

WE JAZZ

BY PHIL FREEMAN



MAARIT KYTÖHARJU

Iro Haarla

If you've ever heard Finnish being spoken, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Finns have an affinity for jazz. The language has a melodious quality and dancing internal rhythm that are innately musical. Finnish swings.

So does the We Jazz festival, held four years running at a variety of locations throughout central Helsinki. The weather can be tear-your-face-off cold in December, so it's the perfect time to gather inside and listen to music by local jazz performers and a few honored guests. This year, saxophonist Mark Turner's quartet performed, as did alto saxophonist Logan Richardson (with a Finnish rhythm section, under the collective name Dunstan) and the quartet Amok Amor: American trumpeter Peter Evans and Germans saxophonist Wanja Slavin, bassist Petter Eldh and drummer Christian Lillinger. The focus though was definitely on homegrown talent.

When I arrived on the fifth night of the eight-night festival (Dec. 4th-11th), Swedish saxophonist Otis Sandsjö performed at Kahvila Sävy, a tiny coffee shop decorated with photos by local legend M.A. Numminen. Sandsjö appeared with a trio of drummer Tomi Leppänen and Aki Rissanen on keyboards and laptop. They played a single extended piece that began very quietly—long slow air-escaping-a-balloon tones, delicately whisked cymbals, electronic static. Eventually it swelled into mantra-like looping cries from Sandsjö atop a fierce *motorik* beat. Rissanen's contributions were both the most unexpected and, occasionally, the weak point; he shifted moods often, from abstract electronic squiggles to synth washes recalling '80s Miles or soaring melodies perhaps inspired by the retro movie soundtracks (and imaginary movie soundtracks) that are all the rage these days.

I caught the night's next performances at Genelec House, a small art space on the edge of a park. The path to the front door was lit by small candles and inside it was warm and intimate. First up were Buba Wii Aa, a highly precise organ trio (Mikael Myrskog on keyboards, Eero Seppä on bass and audience repartée and Sami Nummela on drums). They were happy to set up smooth, ticking grooves and play the blues on top. Myrskog is a terrific, melodic player and Nummela's drumming occasionally offered some surprises and unexpected bursts of machine-gun aggression.

Up next was saxophonist Pauli Lyytinen's Magnetia Orkesteri, a quartet with trumpeter Verner Pohjola, bassist Eero Tikkanen and drummer Mika Kallio. Their work was reminiscent of New York quartet Hush Point in its emphasis on subtlety and interplay, but Pohjola's flutelike approach also showed the influence of Arve Henriksen. Lyytinen switched capably between soprano and tenor and the secret leader of the group was Kallio,

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WINTER JAZZFEST

BY IVANA NG



GULNARA KHAMATOVA

Pharoah Sanders

Winter Jazzfest has always been a platform for radical new voices in jazz and experimental music. Now in its 13th year, this year's festival centered on the theme of social justice. Known for its choose-your-adventure-style two-night marathon, the festival expanded to six days (Jan. 5th-10th) to include exciting concept shows and panel discussions about the intersections of music, political activism and social justice.

Saxophonist Pharoah Sanders kicked off the extravaganza with a breezy two-hour set at Le Poisson Rouge (LPR). His quartet bounced from bluesy numbers to spiritual jazz classics like "Astral Traveling" and "The Creator Has A Master Plan", with fellow saxophonist (and son of onetime Sanders employer John Coltrane) Ravi Coltrane hopping onstage to solo. Opener Shabaka & The Ancestors, a quintet of young up-and-comers from London and South Africa, explored African diaspora with evocative chants and Caribbean grooves. It was invigorating to see multiple generations of jazz royalty sharing the stage.

The weekend marathon (Jan. 6th-7th) hosted over 130 bands across 13 venues throughout the West and East Village and lower Manhattan. One could easily discover visionary up-and-comers, dissect free jazz and dance to swinging bebop all in one night. At LPR, 24-year-old singer Daymé Arocena invoked Yoruban spirituality and Cuban neo-soul with a spirit that was fresh, hopeful and forward-looking. Over at SubCulture, Darcy James Argue's Secret Society explored the more pessimistic theme of "the paranoid style in American politics." The 18-piece big band played their latest album *Real Enemies*. Excerpts from speeches and hearings were seamlessly woven in, daring listeners to reckon with the absurdity of American politics. Some left us stunned while others resonated so deeply that we couldn't help but laugh ("You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.")

One of the highlights was pianist Samora Pinderhughes' Transformations Suite at The New School Glass Box Theater, a five-part tone poem performed over meticulously arranged big band jazz instrumentals examining the radical history of resistance within the communities of the African Diaspora. Spoken word artists Jeremie Harris and Jules Latimer delivered poignant performances, bringing the audience to the emotional brink as they declared, "We cannot retreat in the face of inequity, we cannot ignore the patterns of brutality, we will not be silenced."

While some artists dealt with the festival's theme more explicitly, others focused more on creative survival through thoughtful instrumentation and inventive musical fusion. Ye Olde, a playful quintet led by trombonist Jacob Garchik at SubCulture, featured

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- Wed, Feb 1 **TOBIAS MEINHART QUINTET, NATURAL PERCEPTION 8PM**
Ingrid Jensen, Yago Vazquez, Jesse Simpson
MATT MARANTZ QUARTET 9:30PM
Luke Marantz, Rick Rosato, Adam Arruda
- Thu, Feb 2 **STEVE SANDBERG & ALAYA 8PM & 9:30PM**
Mark Feldman, Michael O'Brien, Mauricio Zottarelli
- Fri, Feb 3 **AUBREY JOHNSON GROUP 9PM & 10:30PM**
Tomoko Omura, Michael Sachs, Glenn Zaleski, Matt Aronoff, Jeremy Noller
- Sat, Feb 4 **GEORGE GARZONE BOSTON COLLECTIVE 9PM & 10:30PM**
Phil Grenadier, Leo Genovese, Dave Zinno, Bob Gullotti
- Wed, Feb 8 **NOAM WIESENBERG QUINTET 8PM & 9:30PM**
Godwin Louis, Dayna Stephens, Glenn Zaleski, Kush Abadey
- Thu, Feb 9 **THE POWELL BROTHERS 8PM & 9:30PM**
Jonathan Powell, Jeremy Powell, Marko Churnchetz, Jeff Miles, Edward Perez, Allan Mednard
- Fri, Feb 10 **ARI HOENIG BRAZILIAN TRIO 9PM & 10:30PM**
Chico Pinheiro, Eduardo Belo
- Sat, Feb 11 **LAGE LUND 3 9PM & 10:30PM**
Matt Penman, Obed Calvaire
- Sun, Feb 12 **ANOUMAN 8:30PM & 10PM**
Peter Sparacino, Koran Agan, Josh Kaye, Eduardo Belo
- Tue, Feb 14 **NANCY MARANO AND JACK WILKINS DUO 8PM**
- Wed, Feb 15 **ALEXA BARCHINI 8PM & 9:30PM**
Julian Shore, Jorge Roeder, Andre Matos
- Thu, Feb 16 **MARTIN NEVIN GROUP 8 & 9:30PM**
Curtis Macdonald, Kyle Wilson, Sam Harris, Eric McPherson
- Fri, Feb 17 **SARA SERPA TRIO 9PM & 10:30PM**
Ingrid Laubrock, Erik Friedlander
- Sat, Feb 18 **KINAN AZMEH'S CITY BAND 9PM & 10:30PM**
Kyle Sanna, Josh Myers, John Hadfield
- Sun, Feb 19 **MOSTLY OTHER PEOPLE DO THE KILLING, CD RELEASE: LOAFER'S HOLLOW 8:30PM & 10PM**
Steven Bernstein, Bryan Murray, Dave Taylor, Brandon Seabrook, Ron Stabinsky, Moppa Elliott, Kevin Shea
- Tue, Feb 21 **DAN WEISS TRIO 8PM & 9:30PM**
Jacob Sacks, Thomas Morgan
- Wed, Feb 22 **TOM GUARNA'S WISHING STONES PROJECT 8PM**
Jon Cowherd, Matt Clohesy, Allan Mednard
JON COWHERD MERCY PROJECT 9:30PM
Tom Guarna, Dan Rieser, Doug Weiss
- Thu, Feb 23 **PAUL JONES SEXTET 8PM & 9:30PM**
Alex LoRe, Perry Smith, Glenn Zaleski, Johannes Felscher, Allan Mednard
- Fri, Feb 24 **THE CRASH TRIO + ONE 9PM & 10:30PM**
Tony Malaby, Leo Genovese, Santi Debriano, Francisco Mela
- Sat, Feb 25 **TOM CHANG QUINTET 9PM & 10:30PM**
Jeremy Powell, Quinsin Nachoff, Sam Minaie
- Sun, Feb 26 **SOFIA RIBEIRO 8:30PM & 10PM**
Juan Andres Ospina, Petros Klampanis, Marcelo Woloski
- Tue, Feb 28 **MARTA SANCHEZ QUINTET 8PM**
Roman Filiu, Jerome Sabbagh, Rick Rosato, Daniel Dor
CARMEN STAAF TRIO 9:30PM
Jorge Roeder, Colin Stranahan

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who used a stack of ceremonial-looking cymbals to announce the next phase of pieces.

The first performance on Friday night was by saxophonist Jorma Tapio and his trio Kaski with bassist Ulf Krokfors and drummer Simo Laihonen. When Tapio was on tenor, it was storming free jazz built around superficially simple melodies ascending into fiery solos, but he just as frequently played flute or alto flute and then the music had an almost Asian folk sound, with plenty of nearly vocal exhortations.

After that, Krokfors and I piled into a van and careened across Helsinki to the Andorra Movie Theatre, where he was one of two bassists with saxophonist Mikko Innanen's 10+ band. The music was a mix of high-energy horn charts, blistering and martial drumming and fluid and expressive solos. Between the pieces proper, momentum was sustained by individual players creating Euro improv-style squawks and squeals.

Saturday offered one of the festival's best performances. OK:KO (saxophonist Jarno Tikka, pianist Toomas Keski-Säntti, bassist Mikael Saastamoinen and drummer Okko Saastamoinen) have only been a band for a year or so, but their music is solid. Tikka started the set—held in the Helsinki Contemporary art gallery—solo and one tune broke down to a piano-bass duo. But when all four were working together, their melodic postbop was at its best, the music built on grooves that had a more respiratory than hip-jutting rhythm. Oddarrang, a quintet whose music has gradually evolved from jazz to a kind of instrumental post-rock with trombone, played at G Livelab, a traditional club. They were almost entirely shrouded in blue mist, which suited their music, a kind of reverberant fog filling the room without ever making any real impression—it was like I had missed the inciting sound and heard only the echoes.

The night concluded at Lapinlahden Lähde, a former mental institution, with solo improv performances by bassist Ville Herrala, accordionist Harri Kuusijärvi, guitarist Markus Pesonen and Anni Elif Egecioglu, who sang and accompanied herself on a diminutive cello. In the main room, saxophonist Jukka Perko's Avara trio with electric guitarist Jarmo Saari and acoustic guitarist Teemu Viinikainen combined fleet, John McLaughlin-esque finger-picking, washes of swelling distortion and meditative saxophone. They were followed by guitarist Mikko Sarvanne's Hip Company, a big band backing up poet Beibi P, who a journalist informed me afterward was hilarious.

On Sunday, I returned to the gallery where I'd seen OK:KO for an extended improv duo by Mikko Innanen and Sami Laihonen. The former played a variety of saxophones and some uncommon flutes and recorders. At various points, he and Laihonen also employed twittering bird calls. The drummer maintained an abstract, pulsing time with ritualistic tom pounding and his kit deserves a special mention, custom-built from a rich brown wood and absolutely beautiful.

The last performance I saw was by pianist Iro Haarla's trio with bassist Ulf Krokfors and drummer Markku Ounaskari, back at G Livelab. Haarla is signed to ECM and the music had the soft-focus, Nordic feel common to that label, at least initially. Krokfors, who composed the second piece, took a thickly resonant, Dave Holland-esque solo to start and Haarla's playing grew in intensity. By the fourth song, Ounaskari was awake and took a thundering solo of his own. The longer the group played, the more their spirits cohered and by the end they were in a zone of rare beauty, creating an almost religious feeling of calm, as though they were performing in a cathedral, not a jazz club.

We Jazz' achievement extends beyond the talent it assembles. What really makes this festival great is the way it integrates the music into the city, staging performances in unexpected venues and creating a feeling of community. The public response was impressive; every show was crowded and the age range

of the audience skewed much younger than your typical jazz gig. Any fan of adventurous live music who can handle the cold should consider going in 2017. ❖

For more information, visit wejazz.fi.

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three guitarists—Ava Mendoza, Mary Halvorson and Jonathan Goldberger, each with a distinct style to complement Garchik's charismatic horn. The trio House of Waters at Bowery Electric experimented with elements of West African rhythms, jazz, psychedelic rock and classical music, creating rich sheets of sound with hammered dulcimer as the centerpiece. Drummer Jim Black's Malamute, a quartet with tenor saxophonist Loftur Guðmundsson, keyboardist Elias Stemeseder and electric bassist Chris Tordini, fused rock songcraft and industrial percussion in an explosive and intimate set at The New School 5th Floor Theater.

Marathon Day 2 was spent around The New School campus, with the exception of trumpeter Peter Evans' sextet at SubCulture. Before his set, Evans called out saxophonist Matana Roberts and other peers active in social justice movements. The music was marked by vigorous tempo, complex grooves and Evans' pointillistic horns. Mary Halvorson played with her octet from their latest album, *Away With You*, to a packed The New School 5th Floor Theater audience. She shone as a bandleader, opening the floor for pedal steel guitarist Susan Alcorn's ambient moods and Country-and-Western aesthetics.

ECM Records curated a showcase at The New School Tishman Auditorium, including the duo of Ravi Coltrane and pianist David Virelles. The latter's imaginative lines and rhythmic intuition was the perfect complement to the former's expansive solos. At The New School 12th Street Auditorium, drummer Andrew Cyrille, Artist in Residence at this year's festival, led Haitian Fascination, exploring the rich music of Haiti, the quintet weaving American jazz themes with voodoo percussion and twoubadou guitar.

It seemed appropriate to end my marathon adventure at Zinc Bar, a cozy and always packed mainstay of the Winter Jazzfest. As part of the "Out of Ra" (Sun Ra, that is) series on Saturday evening, the AfroHORN Superband, led by Arkestra alumnus Francisco Mora-Catlett, played a mix of AfroCuban rhythms, space-jazz and straightahead grooves.

Beyond the marathon, this year's edition also extended to Brooklyn with a show at Littlefield (Jan. 8th). The Thelonious Monk 100th Birthday Improv Show brought together Kris Davis, David Virelles, Shabaka Hutchings, Sam Newsome, Marc Ribot, Charlie Burnham, Erik Friedlander, Linda Oh, Trevor Dunn, Hamid Drake, Andrew Cyrille and Deva Mahal to play Monk's classic *Solo Monk* in various configurations from solos to larger ensembles. Given that each group was created and assigned songs only two weeks before, it was amazing to see the chemistry onstage and hear the diverse range of interpretations.

The festival came full circle, ending at LPR with a panel on environmental justice following a set by the esteemed Charlie Haden Liberation Music Orchestra. Led by guest pianist Geri Allen, the 12-piece ensemble played their latest album *Time/Life (Song For the Whales and Other Beings)* (Impulse), a series of pieces inspired by environmental concerns.

Political expression is not new in the jazz community but this year's festival forced us all to engage with the current socio-political climate. Attendees discovered new music, communed with artists and fostered dialogue. More than anything, this year's Winter Jazzfest was a celebration of community and the power of music to cultivate a sense of agency and ownership over our own political narrative. ❖

For more information, visit winterjazzfest.com.



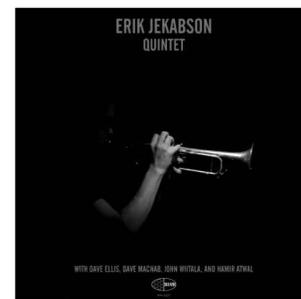
Roscoe Mitchell Conversations
With Craig Taborn And
Kikanju Baku WH-0317



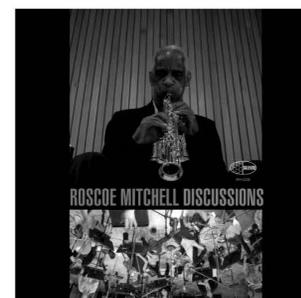
Throttle Elevator Music IV
featuring Kamasi Washington
and Erik Jekabson WH-0331



**Throttle Elevator Music
Retrospective** featuring
Kamasi Washington and Erik
Jekabson WH-0333



Erik Jekabson Quintet with
Dave Ellis, Dave Macnab, John
Wittala, and Hamir Atwal
WH-0339 Released May 2017



Roscoe Mitchell Discussions
Orchestral Conversations
WH-0341 Released
September 2017

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