

JAZZAHEAD! REPORT: NORWEGIAN JAZZ ARRIVES, EN MASSE

For the past several years, in the business and the practice of jazz on the European side of the Atlantic, nearly all roads have led to Bremen, Germany for a long weekend in late April. The increasingly potent magnet: jazzahead!, the expanding phenom of a convention, expo, networking emporium and, yes, densely-packed and tightly organized music festival. 2019 marked the 14th anniversary of the event founded by jazz/classical promoter Peter Schulze and musician-educator Uli Beckerhoff, and this year's model bumped upward in terms of attendance and, presumably, jazz world influence.

By now, the hectic traffic amidst booths on the exhibition floor and in the showcase venues of the large Messe Bremen convention compound and the retrooled slaughterhouse venue known as Kulturzentrum Schlachthof adds up to what might be described, oxymoronically, as a highly-organized temporary citadel of chaos. Much may get done over the course of a few days, and much left-undone and unsaid, left for to-be-continued dealings, projects and conversations.

Amidst the whirl of activity and notes left for later, one searches for cohesive themes or "scenes" as take-home material. One strong theme emerging this year, to my already biased ears, had to do with the varied and fascinating creative solutions to the concept of large ensembles in jazz, and hailing specifically from Norway.

Something akin to a movement seemed afoot on this rendezvous in Bremen, after hearing such expanded Norwegian groups as the mischievous Skadedyr—with an cool elastic humor often revolving around drummer Hans Hulbækmo—and a striking new band led by the maverick accordionist Frode Haltli, his blissfully inventive and open-minded folk-jazz-free band Avant Folk Ensemble. Haltli showed up later in the pristine Sendesaal venue (renovated and now run by jazzahead! co-founder Schulze) for "ECM Night," featuring a rare return to action by the masterful Trygve Seim's chamber-Nordic-jazz tentet Sangam, to these ears, the real highlight of the entire time in Bremen. As a final kicker, we got some punchy, punky post-Sun Ra party timing from drummer Paal Nilssen-Love's fab Large Unit, a brilliant jazzahead! closing set, heard in the Schlachthof early on Sunday afternoon.

Clearly, for these Norwegian outfits, bigger is better, and is also a contextual challenge. Norway boasts its share of notable entries in the big band category, including the great Trondheim Jazz Orchestra. But these "other" large bands are reinventing their own musical wheels and commanding our attention.

More broadly, the musical contingent from Norway, that established stronghold of artistic energy and unique character in the jazz world, has been only marginally represented at jazzahead! in the past. But, as Norway was designated as the annual "partner country" in this year's event, an embarrassment of Norwegian musical riches hit Bremen. The "partner country" concept is a fruitful one, a chance to get a concentrated and carefully curated dose of jazz from given corners

of the world, mostly in and around Europe, though open to new geographic possibilities. Last year's Polish focus was a strong one, highlighted by trumpeter Maciej Obara's set at Die Glocke, and 2016's Finnish year nicely showcased that country's unique jazz palette. But, as the whole, the Norway year grabbed my ear and held it more strongly than any of the six previous years' showcases.

The first year I went, in 2013, Israel was the spotlighted country, and I was duly impressed by a strong roster of players from Israel—and often with secondary or primary bases in New York City—previously unfamiliar to me. The organizing party for that selection was the Israeli Dubi Lenz, a veteran jazz DJ, lecturer, promoter and festival producer (now with the winter edition of the Red Sea Jazz Festival). In a conversation we had during the speed-dating styled “matchmaking” segment of the weekend, he stressed that “it’s important to know that Israel is something other than what you see on the news,” he asserted, adding “I hate politics.”

Politics and tensions between nations and cultures still exist for this Bremen weekend, but for the most part, are set aside (apart from the frequent question posed to us visiting Americans, along the lines of “how could Trump have been voted into office, and how soon can you get rid of him?”). Jazzahead! is primarily a peaceable cultural convergence zone during which differences are set aside for a cause: doing jazz business, and up the multicultural smorgasbord of music sets spread out over two days and three nights.

Most of those sets are strictly timed at 30 minutes—on real, German time—and packed into 40 scheduled slots on the calendar grid, and with a sprawling “Club Night” on Saturday spreading out into whereabouts in Bremen beyond the convention center epicenter.

Thursday night's “Norwegian Night” set the pace for the weekend, with eight sets keeping visitors in perpetual motion every half hour. The varied roster for that evening included the aforementioned, scampish Skadadyr and the glowing Avant Folk Ensemble, the inspired pianoless trio Gard Nilssen's Acoustic Unity—led by drummer Nilssen and featuring saxist to watch for Andre Roligheten and bassist Ole Morten Vagan—and West African-flavored singer Kristin Asbjørnsen. The piano trio tradition got a lyrical yet cerebrally potent representation from the Espen Berg Trio, and hard rock-jazz siren Hedvig Mollestad supplied the night-closing headbanger jazz set at the slaughterhouse.

Over at the annual Friday night “gala concert,” in the enchanted setting of the 1928-vintage Art Deco-styled theater Die Glocke, current ECM rising star Matthias Eick prevailed and won the crowd over with his melodic electro-acoustic band.

On the double bill, we also got an earful of the remarkable “side project” band known as Trail of Souls: this is the hybrid group sound you get when you mix an ace blues guitarist, Knut Reiersrud, a soulful singer, Solveig Slettehjell, and the sophisticated arrangements and derangements of the extant trio known as In the Country. I was impressed the first time I heard them, in a church in Molde, Norway. At

Die Glocke, I was convinced this is one of the great “pop” bands on the planet! Of course, the world may or may not agree, or even get a chance to hear them.

Despite the intentional highlighting of jazz from different locales, though, musical nationalism is hardly the norm at jazzahead!. Culture-crossing musical liaisons were common at the “European Jazz Meeting” and the annual Saturday afternoon “German Jazz Expo--” there, partly because of the liberal meshing of cultures based in the German jazz hub of Berlin. Thus, the German portion of the weekend featured such gifted artists as the German-born but half-Afghan vocalist Simin Tander, in a beguiling duet with electronics-fitted cellist Jorg Brinkmann, the dazzling Russian alto saxist (now a Berliner) Olga Amelchenko, and the German-Finnish hard bop-goes-free meet-up of the Janning Trumann 6. For punk jazz cred, with intricate twists attached, the German trio Edi Nulz made a raucous/joyful/tight noise.

Iceland had its fair portion of attention during the Friday night “European Jazz Meeting,” in the form of American-born, Iceland-based drummer Scott McLemore’s evocative two electric guitars (Hilmar Jensson and David Doruzka), and acoustic bassist Nicolas Moreaux, with a subtle sonic effect reminiscent of the old Bass Desires band.

Also from Iceland, the fine mid-career pianist Sunna Gunnlaugs’ trio, bolstered by guest from Finland, the chameleonic trumpeter Verner Pohjola, wove a supple path between the retooled pop melodic stuff of George Michaels’ “Wake Me Up Before You Go Go,” and the post-hard bop fervency of “Ancestry,” the title track from her latest album.

Other high points of the “European” session: the cathartically noisy psychedelic jazz guitar trio sounds of the Portuguese The Rite of Trio, a multi-culti new project, Aksham, with frequently ECM-linked artist Elena Duni as vocal focal point, strong and poetic, by turns. Capping off the eight-act segment, with an intelligent band, was the now 20-year-old inside-outside Belgian big band Flat Earth Society—a veritable pioneer in the world of alternative big band notions.

Back on the subject of artful large ensemble projects without easy categorization, the music which most lingers in the memory, for me, was Sangam. As accordionist Haltli told me after a mesmerizing and idiom-stitching set, this almost mythic project was playing for the first time in seven years and was relying most on music from an as-yet unrecorded set of music written as a commission for the Vossa Jazz Festival back in 2005.

On this occasion, Seim passed much of the allotted soloing spotlight to other musicians in the group, but he soared with a bold compositional voice veering from minimalism through touches of Kurt Weill and Stravinsky, Carnatic music and plenty of that old Norwegian brew, where contemplative poise and “blue notes” live and breathe. The 75-minute show gets my vote as “best of show” in this edition of jazzahead!, plus special merit as “music most deserving of being recorded.”



Simin Tander and Jorg Brinkmann (photo, Josef Woodard)

Festival Review: jazzahead!



Frøde Haltli's Avant Folk Ensemble (photo, Josef Woodard)



Skadedyr (photo, Josef Woodard)

Festival Review: jazzahead!



Edi Nulz (photo, Josef Woodard)



Gard Nilseen's Acoustic Unity (photo, Josef Woodard)