

JazzTimes

Berlin Jazz Festival

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The Berlin Jazz Festival has long featured big bands in its programming. At the opening gala for last year's 40th anniversary festival, in the famed Philharmonie -- home of the Berlin Philharmonic -- the great trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff, for many years the festival's artistic director, was the guest of honor with the NDR big band. It would be an unexpected public send-off, as the visionary trombonist passed away in July 2005 in his hometown of Frankfurt.

This year, the subject of big bands loomed even larger than usual, and specifically big bands outside the straightahead swinging realm, including Charlie Haden and Carla Bley's politically charged Liberation Music Orchestra, Joe Zawinul's latent Ellingtonia bursting forth in an electrifying project with the WDR Big Band and the Maria Schneider Orchestra's romantic-modernist experiments.

During her closing-night set, Schneider (shown above) dedicated the tender but noncloying ballad "Sky Blue" to Mangelsdorff during her band's encore. It was he who first invited Schneider to the festival many years ago, and she fits right in. Schneider's ensemble may be one of the most individual and carefully sculpted big bands in America, but there's something vaguely European in her harmonic sensibilities and sweeping traversals through jazz and classical. In her work, echoes of Gil Evans can meet traces of Beethoven, all without strain. In Berlin she conducted her expansive, complicated charts, including "Sea of Tranquility" and the picturesque "Hang Gliding," without music and with unabashed body language just shy of a dance form.

The Liberation Music Orchestra resurfaces every decade or so, and the group's most recent socio-political motivations are obvious to anyone since 9/11. The band's new CD, *Not In Our Name* -- with luminous and witty arrangements by Bley -- presents an all-American agenda this time out, being both patriotic in the deepest sense and innately critical of the smelly business currently invading the White House. Naturally, during the Liberation Music Orchestra's performance on November 3 the crowd warmly received the band in "old Europe," and one got the clear idea that it wasn't just a musical message being delivered.

A different kind of revelation was in store with the Joe Zawinul Project, a surprisingly smooth expansion of Zawinul's plugged-in music for combos reconfigured for a big-band package. In fact, the compelling success of this project, initiated in Koln last year and worthy of much ado, isn't so surprising. Zawinul was always an Ellington-infused player and composer -- a one-man, two-fisted big band -- although his improvisatory restlessness, funky nature and stubborn individuality kept him out of traditional contexts. On November 5 at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele, the festival's main theater, Zawinul's core electric rhythm section was fleshed out by a big band teeming with ace players who navigated the hairpin turns of Zawinul's music. Clearly, this was this festival's artistic acme, and hopefully much more than a specialty project. Zawinul with a tight big band must be heard -- and felt, right in the sternum.

The Kulturbrauerei, a fairly new festival venue, is an oasis of coolness in a former brewery in the formerly East Berlin-based Prenzlauer Berg area. On November 5 the hall hosted the Italian big band L'Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio and its wildly multicultural inventions -- a festival in itself. The next night Turkish fretless guitarist Erkan Ogur played beautifully with fretted-guitar player Philip Catherine, and the almost too wizardly Italian pianist Stefano Bollani demonstrated flashy pyrotechnics and good-natured humor in his duet with dazzling accordionist Stian Carstensen (also heard in the band Farmer's Market on November 4).

Jazz Fest Berlin 2005 also continued the trend of hosting players from different parts of the world. This year it was Italy, and who better to headline that segment of the program than trumpeter Enrico Rava? The wily and wise veteran seems to be getting deeper as he gets older, sliding seamlessly from the virtuoso trumpet tradition to enigmatic space-loving mode. Young pianist Livio Minafra (son of Pino) showed chops and promise, and pianist and accordionist Antonello Salis ventured artfully from freedom to Beatlesque snippets in a fluid late night duet with the young guitarist Paolo Angeli.

In other notable music news, Bill Frisell's trio, with violinist Jenny Scheinman and guitarist/lap steeler Greg Liesz, put brain-opening new spins on the John Lennon songbook during its November 3 performance. Frisell has found his way into the musical heart of Lennon without leaving his own personality behind, and you get the feeling John would very much approve -- and perhaps even want to sit in.

Lest they would get lost in the thicket of the festival's program, one of the finest and most experimental performances was on November 4 by the Frank Gratkowski Doppelquartet, a double quartet featuring the likes of drummer Gerry Hemingway and the loveable Paul Lovens and trumpeter Herb Robertson. This was the most inspired meeting of inside and outside playing, with structure and freedom flowing freely.

What's a festival without a minor flap/conversation piece? This year's model was provided by the eccentric Brazilian genius Hermeto Pascoal, who played on November 4. He fulfilled his contract, and crowd expectations, by putting on a hot show that featured his rough-and-ready vocal solos, which include gargling, whistling and whirls of notes on his keyboard. His band was an able bunch, all fluent in the complex vocabulary of Pascoal's writing. But Pascoal's duet with the maverick Dutch drummer Han Bennink went quickly south when the Brazilian abruptly left the stage as soon as he hit it. Apparently, there were communication mishaps preventing what could have been a strange magic. But Bennink seized the spotlight for a ripe

percussive solo, banging out angst on the drum kit and wrist action with stick on his boots and the stage floor. Adversity has no sway over this flying, flailing Dutchman.

On November 5, German pianist Ulrich Gumpert, recipient of the Deutscher Jazzpreis, played a heated early evening set downstairs in the womblike basement club Quasimodo, delivering both solid modernist piano craft and also taking things out in an engaging, pointillist way, rather than with sheer expressionist abandon. The young allies in his quartet reemerged late that night in wildly different musical garb: as the progressive, zany and, at best, Captain Beefheart-ish band Baby Bonk.

The festival ended its compacted four-day run with the more rootsy Americana-based sounds of the Derek Trucks Band (Trucks sounded, as usual, like the future of intelligent rock guitar) and the "Rev." Jeff Mosier's Ear Reverents jamming on bluegrass-fusion energies into the wee hours at Quasimodo.

Observers at the Berlin Jazz Festival, especially outsiders flying in for the occasion, may be tempted to draw metaphorical analogies between the Wall's fall and the genre-razing bent of the festival's musical programming. That's partly valid, but it's also too easy a conclusion. Berlin's program is merely a good example of what any good festival should be about: a celebration of jazz's natural plurality. More than any musical tradition, jazz is itself but also many other things. That state of healthy confusion and openness is alive and well in Berlin.