



## **Soldier of Ideas: Thollem McDonas, Tsigoti, and the Geo-Politics of Sound**

### I. Houseless, Not Homeless

Thollem McDonas defies the conventional wisdom surrounding professional touring musicians. Driven as much by a need to connect with others as express himself musically, Thollem has cultivated an approach to being a traveling musician that sustains and enriches on multiple levels.

Thollem has an extensive background in classical music and improvisation, but abandoned the academy in his 20s to pursue direct political action. Eventually he merged these concerns, using music and performance at protests to draw attention to pertinent issues. Eventually he resumed his professional music career on own terms, integrating his heartfelt political ideologies into his compositions and performances.

Thollem interweaves his twin passions with precise balance. A marvelously disciplined musician, his interest in social justice issues gives him the impetus to perform. This balance is presented in visceral form by the song titles on his second solo album, *Poor Stop Killing Poor*, which read as “two poems intertwined with each other every other line”:

From Empty Came  
Consumption Runs Rampant When  
Something Else Again  
Sleeping With The Puritan Guard  
Relax Into The Wander,  
Rich Eat The Free Lunch  
All Is In,  
And Mass Murder Starving Children.  
The Bitter And Beauty.  
Terror Incorporated,  
Now Will Never Leave Now.  
The Clown Of War,  
Was Always Is And Never.  
We Are Witness To The Collapse...  
To Empty Went

Thollem states “one poem is overtly political and the other philosophical”, an illustration of how Thollem admirably blends high concept with down to earth action.

A self-described “perpetually traveling musician”, Thollem has no fixed address, but finds home in the myriad places he visits, and community in the people he meets. He talks about the reciprocity necessary to facilitate such arrangements, of gaining perspective and learning empathy. “Traveling speeds that process up”, notes Thollem. “Going into the unknown” forces one to adjust and exist in real time. This lack of routine necessitates empathy and promotes the understanding of people and cultures different from one’s own.

## II. War is Terror

Tsigoti is Thollem McDonas’ most overtly political project. A freewheeling anarcho-punk group, Tsigoti serves as a literal mouthpiece for his activism. Thollem sings politically charged lyrics alongside his off-kilter piano playing. The group is rounded out by Italian musicians Andrea Caprara (drums), Matteo Benicci (bass), and Jacopo Andreini (guitar).

Tsigoti began humbly enough. “Tsigoti started off as War Is Terror 5 years ago. I was in Nipozzano, outside Florence, in a house with a bunch of musicians and a recording studio. Andrea and I were just talking about how we’d like to make a punk album and we had 3 days to do it, so we did.

“I had written pages and pages of words about war when I was in Prague a few months prior, and we turned them into songs, recording, mixing, and mastering our first album, *The Brutal Reality Of Modern Brutality*.”

A cross-continental group based in Italy, Tsigoti’s output reflects both specific concerns endemic to the participants’ surroundings and the underlying universal tensions of class and place.

“I think there are benefits to this, and mostly it is the varying perspectives on politics. They are in a very different geo-political region than we are in the U.S., and Italian politics are quite different than ours in some ways. Also, musical sensibilities are varied as well, for the same reasons.”

There are also impediments to this arrangement, but the band transcends them by utilizing these limitations to their benefit.

“The drawback, of course, is that it is more difficult to tour together. We decided awhile back that we would make our albums on the spot, writing songs together in the same room and

recording them as we do it. The spirit of the band is to not be too meticulous about our performance. We're much more interested in retaining the original spirit and rawness of the band. So, we have made it work for the better all in all."

The content of Tsigoti's songs is directly informed by the group's shared political concerns. "I'd say for the most part, we all share basic political perspectives in that we don't want to be ruled by anyone, and we care about social justice issues, ecology, corruption, etc. I think we have been able to inform each other in some ways because we are coming from different parts of the world. Italy itself is quite varied, and the Italians come from different regions, which has also defined the way they see things.

"We often work directly from everyday topics from the news, looking into how these issues/stories are timeless and universal. We're not interested in pointing our finger at any one government or corporation, but at trying to reach the fundamental properties of problems that have been at the root of human existence for thousands of years - ignorance, greed, corruption, authoritarianism, exploitation of women and workers, etc. So, if you look deeply into our lyrics, you might find hints of current news, but for the most part we don't directly relate them. That's what the news is for..."

### III. Action is Necessary

"We have all these amazing technologies to communicate with people around the world in real time and so on, but there's no way you can substitute real physical traveling across geopolitical borders and cultural borders - all these different types of borders we create in the physical realm. Obviously when you travel, you smell smells and you hear different languages, and you have to cope with people's cultures and customs, and it's a much different thing than getting online and chatting with somebody or hearing some music from the Serengeti or something."

For Thollem, music *is* direct action. The engagement of senses and connections made between communities are integral to his mission. To this end, Thollem often focuses on free improvisation as a medium to communicate with people from other cultures. "An approach to musically being with another person", free improv, according to Thollem, "is not a Western European construct" and "fits within many cultures and philosophical frameworks".

In other words, Thollem enters into both musical and social situations in a non-imperialistic manner, a difficult feat for an American to achieve, or even be conscious of. Free improvisation is dependent on the individuals involved, and is thus the most equitable way of communicating openly and passionately with strangers.

Seeing beyond artificial, culturally-imposed barriers, Thollem observes that "when artists travel, we are non-governmental cultural ambassadors, representing ourselves, our

communities, our countries, and art and artists and ideas in general.” This engagement is at the core of Thollem’s utilization of music to achieve change. Whether in the political screes of Tsigoti or the engaged cultural pluralism of the Estamos Project, in which musicians from the United States and Mexico collaborate in a multitude of contexts, *understanding* lies at the center of all his endeavors.

By engaging in direct action, by being constantly active, Thollem McDonas works to increase understanding between people, and to show how arbitrary the constructs we create around our differences are. That he chooses to do this in the most kinetic of forms, through musical expression, further illuminates our shared experiences and breaks down barriers between nations and cultures.

#### IV. The Future is Now

With recent collaborations with William Parker & Nels Cline and Mike Watt & John Dietrich (as The Hand to Man Band) still fresh, Thollem continues to push forward, releases a handful of diverse recordings in 2013. Alongside another Dietrich collaboration and a record with Jad Fair (Half Japanese) and Brian Chase (Yeah Yeah Yeahs), are the new Tsigoti album, *Read Between the Lines... Think Outside Them*, and *People’s Historia*, by the Estamos Trio. A continuation of the Estamos Ensemble, in which Thollem collaborated with Mexican musicians, including a children’s orchestra, the Estamos Trio is completed by Carmina Escobar (voice, electronics, field recordings) and Milo Tamez (extended drumset).

Both *Read Between the Lines...* and Tsigoti’s 2012 album, *The Imagination Liberation Front Thinks Again*, are available from Post-Consumer Records. Relative Pitch Records will release *People’s Historia* in June.

Thollem is, as always, on tour and will play Monk’s Kaffee Pub in Dubuque on March 26, performing on a Fender Rhodes electric piano to the short films of Tula Cherici. [link](#)  
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