheless produces freedom of movement, in a continual process of adjustment among instruments that are unmoored yet completely connected to one another, constantly expanding.

These elements are expressed through an original musical proposal that begins with a strong harmonic sensibility, the writing of gentle and evocative melodic lines, and compositions that are polished, sinuous and soft in tone. This allows the VMV Trio to move away from awkward comparisons and bring its own modus operandi to the surface, supported by a technique that is

never an end in itself but always placed at the service of genuine creativity.

Vincenzo Di Gioia on alto saxophone and piano, Marco Cutillo on guitar, and Vito Tenzone on drums as well as keyboards have made an album that blends echoes of Nordic jazz with Mediterranean-flavored melodies, distant references to progressive music, and dense, substantial work on arranging and composition, handled with care and an enveloping touch. The eight original pieces, with writing duties divided more or less evenly among the three musicians, reveal an unexpected maturity given their young age, though one reinforced by appearances at festivals and competitions and by collaborations of various kinds.

Within an overall setting that is both accomplished and thoroughly enjoyable, several pieces stand out. *May 14 (the story of us)* opens with droplets of keyboard, airy guitar arpeggios and saxophone tracing soft melodic lines before launching into an improvisation full of dizzying double-time figures. A second section introduces a rhythmic shift, saxophone and guitar moving in unison before an elegant solo by Cutillo.

Now fly, the dream is real has a more urgent momentum, with intricate alto-sax melodies interrupted by reflective passages, finely crafted guitar and saxophone solos, and rhythmic stops in which Tenzone's drums shape the musical material, before the piece closes with an aggressive finale marked by powerful saxophone excursions. The brief *Troubled Consciousness*, the only track written jointly by all three musicians, is also noteworthy, with a poignant piano arpeggio and an estranging saxophone part; here improvisational interplay takes on a greater role than elsewhere on the album.

Outrage is distinguished by a fine guitar solo, virtuosic but never emphatic, while *Missing Pieces* has a classically inflected, Nordic-jazz feel, including an interesting passage in which an arpeggio moves from guitar to alto saxophone. The opening track, *Opening*, is mysterious, with a lightly progressive character that nevertheless introduces the album effectively. Both *Film* and the closing *Where am I now?* create an evocative nocturnal vision, almost like film music: an enchanting, poised soundtrack.

Credit is due to Inner Urge, the Apulian label that released *The Search of Meaning*, for having both good ears and the courage to give these three musicians such an opportunity. One can only hope that a project of this kind will find suitable live spaces in which the high quality of its musical proposal can be fully appreciated.

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