

Northerly Jazz Tracking:

Tampere, Finland, and Umeå, Sweden, Festivals

When jazz people think of European festivals, they often dwell on the summer circuit and the major venues, where musical esthetics are often mixed with tourist-baiting. Some of the more exciting and envelope-pushing festival activity takes place on the fringes—of the calendar and the European Union. Head north in late October/early November, for instance, and you can find plentiful evidence for the notion that Scandinavia is a hot spot for jazz, and jazz-related offshoots, of the thinking variety.

Finland's Tampere Jazz Happening has become one of Europe's more important keepers of the cutting-edge flame. This year's three-day festival, the 21st, upheld the Tampere noble tradition, with great sets by the improv-fueled Doppelmoppel, the intriguing chamber-esqueries of Susie Ibarra's Trio and mutant exotica from Ekova, among other offbeat treats.

The previous weekend, the 35th annual Umeå Jazz Festival proved to be a more wide-ranging exploration of jazz styles. With this fine festival, in a city an hour's flight north of Stockholm, special emphasis is given to Swedish artists—generally an ear-opening and impressive lot, including the formidable pianist Bobo Stenson.

Umeå's festival, for the most part, takes place under one roof, on several stages, in the central Kulturhuset. Judging from these two festivals—and there are many others in different continental outposts—jazz is treated as an art form more than a commercial entity, and the European musical pulse is showing an enviable strength.

Bands led by Bill Frisell and Francois Courmeloup, the two acts common to both festivals, were highlights of each, and for different reasons. French baritone saxophonist Courmeloup's stunning new group, with ace trombonist Yves Robert, drummer Eric Echampard and mischievous virtuoso guitarist Marc Ducret, warrants attention on the greater international scene. It possesses an uncanny balance between free improv and neo-chamber jazz writing—sometimes slightly reminiscent of Henry Threadgill's sensibility. Add to that fleeting elements of a rock energy courtesy of Ducret's wily fretboard and foot pedal scamperings, and Echampard's heat, and you have a band of intellectual might and sonic muscle.

In Umeå, they played in a too-tiny hall, but fared better in the much larger space Pakkahuone. In between, the quartet could

be found raising the roof in the wonderful Stockholm jazz club Fasching. In each situation, the audience seemed to recognize the presence of something fresh and liberating. Bill Frisell brought over his ambling, loosely Americana-lined quintet, with drummer Kenny Wollesen, bassist Tony Scherr and violinist Jenny Scheinman. The group's open-ended feeling found some sort of poetic resonance in this snowy domain, especially with Tampere's high-tech light show.

Just in terms of sheer atmospheric power, the highlight of Tampere's 2002 program was another Scandinavian sensation, Nils Petter Molvaer, heading west to make his Tampere debut. At a time when jazz seems confused about where to go, Molvaer has latched onto something fascinating, with nods towards Miles and techno and a hauntingly cool Nordic vibe. In another stylistic corner entirely is the 20-year-old improvisational lab experiment/circus from Germany, Doppelmoppel. Trombonist brothers Konrad and Johannes Bauer met up with guitarists Uwe Kropinski and Helmut "Joe" Sachse for some old-fashioned/always-new-fashioned improvisation. As Kropinski noted in a press conference, this is a band which has never rehearsed in 20 years. And proud of it. Their set was a wonder.

Tampere's festival was nicely capped off by a well-crafted program of Finnish film pieces by an ad hoc group called the

Jarmo Saari Filmtet.

In Umeå, you couldn't help but be awed by the wealth of good, cliché-dodging Swedish musicians, including regular Stenson, playing with his usual touch-sensitive acuity in the fine introspective Norwegian-Swedish band Parish. That group is led by saxophonist Fredrik Ljungkvist, also part of another festival highlight, the band Atomic. This fiery, artful quintet, vaguely in a Dave Douglas-like mode, summoned up a bold sound on original material and the occasional fashionable dip into the Radiohead songbook.

Sultry torch jazz singer Viktoria Tolstoy drew an overflow crowd into the largest theater in the complex. The pinnacle of her set was an ethereal version of "Blame It On My Youth," skillfully and emotionally reharmonized by the outstanding pianist Jacob Karlzon. Greater vocal adventures came from the dazzling and wild-coifed Lindha Svantessen, who appeared in an experimental duo with sax/electronics artist Thomas Gustafson. Svantessen has some genuinely good new ideas about extended vocals, jazz and more, with quirky touches of Björk-ishness, but lined with ample chops and an experimental verve we don't hear enough of on the jazz vocal scene.

—Josef Woodard