The Straits Go Italian! The Legendary Dire Straits. Interviews & Tour Warm-Up Review

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I wasn't exactly sure what I was letting myself in for when I decided to go to Nice Living, a restaurant *cum* live music establishment, reasonably upscale and featuring fine dining, ensconced in the **Foro Italico complex,** for what promised to be a **Tour Warm-Up on August 4th. 2011** by **The Legendary Dire Straits.**

The **Dire Straits** were celebrated, indeed, in their own right and immensely popular in the eighties but definitely disbanded ! And **bandleader** **Mark Knopfler** [2] I checked was elsewhere believably preparing for a tour with Bob Dylan! So who were these? To my surprise when I arrived, I learnt that the leader of this band was Italian.

I was taken aback, but was reassured immediately by him that many original members of the English band were playing this night. And **Jack Sonni**, the only one from the US, was there too. "I shall bring him and the others to you and we'll have a chat...but after the concert." A number of former band musicians, performers and collaborators on innumerable albums of the band officially disbanded in **1995**, when the **charismatic vocalist-guitarist-bandleader Mark Knopfler** took a decision in favour of a **solo career**, it seemed had decided to get together for a warm up concert, a prelude to fullfledged ones in Rome's vicinity, to revive those long unplayed live but far from forgotten staples of the Straits repertoire. It promised to be a long evening and indeed it was almost two o' clock by the time the concert and all my 'chats' were over !

But the moment I heard the band commence playing, even though it was an informal warm-up, I knew this was something I ought to sit through. I flung all thoughts of leaving aside and moved my seat close to where I had a better view of the stage. The sound was distinctly authentic. The authentic sound of an authentic band and not that of a cover or tribute band. And I began to examine the line-up closely. Many original members of Dire Straits were here! **Jack Sonni** on the guitars was still Jack Sonni and even better. **Mel Collins** **[3]** was exceptional on the saxophone and had all the warmth of tone, the **fluency** and the **magic** of his early years. And on the drums, although less visible on a tight stage setting, was **Danny Cummings** who had also had his own stint with the Straits.

The musicians were playing "**Walk Of Life** [4]" from ***Brothers In Arms*** and straightaway, its long introductory solo onwards, it was obviously very much the **Dire Straits** sound, a professional sound relying heavily on its **rock and roll rhythm** for effect with that melody reminiscent of busking in the subway. Even the vocalist in Mark Knopfler's shoes, **Marco Caviglia**, adhered to the songs stylistically and vocally intoning much the same way.

His stance, his style of guitar playing (what a guitarist!) and even his vocals (with only a very distant Italian accent lacing the occasional phrase) sounded tailor made for the Dire Straits body of sound. **Jack Sonni** on the guitar, **Mel Collins** on sax, and **Cummings** on drums were all in tremendous form as they walked all day and night through the

number. By the time "**Your Latest Trick**" (the rock song from the studio album ***Brothers In Arms***) came on, my suspicions had fled. I was having a good time! This band was worth staying up for. “All I can do is send it to you” and a sax solo.

And then, as soon as they launch into the celebrated **1985** song "**So Far Away**", the crowd is on its toes, basking in reflected glory for even though Mark K was so far away: his hit was being enjoyed in this near perfect rendition with all the abrupt stresses of this inimitable rock ballad. Marco Caviglia was doing well and this music was worth reviving! "**Tunnel Of Love**" from the 1980 album ***Making Movies*** mentioning Rockaway Beach in New York featured incredible guitar solos.

"**Romeo And Juliet**" from the same album (it has reappeared in several live albums since) is a conversation between lovers with **Romeo** as narrator, and one revelled in the opening guitar melody with all its arpeggios. **Keyboards** were most attractive, **Jack** on guitar and **Danny Cummings** on drums effective. "**Two Young Lovers**" (“It was the last day of summer..”), the country and western song, had guitars hard at work and the 14 minute marathon "**Telegraph Road**" with its plain folksy vocals lyrical keyboards waxing eloquent. The song which studiously follows a linear road pattern, inspired by one of Knopfler’s bus trips in **Detroit Michigan**, features several guitar solos including the iconic five minute one brilliantly handled in this concert.

When it came to the title song "**Brothers In Arms**" on the video watcher, with its instantly recognisable hook line and tuneful guitar riff, it took one back to 1985 when the song made history as the first CD single ever to be released! A rendition I really enjoyed was the title song from "**Sultans Of Swing**" on a jazzband playing in a deserted pub which features an extended guitar solo. "**Money For Nothing**", also an ‘85 song, and " **Solid Rock**" had the listeners wanting revivals of other songs from the The Legendary Dire Straits who focussed on reviving the hits of the roots rock and pub rock era band that distinguished itself from the punk rock of the time by drawing upon **country rock** and **progressive rock** musically and the leader’s Newcastle themes for lyrics and went on to win four Grammys to become one of the world’s most commercially successful bands with 120 million albums sold.

With the lead’s eloquence and emotional vitality, the sax player’s rich controlled tone and clean firm attack that constructed fluid lines with warmth, the keyboardist’s blend of the freely fanciful with disciplined harmonic techniques and the drummer’s formidable energy sculpted with imagination, this band **The Legendary Dire Straits** performed with instinct, a flair for the unexpected and a rare unity of purpose.

LEGENDARY LINE-UP: Meet The Band Musicians In Exclusive Interviews

Have you ever heard of **JACK SONNI** ? Electric guitarist who has played with **Pete Townshend**, **Keith Richards, Eric Clapton** and **Bob Dylan**. The only US member of **Dire Straits**, Californian **Jack Sonni** who alongside **Mark Knopfler** was labelled ‘the side guitarist’ came into his own in this performance often taking the lead and revealing his worth. Jack happens to be a competent instrument maker as well who once made a **six string** for Mark!

He was with **Dire Straits** during ***Brothers In Arm*** in **1984** and played exceptionally well on its twelve month tour. Jack still enjoys showing up at old haunts such as those of Bleecher Street in Greenwich Village, New York City. And sitting in on gigs when he happens to encounter old friends. That’s exactly what has happened and he’s joined forces with **The Legendary Dire Straits** in Italy. Although exhilarated by the night’s performance, he looks somewhat shaken at the old memories returning and speaks in clipped phrases.

He hasn’t parted on good terms with Mark Knopfler - it is obvious - and in spite of the playing of those numbers with familiar faces and close collaborators of yore he wears a remote look on his face. The performance that has revealed him in good touch has been disconcerting, stirring up too many old feelings and music he has steered clear of for decades. He couldn’t bear listening to any Dire Straits music as things had soured to the point of any “playing becoming painful”. He was wary of performing with **The Legendary Dire Straits** at first.

To him the thought of playing the old songs was distinctly unnerving. Five old members getting together to play Dire Straits material with a **tribute band leader** in the shoes of **Mark Knopfler** was odd. More so when **Marco Caviglia**, the Italian who has lead the Dire Straits tribute band for decades plays, sounds and has all the mannerisms of Mark Knopfler! However, the attractions of Italy and the early performances to throngs in remote towns near Rome helped overcome his misgivings and he is slowly unwinding, becoming more himself, "I was on the last two albums of Dire Straits and all through the tours and it was quite an experience. We each made our own individual contributions, brought our own ideas to the albums definitely. We always do." Somewhere along the line, bitterness was generated - it is obvious - as he withdraws into his own world of thought and he packs away his guitar.

What about **MEL COLLINS** ? **1947** born, he hails from the **Isle of Man**. A brilliant sax player of the eighties, he was a member of the seminal progressive rock band **King Crimson** in the seventies, playing in the album ***In the Wake of Poseidon, Lizard, Islands*** and ***Red***; he has worked with and played on the albums and tours of **Eric Clapton**, **Bryan Ferry** (1976 to 1993), the **Rolling Stones** and **Cliff Richard** in 1982-83. Mel's an able flautist as well. Remember the sax solo on the 1977 **Rolling Stones'** song "**Miss You**" with **Mick Jagger's** vocals? It has a 'directness and feeling of longing' as **Jagger** once stated, reluctant to comment on his own song. Well, it's all in the sax accompaniment and solos as well! Mel Collins was on the **Dire Straits'** first live album ***Alchemy*** in 1983; on 1984's ***Money For Nothing*** and the EP ***Twisting By The Pool***. Recently he played on the **Crimson Jazz Trio's** second album, ***The King Crimson Songbook.Volume Two,*** released in **2009**.

Ever heard of drummer and percussionist **DANNY CUMMINGS** ? Well, I had a most pleasant conversation with **Danny Cummings** on his table at **Nice Living**. "I was on the last album and the last tour of the **Dire Straits** as percussionist and then stayed on for five years supporting Mark Knopfler's solo career and all his solo album tours, ***All The Road*** and ***Kill To Get Crimson*** and ***Get Lucky***". As I congratulate him on his drumming on Knopfler's ***Kill To Get Crimson*** and somewhat subtly ask after his equation with the master guitarist-bandleader, Danny who seems less bitter than some says, "That's a small question with a big answer, but I'm fond of him. We had a good relationship. What do I think of him? He's unique and remarkable. Brilliant in his own way."

On the subject of drumming, while Danny is most accomplished, plays all styles and incorporates most approaches into his performances, he admits, "I like soul and motown drumming best. And am open to all Afro drumming experiences." **Danny Cummings** lives in Surrey and is busy with a host of projects in nearby London. "I am playing on the new record by **Amy Winehouse's** niece Dionne Bromfield. The producer called me only the other day and so I'm on that." While talking of The Lighthouse Family and the Cummings' drumming highlighted in their Ocean Drive, he adds, "And I have a project with **The Lighthouse Family**. We're old friends. We're trying to do a comeback. And I am with the BluesClub, one word, doing Rolling And Tumblin' their new album, which I suppose I'd call the Muddy Waters type of music with a different twist." Danny Cummings has recorded with **George Michael, Johnny Hallyday, Tina Turner, Elton John** and is featured on **Bryan Adams'** ***On A Day Like Today***. He specially enjoys his experiments with electronic sound, blending the traditional and futuristic, European drumming with instruments like bongos, congas, shakers and tambourines.

And **PHIL PALMER**, the slide guitarist familiar to Italians for his collaborations on **Lucio Battisti's** albums and famed for his work with **Clapton** and **Tina Turner**, who was away on a **George Michael** tour for the evening I attended, is very much on this tour and performed in the Ronciglione and Orbetello events.

MARCO CAVIGLIA's expertise on the Dire Straits sound stems from years of familiarity with this music which as a tribute band leader he appropriated in the best sense of the term and made his own. The fact that this music was lying unplayed, going to waste so to speak and all these old friends of his not playing that wonderful material any more troubled him and he decided to launch this band. "We called ourselves the **Legendary Dire Straits** for obvious reasons and with some members from the old lineup we are getting together for fun, for old times' sake, to keep this music alive and for the sheer joy and thrill of old friends playing together again. Each one of them loves Italy so why not play here? And we have big concerts lined up. Today's is merely a warmup exclusive event in Rome, but we have bigger concerts in Ronciglione and Orbetello." Of Mark, his namesake, in whose shoes he stands, he had only good things to say, "I have known him since the eighties and think highly of him obviously. It is unfair that this music which fans especially in Italy long to hear played live is unplayed. That's why I started this

new band, for fun, to keep this Dire Straits music going."

Keep track of them all! It is the skill of these musicians that, while intent on preserving the instrinsic characteristics of the old band, brings forth from that material new ideas and adds dimensions to the old with fervour.
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Scheda**Titolo completo:**
Dire Straits

Marco Caviglia: lead guitar & vocal
Jack Sonni: guitar & vocal
Phil Palmer: guitar & vocal
Mel Collins: sax
Danny Cummings: drums
Primi Di Biase: keyboards & vocal
Maurizio Meo: bass

Location : Nice Living is the live music and dining establishment in the Foro Italico complex.

Anno: 2011

- Musica

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