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Justin Adams and

Mauro Durante

Sweet Release

Ponderosa Music and Records

Review and interview by George De Stefano

An Anglo-Italian duo makes an album that impresses critics, delights the artists' fans, and wins prestigious awards. The music is a unique synthesis of diverse styles, Southern Italian, North African, Middle Eastern, blues, folk, rock 'n roll. The sound is driven by rhythm yet rich in melody. The two musicians' virtuosity dazzles, but their technical prowess is at the service of mood, atmosphere, and feeling. The songs, the grooves. You've heard elements of the duo's sound in their own projects, but their collaboration blends them to produce something wonderfully original that's more than the sum of their parts.

That album was *Still Moving*, by the British guitarist Justin Adams and the Italian violinist and percussionist Mauro Durante, who specializes in the pizzica music of his native Puglia region. Released in 2021 to virtually unanimous critical praise, the album ended up on many global music best-of lists and was voted Best Fusion album in Britain's 2022 Songlines Music Awards.

Adams and Durante put in a lot of roadwork to promote the record, touring the UK and Europe. In 2023, they performed in NPR's [Tiny Desk miniconcert series](#), and, in early 2024, at the New York club Le Poisson Rouge. Those gigs honed the collaboration and took it to a higher level, and the proof is their second album, *Sweet Release*. No



sophomore jinx here; the synchrony they achieve on the album is even more seamless and captivating than their debut.

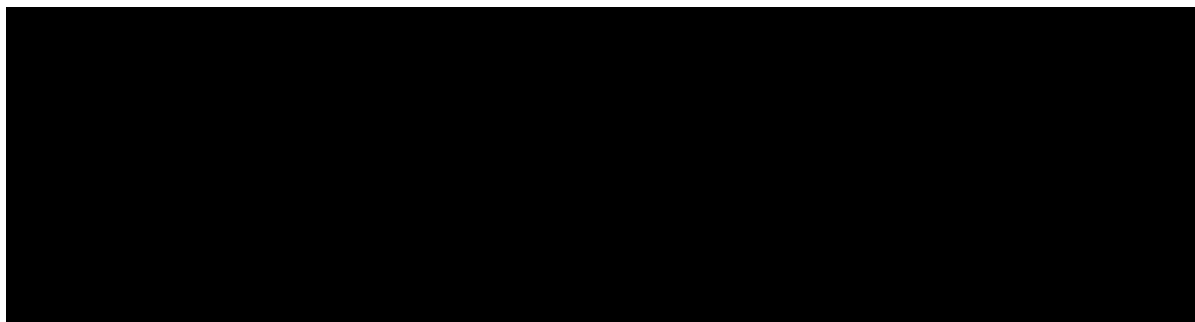
The seeds of the duo project were planted in 2011 when Durante and Adams met and performed at the Notte della Taranta festival. The festival showcases Salento's pizzica, a traditional, rhythm-driven music whose distant origins lie in trance rituals. Adams was unfamiliar with pizzica, but he quickly took to it. Like Durante, he was fascinated by trance-inducing rhythms and their healing power.

With CGS, Durante has gained global recognition for Salento's pizzica music with excellent albums that honor tradition while reinventing it with Arabic, Indian, Anglo and Italian folk, with Western pop and Salentine roots.

The Adams-Durante no-borders aesthetic is fully realized on the ten tracks that make up *Sweet Release*. These songs have surprises, with shifts in meter and melody, pensive moods turning turbulent, moments when the sound is fuller than you might expect from a duo and others when the players employ a minimalist approach to space. Adams and Durante have written all the songs except for "Wa Habibi," a lament made famous by the Lebanese singer Fairuz.

The title track offers a theme for the album—the healing power of music when life's struggles and contradictions seem too much to bear.

*I got a heartbeat, but I'm running out of time
Wasted, time tough,
Once tasted, you know it's never enough
But these strings
This drum
From another world they come
Bringing messages of peace And songs of sweet release*

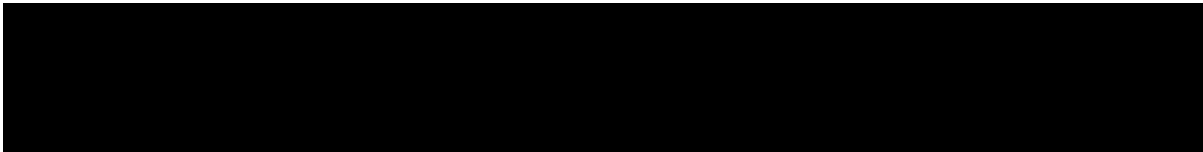




The rhythmic interplay between the players, with Adams working the desert blues style, the insistent throb of Durante's tamburello and its dancing cymbals, evoke a cathartic "sweet release" and also pizzica's healing power—"rhythm is the cure"—as the saying goes.

Adams sings lead, but then Durante comes in with a vocal that seems to echo from another world.

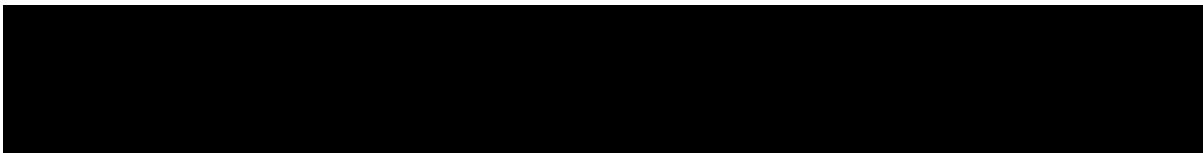
"Leuca," titled after a beautiful coastal town (Santa Maria di Leuca) in Durante's Salento, opens with Adams' chiming guitar; the pensive introduction gives way to a rhythmic shift into pizzica, with Durante's CGS bandmate Alessia Tondo joining him on vocals. The furiously rocking "Ghost Train" mixes Saharan desert blues, blues rock, and pizzica, with Adams and Durante sharing the vocals. This train is not bound for glory; it's a nightmare of a ride they want to end. "I wanna get off and get out of this story," Adams sings; Durante echoes the desperate sentiment: "Fermu a quai nu te puei salvare" (Stuck here, you can't save yourself).



"Wa Habibi," a Good Friday lament originally recorded in 1967 by Fairuz, features a poignant vocal by Yousra Mansour of the Moroccan-French rock band Bab L'Bluz and a gorgeous violin solo by Durante that's quite different—more Arabic than Salentine—from his work with CGS.

The instrumental "Ithaca Return" is another showcase for Durante's violin. There's no percussion but rhythm galore as Durante takes us on a wild leap into the pizzica stratosphere.

"Qui Non Vorrei Morire" (I Would Not Like to Die Here"), a ballad (somewhat reminiscent of CGS' "Solo Andata") set to verses by the Salentine poet Vittorio Bodini, was originally recorded by Durante's late father Daniele, a leading figure in Salentine music and the pizzica revival that began in the 1970s. His son's personal connection to it manifests in a heartfelt rendering of the melancholic lyrics.



On "Tide Keeps Turning," a blues set to Neapolitan tamurriata rhythm. Felice Rosser, a bassist and singer from Detroit now based in New York, provides soulful vocal accompaniment to Adams' lead voice.

Sweet Release ends with "Santu Paulu," a prayer to Saint Paul, the patron saint of the *tarantate*, those who, in the mythology of tarantismo, suffer physically and spiritually from spiders' supposedly poisonous bites and find catharsis (or sweet release) in dancing to the rhythms of pizzica. Adams' guitar, Durante's vocal—at first solemn and then soaring—and the pulsing tamburello beats create a stark, mysterious mood for this plea to be granted the "grace" to cope with and rise above life's tribulations.

George De Stefano talked with Adams and Duante in late October of 2024

[Here's that interview.](#)

Find the artists online:

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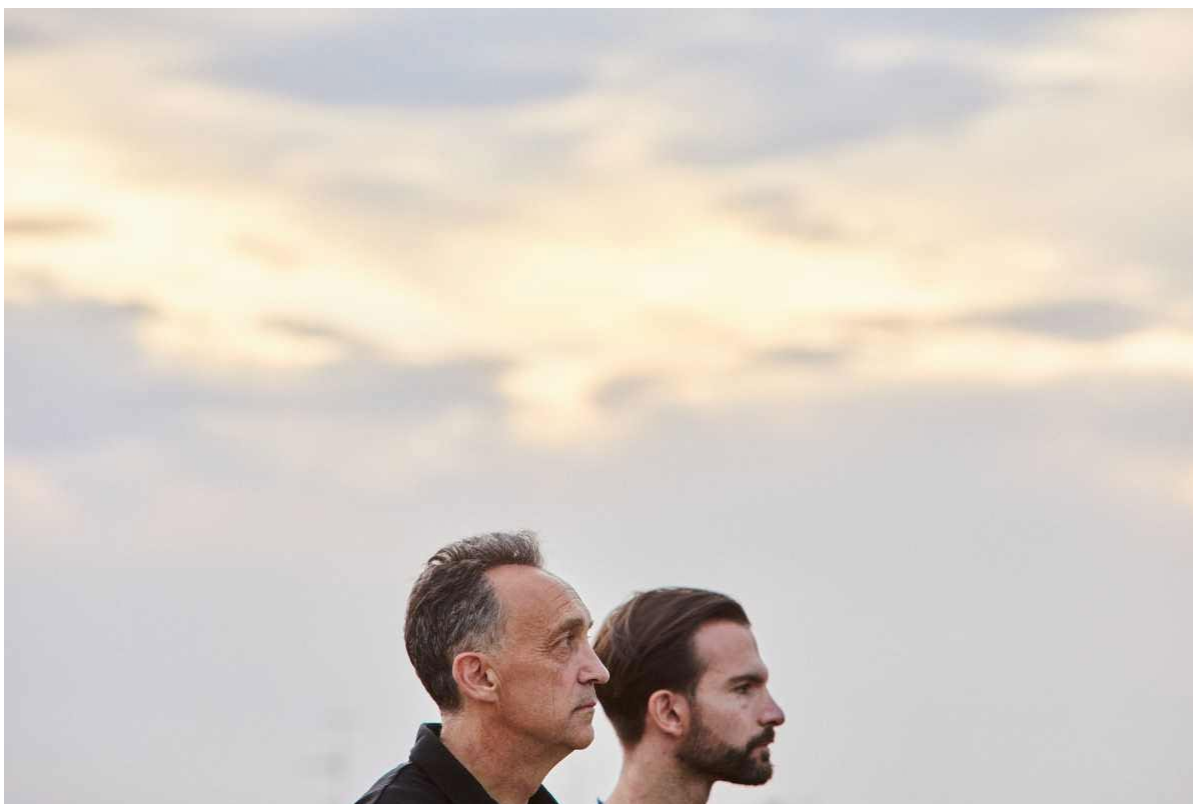


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Justin Adams and Mauro Durante have found their *Sweet Release*



In late October 2024, George De Stefano interviewed Justin Adams and Mauro Durante about their new album, *Sweet Release*. Adams provided all the responses except the last one.

George De Stefano: As good as *Still Moving* was, this album is even more impressive. Do you think your performing live together in the past couple of years had anything to do with that?

Justin Adams: We made *Still Moving* having never toured together as a duo, so it made a huge difference that we've had the experience of years of performing together in all sorts of conditions. We feel like we have become a unit, a combination of our musical personalities.

What does “*Sweet Release*” mean to you? And can music provide it?

JA: As I get older it seems more and more clear that the function of music is to make us feel connected and to lift our spirits. When I think of all the human energy spent on what feels like necessary survival, the moment where we can lose ourselves in music can give us a taste of a different reality.

The new album expands on the blues-meets-taranta of *Still Moving*. There's “Wa Habibi,” for example. Did you both decide to expand the musical parameters for this record?

JA: I think *Still Moving* had a broader palette than blues-meets-taranta already. Neither Mauro nor I feel at all constricted about genre. The important thing is to

play from the heart and to make an emotional connection. “Wa Habibi” is a song that comes from a shared Arab/European heritage and is a beautiful lament that seemed to us appropriate for our times.

*Was *Sweet Release* recorded live in the studio? Were there overdubs, or are we hearing just the two of you playing in real time?*

JA: It’s basically recorded live, although Alessia (Tondo) and Felice (Rosser) added their parts later, and sometimes, we add our vocals to an instrumental track to get a better sound. We find it works better not to add any extra overdubs; it achieves more space and a natural dynamic.

I’m curious about your creative and collaborative process. How do the two of you decide on the material, how to arrange and play it?

JA: We normally start with a rhythm or a riff from one of us, then the other responds, lyrics come later. A duo is very practical. One suggests an idea, we try it and then for us to keep it, we need to both agree that it works. It’s actually easier than working solo (when you are sometimes not sure of your own ideas) and working in three or more, where it’s not always easy to find common ground.

The ideas come organically; new riffs and rhythms are either inspiring and have momentum, or they get discarded. Then a theme may emerge, consciously or not, the result of us making a series of choices that are harmonious, hopefully!

The singer, songwriter, and bass player Felice Rosser appears on one track, “Tide Keeps Turning.” How did she become part of this project?

JA: An old friend of mine, Malu Halasa, always told me about a friend of hers from New York college days called Felice Rosser, who used to hang out at CBGBs and was a friend of [the late artist Jean-Michel] Basquiat. A year ago, she played me Felice’s demos, and I loved them. We had a lot in common, coming from that fertile post-punk period where dub, funk, Afrobeat and free jazz were our inspirations along with punk rock. I produced her album, so when we recorded “Tide Keep Turning” and were thinking about call-and-response vocals, she was an obvious choice.

Are you planning to tour with the album?

JA: We have already started to tour the album, and we are getting a good response, although we aren’t an easy product to market!

Are you committed to working together solely as a duo? Any chance you might bring in some more players (or maybe form a band)?

JA: If there is a rule, it’s that there are no rules, so yes, anything is possible!

Mauro, why did you decide to include “Qui Non Vorrei Morire,” a song recorded by your father Daniele, adapted from a poem by Vittorio Bodini?

Mauro Durante: I’ve always loved that poem, and my father’s setting of it is just beautiful. I think the album where he interpreted Bodini’s poems with his music [*Le Mani del Sud*, 2011] is his best. I miss him dearly, and music is what makes me feel most connected with him.

[Adams and Durante online.](#)

Further reading:

George's review of [Sweet Release](#)

Chris Nickson's review of [Still Moving](#)

An interview with [Mauro Durante and Antonio Castrignanó](#) about [Supertaranta](#)

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