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Innovation key to Manteca's staying power

Jazz ensemble plays intimate club shows at Toronto's Monarch Tavern on Tuesday and Wednesday.



Andrew David photo

Manteca is set to release its 11th album on Sept. 24.

By: [Peter Goddard](#) Visual Arts, Published on Tue Sep 17 2013

"Hey man, I love the opening," Matt Zimbel told Doug Wilde a while back. The subject was the tune "Radio Noir," destined to be the final of seven cuts on *Monday Night at the Mensa Disco*, the latest of [Manteca's](#) 11 albums, set to be released Sept. 24. "I love it, love it, love it," bandleader Zimbel enthused for the benefit of Wilde, the group's resident composer. "But just the opening. The rest I hate."

Yikes. These would be expensive fighting words for today's bands and their lawyers. But not for the veterans in Manteca. To the group's long history — which includes some 100,000 album sales and stage-sharing with the likes of Ella Fitzgerald and Miles Davis — there can now be added the words "calm

and comfortable,” according to Zimbel. Once was, the band’s approach mostly meant “energy with speed,” he points out.

From its inception in 1979, Manteca has been something of a trendsetter as Toronto’s jazz connection to salsa, samba and other Latin-rooted, percussion-based styles. And with gigs at the hallowed [Monarch Tavern](#) on Sept. 17 and 18 — a “residency,” as such former jazz blasts are now dignified — the nine-piece ensemble is front-running again. It’s showing younger musicians how long-term survival is assured by having weathered egos as tough as leather. Wilde, who doubles as the band’s pianist, took Zimbel’s criticism and ego-stroking in stride and began to rework “Radio Noir.”

“A lot of this new record comes from the fact I was a huge fan of Doug’s,” says Zimbel on the phone. “We started working on *Monday Night* three years ago. We’d send demos back and forth, shredding parts and rebuilding them and rebuilding them again. Some versions of the tunes are in fact the ninth or 10th.” Wilde pitches in: “In the process that Matt and I have, we would describe the kind of tune we wanted” and head in that direction. “It was like having a brief to work with.”

Monday Night at the Mensa Disco — the title is Zimbel’s conceit about an imaginary dance hall for brains where they check your IQ at the door — serves to reintroduce the band. And it begins with the opening tune, “Mind Monday,” another reference to the high IQ Mensa society. Beginning with a hint of the Manteca of old — a repeated simple, high-horn riff that might be found in an African dance hall song — the piece swerves in an entirely unexpected direction with the arrival of a bottomless bass note. It’s a gut-grabbing introduction to the band’s new “sonic world,” as Zimbel calls it. *Monday Night* is personal where most earlier Manteca LPs are communal. “Carmen’s Way,” the second cut in, is named after a new street in Sault Ste. Marie, Wilde’s old hometown. “The street is not as pretty as the piece is,” says Wilde. The chaos-courting “Casserole” comes from Zimbel watching Montreal’s 2012 street protests from his home, “where people began banging their pots and pans,” he says.

“After 2007, when the band reformed after we’d gone through a cleansing period, we looked around at what was out there,” Zimbel says. “Manteca had always looked at what formed the musical foundations of other cultures, like salsa or samba. But in 2007, when we looked around we could see there were so many samba and salsa bands we realized we didn’t need to do that. That was our challenge.

“Bands around at the same time were doing projects. (Toronto guitarist) Michael Occhipinti did the Beatles. Others were looking do something on (veteran arranger) Gil Evans. But that kind of thing is not in our DNA. We are a composers’ band with a lot of great players. There’s a new sense of confidence here.”

Manteca plays the Monarch Tavern (12 Clinton St.) at 8:30 p.m. on Sept. 17 and 18. \$15 at the door