



Caught

Berlin Fest Leans Toward Folkish Themes, Tributes

For those interested in checking out what can loosely be called “Eurojazz,” one decidedly fruitful option is to go to Berlin. Held Nov. 2–6, 2011, months after the European summer jazz festival circuit had wound down, the Berlin Jazz Fest may have been leaner in budget than its larger counterparts. But it was more inspired in terms of aesthetic outlook and theme-driven concepts.

One of the festival’s main focal points was Poland, swirling around the legacy of late Polish pianist and film score genius Krzysztof Komeda. Polish jazz luminary Tomasz Stańko, once an ally of Komeda in the ’60s, delivered a historically telling version of “Litania,” a revitalizing homage to Komeda’s music. The trumpeter conveyed the liberating flair, brooding Polish melancholy and folkish palette specific to his subject. Also on the Friday night bill were Adam Pierończyk’s dynamic quintet and impressive solo pianist Leszek Możdżer. Możdżer, who recently released the album *Komeda* (ACT), crossed from lyrical, modern jazz piano to classical resonances, generally erring on the side of intelligence over sentimentality.

Remarkable French accordionist Richard Galliano unveiled a fascinating, jazz-lined tribute to iconic Italian film composer Nino Rota. Trumpeter Dave Douglas was on hand to savor and subvert the *La Strada* trumpet theme. The bittersweet, existential finale music to Federico Fellini’s masterpiece *8½* took on new meaning and artfully swung hipness.

This year also offered less of an American emphasis. The star of that transatlantic component was Steve Swallow’s limber, witty band (with wife Carla Bley as a ripe foil and texture-supplier on Hammond B3 organ). Swallow’s unique lingo as a creator of pen-

sive ballads, quirky Monk-ish beats and twisty swing tunes seemed even more precious and singular in a live setting, especially with empathetic players such as saxist Chris Cheek and guitarist Steve Cardenas.

Charles Lloyd returned to Berlin with his new project featuring revered Greek vocalist Maria Farantouri, changing up his usual post-Coltrane quartet format. Keyboardist Joe Sample had his own grand European encounter, courtesy of the flexible National Danish Radio big band’s reading of his *Children Of The Sun* suite, with guest trombonist and fest Artistic Director Nils Landgren contributing well-proportioned riffs.

American guests—particularly tenor saxophonists—also stood out in otherwise European groupings. Gary Thomas was a potent, poetic force in Pierończyk’s band, and Mark Turner compelled and reinvented with every solo in Galliano’s band.

This Berlin fest also featured some enticing ideas in the big band (and little big band) field, from the well-rounded sounds of BuJazzO & Maria Baptist “City Grooves” to the cross-stylistic madcap-pery of young composer Daniel Glatzel’s Andromeda Mega Express Orchestra. With her Polish-German nonet, pianist-composer Ola Tomaszewska impressed with her strong voice, sophistication and a certain Maria Schneider-esque harmonic flair.

Moodier persuasions of the indie-jazz variety from Scandinavia impressed in late-night sets at Haus der Berliner Festspiele. Norway’s PELBO (a trio with well-placed vocals, tuba and organically deployed gadgetry) and the expanded duo project of Sweden’s beguiling Josef och Erika softly glowed with northerly introspection.

—Josef Woodard