

Berlin Celebrates 40 Years 'Out Of Sync'

Germans seek the sublime in numbers and systems. The truism rang loud and majestically last November through Berlin's grand venue, the Philharmonie, when conductor-pianist Daniel Barenboim performed Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," a set of 24 pieces in all keys, major and minor, ranking among the greatest music ever written. Four nights earlier, different sets of numbers were aligning in the same hall, as the Berlin Jazz Festival, Nov. 4-7, turned 40 and showcased flailing Dutchman Willem Breuker, celebrating his 60th birthday.

Breuker was joined by his little big band, *Kollektief*, plus strings, in a tight, absurd and pleasantly rambling set. It kicked off with his customized take on "Rhapsody In Blue," actually the least interesting moment in a set full of the leader's own compositional adventures. In his own way, Breuker's careful blending of American and European concepts, tight ensemble writing and manic free blowing both cathartic and circus-like, could summarize the Berlin Festival's artistic agenda.

They love measured doses of things avant-garde and sweet virtuosity, which they had on opening night with the jazz accordion king Richard Galliano and guest Toots Thielemans, still blowing an affably mean chromatic harp at 82. They also love a good big band, and have one in Germany's NDR Big Band. Opening night found George Gruntz leading the NDR band through a set of Thelonious Monk variations and then hosting veteran trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff, this festival's director for many years. Mangelsdorff still has his signature chops in order, if a bit rusty in the transitions.

The opening night gala was true to form, for a festival which is deliberately, and blessedly, "out of sync" with the summer's European festival circuit. The parade of usual suspects and touring jazz acts doesn't stop here. Berlin is a festival apart, thanks to its lonely spot on the calendar and also due to an innately stubborn interest in offbeat ideas, a tradition notched up in recent years by artistic director Peter Schulze.

The architecturally wild Philharmonie was this festival's home base for its first 25 years before the festival moved elsewhere, leading the local newspaper, *Zitty*, to dub this special concert "jazz back at the Philharmonic." Most



Albert Mangelsdorff



Willem Breuker

of the concerts now take place in the central Festspielhaus, with peripheral shows at the club Quasimodo and the Kulturbrauerei, a reformed brewery turned cultural hub. There, the acts included the intriguing British band Acoustic Ladyland, which gave a new spin to Jimi Hendrix and neo-electro-acoustic jazz, and Turkish percussion wizard Arto Tunçboyacıyan's Armenian Navy Band.

Coincidentally, 2004 marked the 40th anniversary of Eric Dolphy's death (he was living in Berlin at the time), an event commemorated at the "Total Music Meeting," the concurrent "fringe festival" in town presented by the FMP label. Usually, there is some small measure of crossover between the festivals, seen this year in the cross-town traffic of the free-minded Dutch pianist Misha Mengelberg and percussionist Han Bennink. At the Berlin festival proper, Mengelberg and Bennink were the rubbery pillars of the ICP Orchestra, expertly balancing swinging solidity and playful experimental mischief, and featuring typically impressive work by reed player Ab Baars.

Saturday night's main event was a study in contrasts, a double-header of tribute projects of differing colors and degrees of fidelity. In Bennie Wallace's Coleman Hawkins Centennial Project, the saxophonist's nonet paid respect to Bean, mostly through guitarist

Anthony Wilson's lean, smart arrangements. Fine soloing was the norm, especially from trombonist Ray Anderson and Wallace's limber, lightly drawing, and inside-out panache on tenor.

Next on the bill, Berlin-based pianist Aki Takase's Aki Takase Plays Fats Waller project was a blend of faithfulness to the source and contemporary liberties taken. It had the irreverent looseness we've come to expect from sidemen like guitarist Eugene Chadbourne, the least jazz-fluent player onstage but full of kinetic, Waller-esque vivacity. But the tribute was also sincere, especially in Takase's impressive hands, all over the piano.

Yet another brand of tribute alighted in the European premiere of Charles Lloyd's tribute to his late cohort, drummer Billy Higgins, in a trio with tabla master Zakir Hussain and drummer Eric Harland. Lloyd has worked with great pianists, but exercises a special freedom in this chordless, percussion-guided setting.

Being in Berlin invites historical speculation without trying. Proceed past the redesigned Reichstag and into what was once East Berlin, until the fall of the Wall gave it unique cachet as a "liberated city." Born in the era of walled oppression and West-East schisms, the Berlin Jazz Festival continues to chase its own notions of liberation philosophy in sound and attitude. —Josef Woodard