

DIDGERIDOO *& Co Magazine*



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Inner Strength

Folk-Rock with a Mystical Touch

For over two years now, the Dutch band Inner Strength has been performing in the Netherlands with their innovative music, which has been characterized as "folk rock with a mystical touch". In more than half of their songs, the didgeridoo plays an important role in setting the atmosphere. Their songs range from laid-back ballads through melodic rock to danceable folk-inspired songs. Inner Strength consists of six people, combining didgeridoo, vocals, violin, flute, guitars, bass, drums and percussion.

Where most bands with didgeridoo use the didge as a constant ambient background drone with some harmonics, Inner Strength often use the didge as a rhythmic instrument. This is clearly demonstrated in songs such as 'The Power Of Now' and 'Free'. In the latter, the didge is used in a non-conventional way, playing brief staccato notes. Roland, the didgeridoo player, has been influenced by players like Charlie McMahon and Michael Jackson (Axis), but has also attended workshops with (amongst others) Mark Atkins, Alan Dargin, David Blanas and Djal Gurruwiwi. Roland is also webmaster of <http://www.didgeweb.com>, a didgeridoo website focused on Dutch and Flemish didgeridoo players.



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Left to right:
Judith, Endy, Roland, Noortje, Geert, Kelly

The beginning

Kelly (guitars): "I always wanted to create a band in a rock/classic/world music crossover style. The idea was formed especially after I heard Metallica & the San Francisco orchestra, and when I went to see the Chris Hinze 'Tai Chi In Balance' tour when they came to Eindhoven in November 1999. So by the end of 1999 I had some friends together to try and start the band."

How did the didgeridoo join the band?

Kelly: "Around that time I had also done a didgeridoo workshop and I really liked the sound. I felt this was a sound that would fit quite nicely with the world music crossover idea I had in mind."

Purely by coincidence, I ran into a small advertisement for a didgeridoo player looking for a guitar or flute player. That player turned out to be Roland and so he was also present the day the band first got together, at the beginning of December. It was only a few years later that I found out that Roland had been at Chris Hinze's show as well!"

Did all the band members know the didge?

Roland (didgeridoo): "When the band got together for the first time, the didge was not yet well known to most band members. Incorporating the one-tone drone in our music was something that needed to be learned over time. Today the didge is still often in one key during a song, mainly because changing the pitch is something that needs to be done carefully and accurately; otherwise it just doesn't sound right. However, the flexibility of the didgeridoo, enabling tuning of the didge while playing, now also leads to songs where the didge follows the melody of the songs."



Roland on didgeribone

Foto: S. de Gier

Band Introduction



Inner Strength "on stage"

Foto: B. v.d. Voort

Judith (Flute and vocals): "Indeed, the first time I consciously heard the didge was the day we got together. I was immediately impressed by the sound; it touched me. On the other hand I was afraid that the instrument would be very limited and therefore a constricting factor. Roland proved me very wrong there, and even today he often surprises me with the flexibility of the instrument and the sounds and rhythms that are possible."

How do you write your songs?

Judith: "Writing songs is still a challenge and I think it will always be. We needed to experiment for quite a while on incorporating the didge sound in our music. In the beginning, we needed to play a lot of covers to get to know each other. Now we are beginning to learn the trick of using the didge in our own songs. For example, with the flute, I learned that the combination with didge can be a very strong one that I enjoy a lot. The didge plays as a rhythm instrument while the flute shapes the melody. In our songs which also feature violin and guitar, the didge can be both a rhythmic element of the music and an instrument that creates a very warm mood."

Roland: "Often Judith or Kelly have a certain basic idea or rhythm. Once they start playing to form a basis, the others join in, often in a jam-like style, trying combinations. Sometimes a melody played by a guitar or bass guitar triggers me to play something similar on the didge."

This is, for example, how the didge rhythm in "Spirits Bay" was born. Another time the rhythm being played might simply trigger me to play a certain thing that just fits in with the other parts being played. This happened in "Power of Now": Geert, the drummer, started to play an up-tempo riff on the drums and I filled in the didgeridoo part, which again triggered Judith to play her flute part. We have found out though, that to bring in the didge in a song, it needs to be part of the song in an early stage, otherwise it's difficult to combine the drone with songs that have lots of changes in the key or chords in the melody."

You mentioned covers. Did you play covers of didge songs?

Roland: "It was hard to find good didge songs to cover that matched our musical taste. The only possible covers we found at that time were from Charlie McMahon. From those, we only covered "Drifting", and in fact we still play our version of "Drifting" at some of our gigs."

Noortje (Violin and vocals): "I think this was really the first song and cover where the didge starts, the violin joins in and then we do a sort of duet for a few bars, after which the rest of the band starts to play. This song was definitely a good way of learning to play violin together with didge - and also getting used to listening to the didge. I love the didge sound just like Judith does, but it took a while until I was able to hear the bars in the sound properly, regardless of the fact that Roland put extra emphasis on the one-beat."

Judith: "Talking of Charlie McMahon: I really appreciate his playing and I think he is very innovative and stimulates the didge in modern music a lot. He is a true pioneer in integrating such a traditional instrument in modern music. Thanks to Roland, I once met Charlie and I could play "Drifting" with him. Again, the combination of flute and didge was magnificent. I truly enjoyed playing with him and I was touched by Charlie's passion for the instrument."

How would you characterize your songs?

Judith: "I think that is one of the most difficult questions. Our songs vary quite a lot, from almost rock, especially our first songs, to beautiful songs for easy-listening in your armchair. I think that in general, our music tends to be more and more folk-based. Especially the faster, merrier songs are influenced by Roland's didgeridoo playing. In those songs, the didge rhythms are really a pushing, pumping force. And fortunately, thanks to the didjeribone, the didge can join in almost every song, no matter which key it's in."

Kelly: "The fact that the style of our songs vary a lot makes it sometimes difficult to describe our music. And that again makes it sometimes hard to convince organisers that they really have to hire us. Fortunately we once heard a good description from our audience: "folk-like rock with a mystical touch."

What does your audience think of the didge and the songs?

Kelly: "Our audience is always very positive about our music. Especially the innovative aspect of our music is very much appreciated. The didgeridoo is appreciated too. We never got this feedback that you sometimes hear about other bands that the didge becomes boring. This may partially be because of the way it is played: in lots of different styles, depending on the song, and it may be because we never push to have the didge in all of our songs or continuously in one song. The didge is there whenever it should be there, and it is silent whenever it must be silent."



Charlie McMahon & Judith van der Valk playing "Drifting"

Foto: R. Mathijssen

Roland: "I think what Kelly says is true. Certain songs we create are simply complete without the didge. The only thing I might do is use a small shaker to create a background in the songs. Adding a didge would disrupt the completeness or tranquility of these songs (e.g. "The Source"). Whenever the didge is in the songs it definitely has its own role: and people apparently like it. Almost always after a gig, a few people come to me who are touched or intrigued by the didge and want to know more about it."

What are your plans for the future?

Kelly: "Right now, we plan to write more songs. We now have roughly a dozen songs of our own, but for a full one-and-a-half to two-hour set we need a few more songs. Further, we plan to be present at one or two festivals this year and it seems that's going to work out. For next year, we are looking at the possibility of a small tour, perhaps outside of the Netherlands. In addition, we have just finished our first live album "No Expectations". In the meantime we have written a handful of new songs and we would like to record them in the second half of this year. We do not yet know whether this will be a studio recording or a live album. The latter is cheaper but a studio album always gives better quality."

Roland: "As for the didge, the plan is to develop my playing technique even further. As Mark Atkins once said in an interview "I've been playing it for 20 years, and I'm

still learning." So this means I have at least another 14 years to go! I also hope to get Charlie's Seismic Sensor in a couple of weeks. This too should give me enough work to learn to use it and it will give the band the challenge of working with another new sound."

Inner Strength are:

- Roland Mathijssen** Didgeridoo, Percussion
- Noortje van de Voort** Vocals, Violin
- Judith van der Valk** Flute, Vocals
- Kelly van der Heijden** Guitars
- Endy Kasanardjo** Bassguitar
- Geert van der Wallen** Drums, Percussion

Inner Strength are said to show great promise for the future. Although most of their music might be slightly less accessible for the masses, the band does well in the folk scene, which - according to some Dutch music reviews - is the most innovative music scene nowadays.

More information and song samples at:
www.inner-strength.nl

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