



Off the Radar, Umeå Turns 40

While seasoned North American jazz festivals have incurred fanfare about their recent milestones, the Umeå Jazz Festival, in a culturally rich and growing university town in the northerly Norrlands part of Sweden, celebrated its 40th anniversary from Oct. 22–26, 2008. The event affirmed what makes Umeå a significant stop on the European festival circuit, even if its location keeps it apart from the regular touring grid.

The festival is a fine place to check in on the shifting landscape of jazz from Scandinavia, and, by extension, the rest of Europe. Plenty of the best music came from this part of the continent, and one highlight was homegrown. Umeå-born saxophonist Mats Gustafsson appeared in several settings as artist-in-residence. His new group Swedish AZZ was a distinctive marvel, a mixture of free playing, vintage sounds (in real time and supplied by and deconstructed on turntable), and

musical notions between inside and outside. For sheer cathartic intensity, the festival's potent post-free-jazz apogee came when Gustafsson—with baritone sax wailing, wooing and splitting tonal differences—engaged in a free-improvisational power trio with German fire-eater tenor saxophonist Peter Brötzmann and dynamic drummer Paal Nilssen-Love.

Inside-outside experiments made some of the stronger impressions. The witty Monk's Casino, featuring pianist Alexander von Schlippenbach and the flexible German trumpeter Axel Dörner, took its cues from Thelonious Monk's innate levity and avant-garde leanings. From Finland, Mikko Innanen and Innkvisitio proved to be one of the more dazzling young bands around: funny, funky and risk-taking, with an expressive secret weapon in wildly inventive keyboardist Seppo Kantonen, who mixed painterly timbres and unpredictable ideas on synthezier. He is one of the more fascinating

and wilier keyboardists on his side of the Atlantic. His open approach and appreciation of space sometimes resembled Craig Taborn or Joe Zawinul at his most angular, but with a dry Finnish sense of humor.

Swedish pianist Esbjörn Svensson's death in June was felt particularly hard in his homeland. In Svensson's memory, saxophonist Joakim Milder wrote the poignant orchestra-choral-jazz piece "Mysterious Ways." An example of the tricky business of mixing genres and ensembles, Milder's piece proved sophisticated in design, and poignant in its emotional palette.

A sense of geographical and stylistic balance was in order with a list of strong American visitors, including the Dave Holland Quintet, Joshua Redman's empathic trio and the best American act deserving wider recording—Henry Threadgill's Zooid. Threadgill projected a creative voice and vision all his own. His intricate-yet-flowing music served as brainy puzzler and visceral listening experience, at some personally devised crossroads of European art tradition, Africa, New York, Chicago and New Orleans. —Josef Woodard