

Vossa Jazz Festival Brings Nordic Improvisers to New Peaks

The 37th edition of the Vossa Jazz Festival, held March 26–28 in the lovely fjord-country town in western Norway, reasserted its value this year. This festival accentuates the town of Voss' beauty while covering broad stylistic turf in and beyond jazz. Vossa is held in multiple venues around the town, including the Vangsykkja church in the middle of town.

This year, the most dramatic moments came on Saturday afternoon, as keyboardist Jon Balke reprised his "Extremjazz" project, a symbiotic pact between music, the area's dazzling mountain-to-lake natural splendor and the city's reputation as a mecca for "extreme sports." Last year, Balke led his band down by the lake, but this year, his illustrative and flexible score for a quintet was performed on the snow-covered ski area mountaintop of the Hanguren. Band and audience peered down to the town far below, and the aerial arabesques of parasailers launching from stage right.

Three of the finest Scandinavian jazz artists of the day—from three distinctly varied perspectives, and three different countries—offered up the festival's most memorable shows. On Friday, Finland was representing,



via the fascinating, feisty band Mikko Innanen & Innkvisitio, guided by the strong, free-minded alto saxist, and with keyboardist Seppo Kantonen winning special points for originality. Think Ornette Coleman in a honky tonk, updated and glazed with dry Finnish wit.

On Sunday afternoon in the acoustically blessed Osasalen of the Ole Bull Academy, the city's music school, Swedish pianist Bobo Stenson presented a commanding solo piano performance, teeming with his characteristic blend of introspection, muscular musicality built on jazz-classical vocabulary and his natural openness of spirit.

Another inimitable explorer, Norwegian vocal legend Sidsel Endresen, showed why she exists on a plane all her own in contemporary music. A

modernist with roots in the primordial, Endresen is now almost religiously devoted to true improvisation—of material, vocal/oral technique and form and content—and has worked effectively with kindred spirits like Christian Wallumrød and Humcrush in recent years. Here, she collaborated with versatile saxist Håkon Kørstad, who artfully deployed looping effects. Meanwhile, Endresen's unadorned technical feats sometimes

suggested eerie electronics, whether in chopped up time-space snippets or backwards-like sounds and morphing tones.

Charlie Haden's Quartet West opened the festival with the group's crowd-pleasing, mainstreaming sound. On the band's closer, "Lonely Woman," pianist Allan Broadbent ventured into an ornately classical solo, essentially and somewhat oddly Rachmaninoff-ing Ornette Coleman.

A more feel-good aura worked into sets by Andy Sheppard's multicultural band and Mike Manieri & Northern Lights, in which the veteran vibist relies on the musical kindness of Norwegian players, including the refreshingly unpredictable keyboardist Bugge Wesseltøft. Capping off the heady weekend with a progressive party sound, the Belgian Flat Earth Society served up its tight, seductively irreverent Zappa-meets-Peter-Gunn-meets-Willem-Brueker big band sound, rattling the walls of the Fraktgodsen.

—Josef Woodard