



LESS IS MORE

WITH SOUL MUSIC COMMANDEERED BY POP STARS AND COVER BANDS, RAY WASSEF OF THE RAY MANN THREE TELLS PAUL DONOUGHUE ABOUT FINDING THE REAL HARMONY IN A CLASSIC GENRE.

“We call ourselves a soul band and people are assuming we are Usher,” says Ray Wassef, notably unimpressed. As the singer with Sydney soul/R&B band The Ray Mann Three, his comments are indicative of a decline in the integrity of soul music. Once an empowered, respected genre – its roots in the American working class and willed towards notoriety by singers like Marvin Gaye and Aretha Franklin – Wassef believes his chosen genre has lost some of its former glory.

“The style of music has kind of been co-opted by cover bands and function bands, bands that belong more on a cruise ship,” he says. “So it’s understandable that it has lost a lot of respect.” Wassef, whose trio will play in Brisbane on the back of their Opa Opa digital EP, found a love for the paradoxical elements that underline soul music. “Soul music is very direct, very succinct [and] it is usually quite positive,” he says. “If you are talking about the more unfortunate aspects of life there is always some optimism built into it. For me, that is an artistic challenge.” Positivity in songwriting, however, can be a prickly idea. Wassef compares it to penning a happy poem – the result can appear sappy or “Hallmarky”. Owing to this, the songs on the EP and the band’s 2008 debut album went through a rigorous process, whereby Wassef and bandmates Byron Luiters and Grant Gerathy would weed out anything that did not fit the mood of the

record. “I had some songs that in my mind fell on either side of the ideal balance – they were either too twee or they weren’t positive enough,” he says. “It is not always about the happiest moments but they are moments where you find something honest or better in yourself. And that idea kind of carries from song to song.”

Spare, succinct composition is another element Wassef admired in soul, and has tried to proliferate on the trio’s recordings. Songs like ‘Opa Opa’ and ‘Smile’ build grooves from the barest of foundations: strong, simple beats, Wassef’s smooth, fluttering croon, and intermittent thumps of the bass guitar. Every instrument is pared back, even barely used, meaning each has ultimate impact. Wassef became interested in this idea of the brevity of soul music when the Sydney soul and R&B scenes were giving up nothing but excess.

“They had bands with seven, eight players, and there would be a lot of overplaying,” he says. “Whereas, you would go back and listen to the songs they were referencing and they would sometimes just be so sparse – all you would have is a beat and vocal, and by the time a bass note came in you would feel it in your guts. That had a lot more impact because there is so much less of it. So I thought I would like to see a band doing that live,” he says. The idea of the band being strictly a trio reinforces Wassef’s commitment to the sparse nature of the genre.

The Ray Mann Three have taken their cues from soul’s rich history, its revered forefathers – from Gaye and Franklin to Al Green and Otis Redding. But in Sydney, they have taken just as much inspiration from artists that weave the basic elements of the genre – its honesty, simplicity, the succinct nature of its lyrical style – into other areas, like folk and pop.

“For us, that is a lot more soulful,” he says. “Yes, they are playing a folky song, or it’s a guy with an acoustic guitar or two girls with a harp, but in my mind that sticks more to those basic ideas of what soul music is: it’s honest, it’s direct, it’s unpretentious; there is real skill and craft going into it, but at the end of the day, it is not about technical ability, it is about communicating something from the heart as eloquently as you can.”

WHO: The Ray Mann Three

WHAT: Opa Opa EP (Independent)

WHERE & WHEN: The Troubadour Thursday Jul 9