Between Music and Literature

This week *the Star* talks to Ketil Bjørnstad, one of the most celebrated European musicians

ANANTA YUSUF



You are a writer, composer and a poet. How did you start your career in music and writing?

I started with a piano. When I was a child my mother and father were not very rich, so they couldn't afford an instrument. My mother's uncle was a piano dealer. My mother's family was into European classical music. My mother's grand father was also a prominent musician in Oslo. And I grew up with my mother having a radio and trying to tune into different stations on the long wave or the medium wave to listen to music. When I was six years old, I got a piano from my mother's uncle. Music became important to me when I was 12 years old. Then I suddenly began to practice more. And I realised that music perhaps was my destination. And writing came much later.

In the late sixties and the beginning of the seventies, a kind of post-hippie movement began. The movement was a mixture of cultural elements. You know, it was the time when The Beatles went through a spiritual journey in India. At that time people suddenly opened up new expressions. In Oslo, where I grew up, there was a cultural club called Club 7. The club was home to many poets, writers, musicians, theater persons and so on. So there were many experimental things happening. And it was the time when I tried to express my emotions through words. Perhaps I was inspired by song writers, like you know, Bob Dylan, all those people, mostly American who were making both music and texts. I think that was the biggest inspiration.

Dylan was more interested in writing poetry but you wrote novels too. Do you think your writing is somehow influenced by your music?

The first two books I wrote were actually collections of poems. And then the novels came. I think it is really difficult to express your emotion through words. Words are really not enough to express your feelings. So I tried to fill in the gaps with words.

When I was young, I would try to separate these two territories. For me, the architectures of writing and music are different. But now I feel that these two things are interconnected.

You have worked with Jean-Luc Godard. He never follows traditional script writing structure. So, is it difficult to compose music without script?

Most of the time Godard used my music, which was already recorded. And most of my albums were recorded by ECM. Manfred Eicher, the head of ECM, and Godard are very close. So it happens that he listened to the music that I composed. He asked if I wanted that piece or I wanted 20 seconds from that. He is the one who chooses from what has already been recorded. But sometimes I have to remake. I can give an example: once he asked for a piece but he didn't want a cello, he wanted a