



Norwegian Woodard

By Josef Woodard

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Are you dressed? This ain't California." **Brit**, my kindly guide in Voss, Norway, knew something I didn't about appropriate attire for the late night event about to open the recent **VossaJazz Festival**. After I was refitted with a thick sweater, we tooted up the mountain in a funicular to the mountaintop skiing area and lodge known as Hanguren. Hansa beers in hand, we trundled up a candlelit path to a makeshift stage area, where percussionist **Terje Isungset** was playing one of his legendary "ice concerts." Isungset played his setup — pitched and resonant percussion instruments made from ice molds — while vocalist **Lena Nymark** sailed her understated tones into the icy clean air, nuzzling up against midnight.

Given the snowy setting, the spacious and (ahem) cool music, plus a view of city lights far below, it all made for a magical Norwegian moment. More magical Norwegian moments were in store in the next few days, including the regional ceremony of the *smalahove* ("sheep's head")

dinner, downstairs in the historic Fleischer's Hotel. After initial qualms upon seeing an actual halved sheep's head on my plate, I devoured the whole thing, eyeball included (as instructed, after removing the retina and followed by a snort of akavit — specially made here for the smalahove experience). Carnivores should be willing to acknowledge where meat comes from.



Credit: Josef Woodard

Voss, Norway

Voss, having morphed from a fjord region stopover to a desirable destination, is an enchanted spot, reachable by train or car via a highly scenic fjord-side trip, 90 minutes outside Bergen. A glacial scoop, with a lake surrounded by majestic mountains, Voss is known as a haven for extreme sports, even hosting a summertime extreme sports festival. On more cultural and mental sporting bases, there is **VossaJazz**, celebrating an impressive 35th anniversary this year. It is one of the major festivals in Norway, along with the summertime jazz festivals in Molde and Oslo, and Bergen's **Nattjazz** ("night jazz") in May.

Much of what American jazz fans and critic types know of Norwegian jazz comes via German-based ECM Records. Label head Manfred Eicher is obviously enamored of Norwegian cultural charms and has given a global spotlight to saxophonist Jan Garbarek and guitarist Terje Rypdal since the 1970s. Sure enough, some of the most memorable music at the 2008 VossaJazz came from present and past ECM artists, including **Nils Petter Molvær**, the plugged-in trumpeter whose electro-acoustic jazz represents some of the more thrilling and cooling examples of that subgenre. Molvaer launched his international career with the great ECM album *Khmer* (premiered as a commissioned piece at VossaJazz 10 years ago). This year, pianist **Tord Gustavsen**, presently something of a sensation, was commissioned to write an hour-long song cycle based on the writings of Norwegian author **Lars Amund Vaage**.

Highest on the list for this listener was **Christian Wallumrød**, a pianist/composer/arranger of uncommon vision and new angles on meditative — but also muscular — "chamber jazz." For a good taste, check out Wallumrød's luminous 2007 album *The Zoo Is Near*. That album provided most of the material for his SRO afternoon concert, in Voss's Ole Bull Academy. Wallumrød works a gentle genius in his compositions, blending classical sounds — especially Baroque — with jazz harmonies, the distinctive yearning of Norwegian folk music, and the ineffable mysticism of old Nordic airs.

Like many jazz festivals, this one had its fair share of pop and party-time fare, including the rightfully famed Norwegian singer **Kari Bremnes**. Other Norwegian jazz acts of note: the crazed, odd meter-loving band **Farmers Market** and saxist-deserving-wider-recognition **Tore Brunborg**, who appeared with a flexible, Nordic-leaning trio.

Another musical memory, from the periphery of my visit, came during the smalahove dinner. Nattjazz Festival director **Jon Skjerdal** stood up to pay respects to the dinner party by singing old folk tunes — replete with indigenous “microtonal” pitches — from his hometown village of Aurland. Tucked up in its stunning, watery northern alcove, Norway has much to teach and offer the world, which it somehow seems both a part of and a blessed escape from.

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