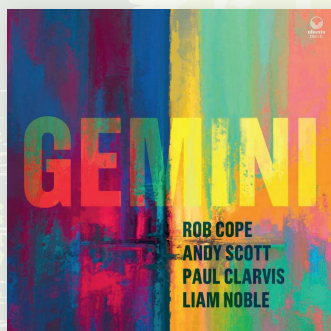


# CD & CONCERT REVIEW

# & concert



**ROB COPE (SOPRANO SAXOPHONE,  
BASS CLARINET),  
ANDY SCOTT (TENOR SAXOPHONE),  
LIAM NOBLE (PIANO),  
PAUL CLARVIS (DRUMS)**  
**Gemini (Ubuntu Music)**  
**25 January, Vortex Jazz Club**

Nothing beats live music, so having just checked out Rob Cope's latest album *Gemini*, I was delighted to be invited to the launch gig at the Vortex Jazz Club, London. It has been five years since Cope's debut release on Ubuntu, *Gods of Apollo* – a fantastic album that I had the pleasure of reviewing at the time (CASSGB, Autumn 2019) – so I was excited to hear his latest project. As Cope writes in the album notes, *Gemini* (derived from Greek mythology meaning 'two' or 'twins') brings together two existing duos; that of Cope and his friend and teacher Andy Scott (saxophone), and that of improvising duo Liam Noble (piano) and Paul Clarvis (drums). The musicians are all interlinked through various projects, and their natural affinity can be heard on the album. As well as wanting to write for this combination of musicians, Cope also wanted to add to the saxophone repertoire and write challenging duos for students to enjoy playing, including his own students at Shrewsbury School who helped to develop some of the pieces. There are plans to publish sheet music from the album in due course.

Rob Cope, as well as being known for his playing and composing, is also the host of the wonderful *The Jazz Podcast* on which he has interviewed some of the biggest names in jazz (Sonny Rollins, Bob Mintzer, Nikki Iles, Jamie Cullum etc) in his own inimitable style. I mention this because Cope's unique, relaxed and jovial style on the podcast is also a feature of his live performances. After walking on stage, Cope asked the band for a moment to locate misplaced music for the first tune. He never did find the music, but it didn't matter because he knew it anyway! (The same thing happened with the second tune, but the rest of the music seemed to be on his stand.) This slight delay gave him the chance to introduce the project and tell us about the first piece, *Breathe*, a new addition to the band's repertoire, not on the album, but a gift to the audience for coming to hear the launch gig. Named due to the fact that Cope had tried to remember to leave space for himself and fellow saxophonist Andy Scott to breathe, this opening piece set the tone of the gig from the off. High energy, high intensity, masterful improvisation and incredible communication between the band members permeated the performance. Liam Noble and Paul Clarvis have an almost telepathic link fostered through years of playing together, and this extended to sensitively accompanying and responding to Cope and Scott on saxophones.

The music performed at the concert and recorded on the CD loosely falls into two categories. As Cope described them at the gig there are the "fun ones", which are complemented by more reflective pieces. *Breathe* was followed by one of the more introspective compositions, *Voices*, which is the first track on the album. Opening with Cope on solo bass clarinet (perched precariously on a wobbly table; Cope chose this table so that people wouldn't knock their drinks off it), Scott then enters on tenor, the two instruments feeling as though they are meeting for the first time, before Noble and Clarvis enter, and we hear the group getting to know each other. After the stillness of *Voices* we were launched into *Together*, which is actually a piece about moving apart. Inspired by the teacher-student relationship, Cope and Scott start together in this piece before gradually drifting apart, indicative of the student evolving their own style. This showcased impressive technique from Cope and Scott with a frantic unison phrase gradually moving apart and growing in complexity before Clarvis and Noble enter, driving the piece forward. *Up* was next on the programme, and this is definitely one of the "fun ones". A Latin American inspired piece, full of carnival vibes (bringing Tito Puente to mind), this was an opportunity for both saxophonists to shine. Andy Scott has perhaps one of the richest tenor saxophone sounds out there, and is a thoughtful and sensitive improviser, weaving melodic lines over the backdrop provided by the band. Pieces such as this are also where I feel Cope's own playing really comes into its own. On soprano you can hear the strong bop influence in his playing which has a real groove and swagger.

*Across* was next on the menu and is rather different to a lot of the other music on the album. It is meant to represent a journey through time, and to me it has a sense of being constantly in motion, perhaps flying over a body of water. The bass clarinet and piano provide an ostinato whilst Scott's tenor saxophone soars over the band like a narrator telling a story; I could quite imagine hearing this piece on a film soundtrack. The first half ended with *Gemini*, which Cope describes as his origin story, moving from his roots in the classical tradition towards the world of jazz and featuring a soprano saxophone cadenza.

The second half started with another track not included on the album, *Mr Moustafa* by Alexandre Desplat (from the film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*). It's a real shame the group hasn't recorded this (yet?), as it was one of the highlights, showcasing Liam Noble's masterful improvisatory skills, with the audience hanging on his every note. After this beautiful moment we were thrown straight back into one of my favourite tunes on the album, *Laika*. The piece is meant to represent the endless energy, enthusiasm and loyalty of dogs and it really does conjure the image of a dog chasing its tail with joy! Next up was *Rain*, a tribute to Scott's double

saxophone concerto *Dark Rain*, echoes of which can be heard throughout, as well as the strong and painful emotions that it conjures. After the intensity of *Rain*, *The Dance* provided some light relief; an almost Balkan-infused folk dance featuring stride piano playing, this features two independent saxophone parts chasing each other but never quite touching.

*Little Glass Box* was originally recorded on Scott's Group 5 album *Ruby and All Things Purple*, on which Cope also plays. It is about how even small things can be magic, and it has a somewhat ethereal feel, with expansive lines and plenty of space for the players to explore in their improvisations. Following this, *Punch* has an almost punk feel to it, with Scott playing a repeated riff using overtones allowing Clarvis to improvise over the top – short but effective!

The gig closed with a final piece not on the album, *Paris* by Moondog, a catchy melody that sent audience members home with smiles on their faces. Scott, Clarvis and Noble all worked with Moondog, and Cope reminisced about performing this piece when he was at the conservatoire, neatly linking the musicians together.

Overall, it was a hugely enjoyable gig, demonstrating masterful improvisation and deep connection between the musicians. Much of the music is contemporary in nature and rewards repeated listening, but it is truly authentic and demonstrates exceptional musicianship. I highly recommend listening to the album, but even better, go and hear the music performed live if the opportunity arises again.

Alastair Penman



Rob Cope (far right) with (l-r) Paul Clarvis, Andy Scott and Liam Noble, at the recording session for the *Gemini* album