

**DRAFT: STS Analog's 'Come Fly With Me' – in which The Amsterdam Jazz Trio prove to be the perfect cure for lockdown-quarantine-pandemic fever**

*David Denyer for The Reel-to-Reel Rambler*

*11 August 2020*

Let's face it, the past six months have been.... well, is there even a word for it? Several come to mind but few of them are printable! What can one say about the massive impact of a global pandemic on every single area of our lives? The virus itself, the effect of months of lockdown, the stress of ongoing social distancing and other restrictions, the loss of so many essential things from livelihoods to loved ones... even I, who am usually slightly obsessive about positive thinking, have to admit that life has been, and continues to be, extremely challenging for us all.

One of the hardest things, perhaps, has been the 'double whammy', the 'both sides of the see-saw' effect: if we think of wellbeing as a see-saw, with all the things that stress and challenge us and give us pain on one side, and all the things that feed and lift us and give us pleasure on the other, a good trick in managing our wellbeing is perhaps to strive for a balance between the two (since we can't avoid stress and pain in life). Then along comes a global pandemic and puts an elephant on the pain side while removing access to almost everything on the pleasure side – great!

Here in the audiophile world, one of said pleasures is of course our beloved music. On the pain side, we've been robbed of all the wonderful gigs, concerts, events, gathering, hi-fi shows, listening sessions – and that's likely to continue for quite some time to come sadly. Of course this comes very much under the banner of 'first world problems', but at the same time I think it's important to recognise the role of such events on people's wellbeing, their spirit. The group energy, the togetherness, the buzz, the collective spirit, the feelings of a shared experience and shared joy. These are important things. As is the role of the arts in our society in general: they're not a luxury, a nice-to-have. They're an essential part of our humanity, and we risk then at our peril (but don't get me onto ranting about the current UK government's track record on such things or we'll be here all day...).

On the pleasure side, however, many of us have had more time on our hands to fiddle with our hi-fi systems, alphabetise our music collections along every possible parameter, and of course, listen to music. Even 'almost live' music, without even leaving the house. Musicians unable to perform in public gatherings have resorted to putting on intimate 'living room' concerts online, which has been a fascinating and incredible and raw thing to witness. I salute every single one of them. But of course, it's not the same. (Nothing, right now, is the same).

So, where to find some solace? How to load up that pleasure side of the see-saw? Well, at the risk of sounding like a broken record (see what I did there?!): reel-to-reel tape. Sounds - *and feels* - more like being at a live event than anything else I know.

Which leads me (finally – rambler by name and by nature) onto to this release from one of the most successful of all master tape brands, STS Analog.

## **Come Fly With Me**

There's a lot that's very tempting about this recording. First, I'm a jazz fan. Second, I already know the quality of STS Analog's offerings. Third, the title track is one of my all-time favorite jazz numbers. And last but by no means least, I'm grounded, grumpy and would give anything to fly anywhere with anyone, so I'll reach for any chance I can get!

First impressions: the cover is undeniably cool. STS is a Dutch company, and the Dutch national airline KLM celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year, which is when this recording was made. The image is a recent, modern one, and yet the cover design is so well done that it puts me in mind of the graphic art of glory days of flying, and of old jazz albums – the pale blue colours, the jet-set era. It's all very classy - vintage chic.

## **The Amsterdam Jazz Trio**

I didn't know the [Amsterdam Jazz Trio](#) before picking up this tape, but I do like a good jazz trio, so I'm all in.

The Trio is / are: Jochem Braat on piano, Adrie Braat on double bass and Tijn Jans on drums.

A bit of Googling reveals that Jochem Braat was born in Amsterdam in 1988, to a house full of jazz music. He played the clarinet for 8 years before one day suddenly putting his clarinet back in the case and the lifting the lid of the piano instead. He studied jazz piano at the Conservatory of Amsterdam and the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia in Rome, and then obtained his master's degree with Bert van den Brink at the Conservatory of Utrecht. He plays, and drawn on, a wide variety of genres – from old, modern and contemporary jazz to classical, from Brazilian folk music to multi-synthesizer disco tracks. All of these influences can be heard in Jochem's playing, arrangements and compositions.

Adrie Braat (I wonder if Braat is a common name in Holland or if he and Jochem are related?) studied classical music at the Amsterdam Conservatory, after which he took lessons from John Clayton of the Count Basie Orchestra. At age 24 he joined Boy Edgar's Orchestra, played in Jeff Reynolds' Big Band and then from 1981 – 1988 played with the Dixieland Pipers led by Bert de Kort. Adrie is apparently famous for his Asian cooking (so we have that in common, I whip up a great Indian curry) and collects old 45rpm jazz records (yep, I have a few of those too).

Tijn Jans also graduated from the conservatory of Amsterdam as well as that of Rotterdam. He's active as a teacher, composer and drummer, and is involved in an eclectic variety of music and arts projects crossing a breadth of genres and styles, including [Luchtman](#), [Maximalistica](#), [Walk Tall](#) and his own project [The Tight Jans](#). Actually he strikes me as a bit of a renaissance man!

## **The recording**

This recording was made by STS' Fritz de With at the Bimhuis, Amsterdam on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2019. It's a pure analogue recording made on Nagra recorders, with an analogue mixer, fed by Schoeps' sublime MK21 microphones.

As is usual with STS Analog master copies, the actual (original) master is played back on a Nagra Audio T studio master recorder and fed to a bank of six Phillips N4522 recorders. Recording The Masters LPR35 tape stock is used which, being a long-play variant of the studio-bred SM911, is perfect for this application.

### **The tape**

This tape runs to around 40 minutes but fits on one reel. STS' reels are gorgeous, objects of beauty crafted by Feinwerktechnik, and this one comes in a smart and pleasingly slim box. Let me say one more word on those boxes from STS: being slimer than usual, you can fit more tapes on any given shelf space. When you're first starting your master tape collection this might not seem very relevant, but when the addiction takes hold, your tapes can take up one heck of a lot of shelf space, and then house space. The STS boxes are therefore cleverly designed in that respect and in others: the tapes are easy to get out of the box, yet when they're in, they're in, keeping the tape perfectly safe and sound. Win, win, win...

### **Come fly with me**

So, having introduced the band, set the scene of the recording, and hopefully got you visualising putting the tape on yourself, let's get this gig going....

First up is the title track *Come Fly With Me*. Now, I'm always going to reserve the biggest place in my heart for Sinatra's original version, also the title track of his 1958 album of the same name. And yet, right now, this Trio's version is really hitting the spot for me. They handle this with a bounce, a mellifluous flow, a softness and easy-going nature that quite frankly (no Sinatra pun intended) is utterly appealing. With all the current stresses in the world, I don't want to be challenged, I don't want to be stretched, I don't want to be teased and tested. I want something beautiful, natural, easy and accessible. And this is.

The piano is recorded extremely well. In fact the whole trio is. Actually let's talk about the drums first... they are oh-so-subtle. Much of the time they are perfectly slight, delicate, just keeping time and rarely taking the spotlight. The bass follows suit; it's deep, warm and rounded. The overall pacing is spot-on: the drummer and bass play and dance together impeccably. And so let's talk about the piano: in wonderful contrast, it's big bold and right there in front of you - but not at all 'in your face'.

The piano can be a difficult instrument to reproduce in a life-like manner but here its captured with an extremely natural tone. Its presence feels life-like in size and well, it just sounds and feels exactly like a 'real' piano. And it's not just the recording that I'm commending here, the musicianship is first class too. The pianist's fingers dance across the keyboard, there's nothing ploddy or mechanical about them, instead there's a cool, relaxed carefree 'je ne sais quoi' to the playing. There's also a great rhythm to the playing.

This is certainly cool, laid back, soft and easy jazz, but don't let that fool you into thinking it's going to be bland or wishy-washy, with vague and sloppy interplay between the musicians. No, this is beautifully cohesive. The trio plays joyously in time, there's an absolute tightness, while at the same time a sound and rhythm that feel mellow, harmonious, soothing and comforting. I always think that to achieve that balance in a musical performance – masterfully tight yet melodically mellow - can't be easy to pull off, and so I take my hat off to anyone who masters it – and these guys most certainly do.

After the opening title track, we have such mega-smooth cool jazz classics as *The Girl From Ipanema* and *Fly Me Too The Moon* - which was one of my first jazz loves and remains an all-time favourite. I'll always associate it with Sinatra and Count Basie, which was the first version I heard. The whole set (sorry, track list, I was still thinking I was at a live gig there) is a roll-call of classics, some up-tempo, some down-tempo, such as the almost caressingly slowed down *What A Wonderful World*.

Overall, the tape lifts and cheers, as it lulls, seduces and relaxes. And, right now, that actually perfect. I need lifting and cheering. I need to be lulled and seduced and relaxed to give me a welcome break from the harsh realities of the day.

This is not just music, it's medicine. Medicine for the soul. Feeling tense, stressed, fed up, isolated, stuck? I'm no doctor, but I reckon this tape should perhaps be available on prescription. I certainly feel all the better for spending some time with it.