

FRINGE BEAT

THINKING BIG AND WIDE

by Josef Woodard

BOP WENDE: The Berlin Jazz Festival, one of the more offbeat and off-circuit of important European festivals, was especially inspiring in its 2005 edition, two weekends ago, even surpassing last year's gala 40th anniversary program. On the thematic menu were running showcases of Italian jazz-from trumpet great Enrico Rava onwards-and also big bands with big and new ideas. These bands think big, and also wide, from the politically charged Charlie Haden/Carla Bley project Liberation Music Orchestra, to Joe Zawinul's special project with the WDR Big Band-a remarkable festival pinnacle of an event, bringing out Zawinul's long-dormant inner Ellington. On closing night, we heard Maria Schneider's Orchestra (pictured), the most personally expressive of all American big bands.



Here are two odder features of the dense four-day Novemberfest: (1) By highlighting Haden and Zawinul, it spotlighted two of four or five important jazz figures living in the global boonies of Los Angeles, and (2) one mind-altering set found everybody's favorite alt guitar hero, Bill Frisell, working magic with the songbook of John Lennon. Joining him, in a minimal but rich stew were allies Jenny Scheinman on violin and Greg Leisz on guitar and lap steel. Frisell does Lennon. It makes perfect sense once you hear it, both being musicians touched by genius and with styles both tough and tender, and often in the same song.

Speaking of genius, the next night, eccentric Brazilian legend Hermeto Pascoal brought his tight yet pliable band to the Haus der Berliner Festspiele. But Pascoal weirdly disappeared from the stage just as a duo with the irrepressible Dutch drummer Han Bennink was to begin. It could have been a great odd-couple merger. Clashing egos and miscommunication were blamed. The show did go on, and Bennink was left to his own madcap devices, splattering his intense and comic energy on a drum kit, a solo snare, and literally "hitting the stage."

Berlin's festival has moved its act around the city over the years, but the current matrix of venues is ideal, including the complex home to Quasimodo-in the classic underground jazz club tradition-and the upstairs Delphi Filmpalast, where one could hear Derek Trucks's trucking eloquence or Italian accordion wizard Antonello Salis.

To get to the fourth venue, the KulturBrauerei, in a lavish-funky reformed brewery in the Prenzlauer Berg area, you head over on the U2 (from which the Berlin-phile band swiped its name, and which also takes you to the central "Zoo" station, vis à vis their so-named album). Berlin, among other

reasons it's one of the hippest spots in Europe at the moment, is a crazy architectural wonderland. Moving from the elegant post-post-Modern wilds of Potsdamer Platz-in the clutches of a Renzo Piano-organized reinvention to the Soviet-era kitsch of the "Zuckerbackstil" ("wedding cake style") behemoths on Karl-Marx-Allee, one gets dizzy, in the best way.

In Berlin, as most everywhere in Europe (and the world and your neighborhood), the anti-Bush sentiment (as opposed to anti-American) is running higher than ever. Thus, Haden/Bley's Not in Our Name project struck a strong chord here, and the Quasimodo crowd roared its approval when the fine young Italian pianist Livio Minafra (son of Pino) said, in his charmingly kneaded English, "Bush is the president, but I hope that will be the past very early." He then launched into an aggressive tune called "Muscle Man."

Any non-ugly American visiting has to fight the natural urge to blurt out apologies for the House of Bush, McDonald's, and now Starbucks, spreading its corporate branding tentacles anywhere humans need caffeine. Of course, one of the great things America has given the world is jazz, and the world is thankful and participatory, from its musicians to music presenters and legions of listeners. We could learn a thing or two from festivals like Berlin's-about the world, and about ourselves. (Got e? fringebeat@aol.com)