

Rock, dance and all that jazz

An experimental performance between Karnatrix and French dancer Claire Le Michel prompted a conversation of movement and sound

The Hindu · 26 Jun 2018 · :: Reji Verghese Claire Le Michel and Karnatrix will perform in Chandigarh on June 27 and in New Delhi on June 29

When I got to know, a few weeks back, that the band Karnatrix would be playing in Chennai, I carefully noted down the date. Karnatrix's founder and guitarist John Anthony is my all time favourite guitarist and a copy of the band's first album *Namaste*, which I bought seven years ago, still plays in my car.



So, I headed to Venkatsubbarao Hall on Harrington Road for their recent performance over the weekend, prepared for an evening of Carnatic, Hindustani, jazz and rock fusion. What was different this time was that French dancer Claire Le Michel would be performing with the band. The performance was about the cycle of life — from the stillness of the womb to your last breath — portrayed in music and dance.

Performers entered the dark stage and took their positions. Three Karnatrix musicians at the back and the dancer crouched in front.

After a few seconds, the lights slowly came on and an unusual track began playing in the background, faintly at first and then louder as the lighting got brighter.

The scene and the sounds were of a new dawn breaking: the sky awash in shades of orange, shrill sound of birds piercing the air and crickets chirping in the distance.

The morning sounds transformed into a slow chant of the

Gayatri mantra as John Anthony on guitar, CR Rahul on bass and Akhil Chand on vocals started performing one of the band's signature tunes 'Angel Dust'.

The dancer started making her first slow moves as she moved from the safety and stillness of the womb into an unfamiliar new world.

Everything was strange and exciting as she looked around, exploring new sounds, smells, experiences. Her movements started getting faster as the band picked up momentum with the guitar and bass phrasing in unison.

On and off John Anthony played a few notes at break neck speed, tailing off with murmured notes or a slow deep groan with a downward press on the tremolo arm.

All of a sudden the sound turned from playful to sinister as the band segued into one of their best known songs, 'Exorcism'. The music suggested that something ominous and menacing was about to happen. Sure enough Claire's movements became much more jerky, jagged and strained. She was being pulled and pushed from all sides.

After a few minutes of this, Claire fell to the ground exhausted. Then, she walked up to the mike and sang a mellow jazz song in French, written by her and John Anthony.

The abrupt change in tempo and genre, as well as the sweetness of the melody took me by surprise: I suppose a mid life crisis doesn't last forever, responsibilities ease up, life itself becomes mellower.

The music and dance moved onto the struggles of old age with the band playing 'Shiva Thandavam'. The 50 minutes-long show ended exactly as it began. The last breath had come and gone. Life turned a full circle.