

AROUND TOWN

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From left: Dave Konopka, Tyondai Braxton, John Stanier and Ian Williams of Battles.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WALL

Fathers of invention

Watching New York math-rockers Battles perform their searingly complex music live can be a life-altering experience

BY JACK HEWSON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Warp Records is a titan in underground music and hosts some of the most consummate electronic innovators of the past 20 years, including Autechre, Squarepusher and Aphex Twin. One of its most recent signings is neo-prog rock outfit Battles, which pays its first visit to Taipei this Wednesday at The Wall (這牆).

"We're all really thrilled and honored to be working with these guys," says guitarist, keyboardist and vocalist, Tyondai Braxton, fresh out of the shower, talking on his cell phone from New York. "To be honest it couldn't be a better fit. We're really close with the label and we really share a lot of aesthetic ideologies with them ... I feel like they really get us and I feel like we really get them. It's just been this fun, exciting working relationship. We couldn't be happier."

Battles, however, represents a significant departure from the typically sequenced nature of previous Warp projects.

"I think there's no substitute for the human element," says Braxton with notable conviction. "The most important element in this band is there aren't machines doing it ... We use technology but only as an extension of our own technique. We don't rely on it to cover up our lack of skills in as far as being able to play."

SPECIAL EFFECTS

And few would doubt the band's pedigree, consisting of ex-Helmet drummer John Stanier, ex-Don Caballero guitarist Ian Williams, ex-Lynx guitarist Dave Konopka, and of course Braxton, son of Anthony Braxton, pioneer of the free-improvisation movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.

A more instrumental direction at the London-based label has prompted the signing of a number of guitar-focused acts, but it is Battles' inclusion that arguably serves best to reconcile Warp styles old and new, a viewpoint Braxton shares.

"I feel like we're a natural extension of what they had been doing. And I feel like they were trying to push themselves to get out of the solely electronic 'IDM' [intelligent dance music] world ... In a funny way I think we're a pretty good example of that logical next step."

In addition to the heavy deployment of effects, including Braxton's trademark pitch-shifted vocals, it is the layering of loops that defines the New York quartet's sound; a technique more commonly found in techno than rock. The advent of the "loop-pedal" has allowed such techniques to be replicated, in real time, live.

"The master of the band that everyone goes to is the loops ... We send loops to this amp behind John, and then we switch from that amp to our live amps. So John has to listen to those loops and he has to stay in time with those loops almost like a metronome. And then we lock into John. It's this kind of figure-of-eight circle of all of us relying on each other," explains Braxton, who is unenthused at the prospect of trying to incorporate more sequenced material into future projects.

"It kind of goes against the way we work and the kind of mission statement embedded in what we do ... It would be kind of a cop-out to suddenly have just a pre-sequenced click-track for John to play to. Can't do it. Can't do it," he says, laughing at his own slightly theatrical insistence.

A 'TUG-OF-WAR'

Now emerging from a brief break following a year and a half touring to promote its acclaimed first LP *Mirrored*, the band is only just beginning to work on fresh material and Braxton is elusive as to the direction the next record may take.

"It's so new right now that I really don't know, it's really hard to tell where we're gonna hop to next."

But by the multi-instrumentalist's account, it appears that the nature of the ensemble's song-writing process makes its sound particularly difficult to predict.

"It's like the Senate floor the way this band works ... The feel of the band's sound is the tug-of-war between the four of us. The youngest person's 30, the oldest person's 40; everyone has been playing their instruments since their teens ... everyone has a strong sense of themselves ... The sound of the band is the result of these four strong personalities fighting and bouncing off of each other, battling if you will ..."

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Battles

WHEN: Starting at 8pm on Wednesday

WHERE: The Wall (這牆), B1, 200, Roosevelt Rd Sec 4, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路四段200號B1)

TICKETS: NT\$1,200 at the door or NT\$1,000 in advance from White Wabbit Records, located inside The Wall's shopping complex