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Vossa Jazz

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Vossa Jazz, the Norwegian festival that celebrated its 35th anniversary in March, may not be one of the best known jazz festivals, but it clearly deserves wider recognition, especially for those jazz lovers with an ear for Nordic musical sensibilities. Vossa Jazz's 2008 edition, the first led by new director Trude Storheim, featured memorable performances by such stellar Norwegian musicians as Nils Petter Molv er (pictured), the remarkable pianist-composer-bandmaker Christian Wallumr d, Terje Isungset (with Lena Nymark), the increasingly popular Keith Jarrett-ish pianist Tord Gustavsen, and the calmly dazzling free-fluent saxist Tore Brunborg and his captivating trio, a sound we need to hear more of. For thinking person's-party-music cred, the energetic Slavic-esque odd-meter machine from Norway known as Farmers Market kept their late-night audience wriggling manically and counting likewise.

There were fine American artists in the mix, as well: The duo of pianist Myra Melford and clarinetist/saxist Marty Ehrlich wove nimbly between "in" and "out" modes; pianist Lynne Arriale led her trio assuredly through mainstream jazz turf; and Roy Nathanson's *Sotto Voce* stirred up its post-Lounge Lizards mix of poetry, party-time hipness and downtown NYC vibes.

Somehow, though, the Norwegian connection made the strongest impression on a visitor already fairly well familiarized with the American jazz roster. When in Norway, bend an ear for the Norwegians. In fact, before the official start of the weekend-long festival, a Thursday night "pre-festival concert" took listeners high up to a mountain overlook, via funicular, to the town's ski area called Hanguren. There, at 11 p.m. and creeping until just after midnight, Norwegian percussionist Isungset, joined by the cool, folk-colored vocalist Nymark, performed an enchanting set in a makeshift performance area in the snow, on Isungset's specially molded, tuned percussion instruments made of ice. Far below, the lights of Voss made for an aesthetically pleasing corollary to the spare, hypnotic musical materials put before a well-bundled audience on a midnight mountaintop.

Even as Vossa Jazz has secured itself in the ranks of important Scandinavian jazz events, alongside venerable Norwegian festivals in Molde, Bergen (*Nattjazz*) and Oslo, the charming host town of Voss has expanded its presence as a tourist destination. In the last several years, Voss—a 90-minute fjord-

side drive east of Bergen, population 14,000—has become a popular landing place for fjord visitors as well as the subculture of extreme sports enthusiasts (Voss hosts an extreme sports festival come summertime). With its dramatic setting, wrapped around a lake enveloped by rising mountainscapes, Voss is something out of a dream, and when you add inspiring music to the environmental equation, the stars align in a special way.

Early on Friday night, the inspired trumpeter and genre-blender Molvær “officially” opened the festival with his mesmeric electro-acoustic sound, this time in a trio setting with texture-ladling guitarist Eivind Aarset and drummer Audun Kleive. All three deftly incorporated electronic sounds in the mix, but without that digital aftertaste. As usual with Molvær, this group’s sound was less about flaunting individual chops or laying down pat grooves than it was about painting pictures in sound, somehow both muscular and poetic.

Molvær’s link to Vossa Jazz is integral to his emergence on the larger jazz scene: In the late ’90s, he presented the mesmerizing piece “Khmer,” under the aegis of the festival’s annual commission program. That project, later released on ECM, helped make Molvær a presence far and wide.

This year’s special commission went to pianist Gustavsen, who has been leaping ahead of his Norwegian peers lately in terms of wider, international popularity. For this occasion, a song cycle based on the writings of Norwegian writer Lars Amund Vaage, Gustavsen expanded his usual trio format to include vocalist Kristin Asbjørnsen, narrator Cecilie Jørstad and saxist Brunborg. Brunborg’s sound, combined with Gustavsen’s general pianistic and compositional approach, solidified a sound reminiscent of the classic late ’70s Keith Jarrett/Jan Garbarek work around the time of *Belonging*.

Stepping into a sideman role, Gustavsen also played in the seductively raspy-voiced Asbjørnsen’s Bessie Smith tribute project, with the Nymark Collective. Even in that bluesy, blowsy setting, Gustavsen played it cool, and savored the soft stuff. It’s in his blood.

Following the world premiere of his new work, Gustavsen was the toast of a ceremonial dinner downstairs at Fleischer’s Hotel. There, an assortment of VIPs and selected artists and journalists gathered for the regional specialty known as “smalahove”—sheep’s head, delivered in recognizable form on one’s dinner plate, ready for eating, eyeball included (this diner’s verdict: surprisingly tasty, with some help from the cooling agent of *aquavit*). Don’t knock it. Reportedly, Shirley Horn attended a smalahove years ago and so loved the food that she asked for a doggie bag.

While much of the festival action took place in a constellation of rooms downstairs in the sprawling, centrally located Park Hotel and the historic Fleischer’s Hotel, satellite venues in other corners of Voss keep festival-goers moving and taking in the spread of the town. In this town, the strategically placed church the Vangskyrkja, built in 1277, has a particularly strong significance, in that it was one of very few structures that survived the massive 1940 Nazi bombing raids, which devastated many towns in western Norway (including Molde). To hear a jazz mass in the Vangskyrkja on a Sunday morning, and a pop-jazzy song set by Berit Opheim later that afternoon, impressed on ambient terms beyond the sounds themselves.

Some of the edgier and more free-hugging sounds took place in the Fraktgodsen, a space on the literal “other side of the tracks” by the Voss train station. There, we heard improvisatory energies from tenor-sax phenom Ken Vandermark, in a fiery set with the twin razor’s-edge guitar assault of The

Ex and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love. The veteran free power trio By Any Means, with saxist Charles Gayle, drummer Rashied Ali and bassist William Parker also shook the rafters of this fringe hangout.

For this listener, the festival highlight came during a Saturday afternoon set by the remarkable Christian Wallumrød Sextet, in the packed auditorium of the Ole Bull Music Academy (Bull was an acclaimed Norwegian violinist, whose visage can be seen in statue form in downtown Bergen). Wallumrød has made four albums for ECM over the last decade, and last year's *The Zoo is Far*, from which much of this performance was derived, is his strongest yet.

If the term "chamber jazz" comes to mind, it is inadequate in describing the intricate yet also open-spirited and spacious scores Wallumrød writes. Without pretension, he deftly cross-stitches baroque music, Norwegian folk music and purely abstract notions for a suitably diverse instrumentation, including the baroque harp of Giovanna Pessi, the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle of Gjermund Larsen and cellist Tanja Orning. For his part, Wallumrød moves between piano, harmonium and toy piano (played in an evocative and serious manner akin to the toy piano music of John Cage). Of particular note are the signature musical voices of longstanding Wallumrød collaborators trumpeter Arve Henriksen, who produces timbres beyond our expectations of that instrument and drummer Per Oddvar Johansen, whose blend of energy and textural sensitivity makes him one of the more interesting drummers on the contemporary jazz scene.

Live, Wallumrød's music takes on a new depth and sense of space, with its ebbing and flowing dynamics, deceptively simple melodies and mind- and time-bending structures. In one piece, pleasantly rippling ascending arpeggios on piano and harp laid a foundation, over which glassy squeals of bowed harmonics and Henriksen's liquid trumpet tones segued into an organically informed drum solo, which then morphed into a final ensemble section resembling a gently twisted, modernized Bach chorale.

Somehow, in that piece, in that space, at least one bedazzled listener got the sense of a new song of Norway rising above the fashionable din of contemporary music.