



A Brave, Nervous, Hopeful New World

Fringe Beat

By Josef Woodard

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BERLIN CALLING: Being in Berlin immediately following **Obama Day**, it seemed proper to make a pilgrimage to the Rathaus Schöneberg, where, in 1963, **John F. Kennedy** made his legendary goodwill speech with the line “I am a small donut” (one actual translation of “*ich bin ein Berliner*”). Now, President-elect Obama is poised to make peace with the world, and Germans, like others in and out of the United States, seem jubilant about the possibilities of U.S.-imposed wounds being healed. At the moment at least, visitors to Europe may find a sweeter exchange rate and a sweeter temperament amongst Europeans toward Americans.

On this rainy Sunday in the square before the hulking *Rathaus* (“city hall”), flea market vendors hawked wares, including old, Berlin wall-era GDR bric-a-brac. One historical landmark visitation deserves another on a lazy Sunday in Berlin, so it was off to the Friedhof Studenrauchstrasse cemetery to pay respects to the grave of **Marlene Dietrich**, connected by six carnal degrees to JFK. Fresh flowers and ivy mark the spot, with its understated epitaph “*Heir steh ich an den Marken meiner Tage*” (“here I stand on the marker of my days”). **Helmut Newton**’s final resting place is nearby. Also in Schöneberg is **Café Neues Ufer**, a hangout of David Bowie during his masterpiece-producing Berlin era (*Heroes*, *Low*, *Lodger*).

Despite the plentiful, dark markers of its WWII legacies, Berlin and the outside world have long had a love affair, especially on the jazz front, as the autumnal **Berlin Jazz Festival** reminds us yearly. What makes this festival special and sets it apart from the expanding jungle of European jazz festivals? For one, the fest celebrates its off-season, offbeat leanings, and usually slips in some juicy intelligent big band music and bold free improvisation (a scene in which Germany continues to play a strong role). From the former camp, L.A.-based but often Europe-employed composer/arranger **Vince Mendoza** presented his luminous new **Blauklang** (also recently-released on CD, on the German Act label), sporting a jazz-meets-chamber ensemble. From the free zone, Berlin’s powerhouse tenor man **Peter Brötzmann** rattled walls and cerebrums in **Quasimodo**, the renowned basement club, in groupings including Japanese guitar-and-angst man **Keiji Haino**.

Swedish flavoring marked this year’s festival—no surprise given the new artistic director, Swedish trombonist **Nils Landgren**. Landren’s funk leanings meant the program included the **Headhunters** (without founder **Herbie Hancock**), **Bernie Maupin** (formerly of the Headhunters, here playing with his own group), **David Sanborn** and, yes, even Hancock himself—albeit in a much less slick and crowd-pleasing mode than he has been in so far in his post-Grammy afterglow this year.

But Landgren also invited intriguing Swedish musicians to the party, including the premiere Swedish jazz musician alive, the fluidly virtuosic and coolly lyrical pianist **Bobo Stenson**, who arrived with a trio, playing music from his great new CD, *Cantando* (ECM). We also heard a “best kept secret” from Sweden, jazz-art-pop singer **Lina Nyberg**, who stretches boundaries in the most delightful and quirky-yet-musical way. Both Stenson and Nyberg relied on the artful kindness of the wild, warm, wonderful young drummer **Jon Fält**—another name to watch for.

In other Swedish news, the way cool voice ’n’ drums duo of **Wildbirds & Peacedrums** also made a popular noise at the festival. (Local note: They hail from the invention-inclined Gothenburg, as does the fab brainy dance band **Little Dragon**, coming to SOhO on Saturday. They tore up the Mercury Lounge back in April.)

Cultural lines and languages can cross easily in the passport-eschewing world of jazz, as with one of the festival’s most impressive shows: French accordionist **Richard Galliano**—the current jazz accordion king—was joined by Cuban/Floridian/Earthling piano master **Gonzalo Rubalcaba**, Czech bassist of note **George Mraz**, and N.Y.C. drummer **Clarence Penn**, all of whom were getting along famously. Translators were unnecessary. They, and we, were all Berliners and global citizens, in a good, hopeful mood at this historical moment.

TO-DOINGS: The slow parade of so-called “world music” continues this Friday in the lovably intimate venue of the UCSB MultiCultural Center, with Los Angeles-based Andean music-and-dance group **Inca**.

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