

'A guitar is like a passport'

Swiss artists Marc and Milla on performing in Sri Lanka

BY SHAILENDREE WICKRAMA ADITTIYA

The universality of music is one that has been explored in depth. Vocals and instruments can be used to convey emotions, thoughts, and stories even when the musician and the audience do not speak the same language. Marc Aymon and Milla Besson are Swiss artists who performed in Sri Lanka recently as part of the Francophonie Festival, demonstrating just how universal music can be.

The Daily Morning Brunch had the opportunity to speak to the artists the day they arrived in Sri Lanka. This was a day prior to a masterclass at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts and a performance at Alliance Française de Colombo on 16 March. On 17 March, the artists performed at TRAX Ahangama, and two days later, conducted a masterclass at the University of Ruhuna.

The artists

Marc is a poet and singer, whose work, described as 'folklore with a modern twist', centres on themes such as his travels, art, and national heritage. Milla is a singer-songwriter with concerts to her credit in French-speaking regions globally. Their performance in Sri Lanka featured their joint project 'Glaneurs', a compilation of 15 Swiss poems and songs on Swiss cultural heritage.

"We have been singing together for two years. I met Marc three years ago and held my first show with him two years ago. I have been travelling and performing with him since," Milla shared.

Marc explained that the duo connected online during the Covid-19 pandemic, mostly talking about art. Once he found out that Milla sings as well, Marc suggested meeting in person, so he could see her perform. "Her voice was incredible, so I invited her to record songs with me for my new album. In six months, we had a new tour with musicians."

Marc went on to say that after these performances, the audience would tell him that while his show was good, Milla was incredible. "And so began our collaboration. Milla writes her own songs in French. I write my own songs in French. And we collaborate on some special projects, like 'Glaneurs'. These are Swiss songs, but are also very universal

songs about humans. It's a project about memories."

He explained that if it was possible, humans would reach into their archive of memories and meet their ancestors, learning where they come from. Memories were a central theme of their work, even in Sri Lanka.

"We love to find ideas for songs from around the world, but we also find very beautiful treasures just in our gardens, for instance. Our idea is to speak about memories and musical traditions," Marc added.

The artists shared that the Sri Lankan performances included their originals as well as typical Swiss songs. Milla said the idea was to mix the two, with Marc adding that they hoped the audience would discover and learn about their culture.

This is the first time Marc and Milla visited Sri Lanka together. However, Marc said he holidayed in the island ten years ago, the beautiful nature and landscape etched in his memory. The recent visit adds the beautiful smiles and incredible kindness of Sri Lankans to his memory.

"Last year, we travelled in Asia, but not Sri Lanka, which is like a little pearl. We have seen information about the country on the internet, but we liked to be here in person and discover the island directly," Milla said.

Marc added: "I remember, when I played in Lima, Peru, we had a day off after the show, and because of this, the organisers invited us to dine with their families and meet local musicians. We hope it's the same here as well."

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While experiencing the beauty of the island and its people directly, Marc and Milla said they also hoped this would be an introduction to the local culture and the possibility of collaboration, as they would like to share the stage with local artists and make memories of shared cultures.

Francophonie Festival

Marc explained that their visit to Sri Lanka was centred on the Francophonie Festival, which is described as a celebration of the diversity of the French language and the French-speaking world that brings together over 321 million French speakers from around the world. International

Day of Francophonie is held annually on 20 March. Marc and Milla's performances in Colombo and Ahangama were hosted by the Embassy of Switzerland to Sri Lanka and the Maldives together with the International Organisation of la Francophonie.

Prior to the Sri Lankan leg of the tour, Marc and Milla performed two shows in Budapest, Hungary, and moved to Myanmar for five shows after their time in Sri Lanka. After that will come shows in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Paris, France.

"We are very happy to be here in Sri Lanka. One phase of the tour is the workshops with students, which is an educative meeting with instruments. We

hope to meet students with typical or traditional Sri Lankan instruments," Marc shared.

Prior to the performances and masterclasses, the artists were excited to meet Sri Lankans, saying they are a friendly people, especially when they see the artists with their guitars.

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The artists seemed to favour settings where they weren't just performers on stage, but were one with the audience, like in a garden or living room.

Speaking ahead of the performances, Marc said: "Of those who come for the show, some will understand French, some will be familiar with Swiss culture, but we hope that those who attend but don't know French or Swiss culture will still feel the energy of the music. We will try to give them something with emotion, inviting the audience to also sing the songs."

In terms of what comes next for the duo, Marc explained that the end of April will have them in Paris, recording new songs, while the end of the year will have them engaged in transatlantic travel and song writing.

PHOTOS VENURA CHANDRAMALITHA