

EDGEFEST

BY JOHN SHARPE



Ingrid Laubrock & Peter Evans

For the 20th edition of Ann Arbor's forward-looking annual Edgifest (Oct. 26th-29th), thanks to generous sponsorship, Artistic Director Deanna Relyea and her team were able to pull out all the stops. Alongside impressive local improvisers and outfits on tour, top-notch acts were invited especially for the event. In addition there was a fringe spotlighting yet more local groups, a concert by the University of Michigan (UoM) Jazz Ensemble and, to kickstart the last day, a parade through town. The vast majority of the shows took place in the Kerrytown Concert House nestling in the heart of the historic downtown.

Unsurprisingly, the established names, most of them well known to NYC audiences, accounted for many of the highlights. Among them, pride of place should go to Trio 3, the venerable collective of alto saxophonist Oliver Lake, bassist Reggie Workman and drummer Andrew Cyrille, which had the honor of presenting two sets on the final day. They mined an extensive repertoire, yet did not rest on laurels, as they reworked familiar tunes into uncompromising and stimulating guises. They formed a tight unit, not only in their proximity on stage, but through the authority with which they played and interacted. From the opening "Bonu", Lake's bat-register whistles, snarls and multiphonic dissonances vied with motifs reiterated in his unique sweet-and-sour-toned delivery. Cyrille's exuberant solo spot, "For Girls Dancing", summed up his appeal—all buoyant polyrhythms and embellishments, sometimes sensitive, sometimes brash—a one-man drum choir. In many ways the anchor, Workman bent and slurred his fat resonant notes or bowed deep counterpoint.

In another finely honed yet unpredictable performance profiting from years of shared experience, trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith and bassist John Lindberg revisited their *Celestial Weather* (TUM, 2015) duo. Smith's majestic fanfares and Lindberg's almost classical purity of tone made for a lovely blend. As ever with Smith, at times equivalent amounts of silence threw the notes into even sharper relief. But to mix it up they also juxtaposed unconventional textures such as hoarse strangled cries and bow bouncing and drawled notes. On "Malachi Favors Maghostut", dedicated to the late bassist, they contrasted Americana-tinged sadness with spluttering exhalations and harsh arco scrapes in a show of uncanny communication.

Ingrid Laubrock's *Serpentines* featured a distinguished crew in an idiosyncratic lineup: Craig Taborn (piano), Peter Evans (trumpet), Dan Peck (tuba), Tom Rainey (drums), Miya Masaoka (koto) and Sam Pluta (live processing). Although multi-sectional, each of the stunningly unorthodox pieces allowed

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PANČEVO

BY THOMAS CONRAD



Enrico Rava

Jazz festivals are different in Europe. There are more of them. They are more important to the social, economic and creative health of the art form. They are even held in months like November (3rd-6th), in places like Pančevo, Serbia, a town of 90,000, 15 kilometers from Belgrade. It is always in danger of being dwarfed by the Belgrade festival, the most important in Eastern Europe, which immediately precedes it. But Pančevo stubbornly sustains its own little niche. The town, like all of Serbia, looks austere and down-at-heel. But the confluence of two rivers (Danube and Tamiš) improves the cityscape. Pančevo has some pleasant parks and excellent cheap restaurants. Its festival vibe is much mellower than that of Belgrade. Concerts take place in a 380-seat auditorium in the Kulturni Centar. Jam sessions go down after hours in the foyer. In Pančevo, at three in the morning, you can get the best hamburger of your life from a street kiosk for 220 Serbian dinars (\$2). It's called a gurmanska.

The same person, Vojislav Pantić, books the Belgrade and Pančevo festivals. He is a passionate jazz polymath (by day a math teacher). There were four memorable concerts this year. Guitarist John Scofield's *Country for Old Men* opened, his best project since his *Hollowbody Band* with Kurt Rosenwinkel. Whereas so many of today's jazz musicians only want to play their own stuff (good or not), Scofield has tapped into a rich preexisting cultural repository. His versions of country tunes are not as ethnic, not as steeped in Americana, as those of Bill Frisell. Scofield uses them as nostalgic, elemental melodies to blow on and as opportunities to swing his ass off. He recited the lyrics to "Mama Tried" by that redneck Wordsworth, Merle Haggard, then got all nasty with the song. He teased the crowd with snatches of Dolly Parton's "Jolene", then smoked it. His huge, brilliant, biting electric guitar sound, identifiable in one note, owned the Kulturni Centar, all the way out to the street. The band (organ player Larry Goldings, bassist Steve Swallow and drummer Bill Stewart) was tight.

The best concert was by Enrico Rava's new quartet, wherein he played flugelhorn exclusively. In the auditorium's favorable acoustics, his golden, round notes took a long time to decay. Rava's new guitar player, Francesco Diodati, is a badass, providing suggestive backgrounds and implicit, arcane harmonies (in keeping with the gestalt of a Rava band), or playing with a rawness and freedom that takes a Rava band into uncharted waters. Diodati admires Charlie Christian and The Edge. He has contemporized Rava while respecting his jazz roots. They played mostly tunes from their only album *Wild Dance* (ECM, 2015). On "Infant", Diodati took a solo of rasping, sublime skronk and

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TAMPERE

BY IVANA NG



Håkon Kornstad

Winter arrived early in Finland this year, but that didn't stop music lovers from gathering in Tampere, a major cultural hub in the south, to enjoy the 35th annual Tampere Jazz Happening (Nov. 3rd-6th). Year after year, TJH draws loyal audiences and international acclaim with its thoughtful curation and well-produced shows in intimate venues. Though the days became progressively more frigid, with snow showers on most evenings, it was nothing a strong cup of coffee (preferably spiked with Estonian rum) and a quick session in the sauna—two of Finland's finest pastimes—between sets couldn't remedy.

TJH kicked off with a free show at Klubi, the spacious nightclub inside the Old Customs House. In a genre that is heavily male-dominated, it was refreshing to see three projects led by women. The program, a showcase of Swedish talent, ranged from straight-ahead jazz to rock fusion to dream pop. Gothenburg-based pianist Naoko Sakata's trio (with bassist Alfred Lorinius and drummer John Birgenius) took some time to get into their groove, but once they got going, their improvisations soared effortlessly. Susanna Risberg, a Berklee-trained guitarist who, at age 24, has already won several jazz prizes, brought bluesy timbres and frenetic rock to the stage with bassist Ale William Sjöström and drummer Jonathan Lundberg. Nuaia (Sofie Norsling, vocals; Mika Forsling, electric guitar, mbira, handdrum and live electronics; Michala Østergaard-Nielsen, drums, percussion, vibraphonette) closed out the night with pop soundscapes from their latest album *Belong to the Moon*. While they were a bit over-reliant on vocal looping and electronic distortions, it did contribute effectively to an aesthetic of ethereal industrialism and Nordic mysticism.

As per tradition, the festival dedicated one stage—cozy ski-lodge-esque bar *Telakka*—to Finland's top contemporary artists. Friday night played host to the younger generation of Finnish talent, who are heavily influenced by American swing and rock'n'roll. Kaisa's Machine (bassist Kaisa Mäensivu, saxophonist Max Zenger, pianist Mikael Myrskog, drummer Jonatan Sarikoski) played energetic bebop that could have just easily wafted out of a hole-in-the-wall NYC bar. In a more cinematic thread, pianist Aki Rissanen's trio with bassist Antti Lötjönen and drummer Teppo Mäkyänen explored electronic minimalism and lyrical melancholy with pieces from their critically acclaimed album *Amorandum* (Edition Records, 2016). Rissanen also starred in bassist Lauri Porra's *Flyover Ensemble*, alongside guitarist Tuomo Dahlblom, trumpeter Kalevi Louhivuori, trombonist and percussionist Juho Viljanen and drummer Ville Pynssi, for a prog-rock set.

Guitarist Raoul Björkenheim and reed player

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ample space for individual expression. High points were Evans' muted circular breathed mutter, his duet on piccolo trumpet with Laubrock's soprano saxophone at the outset of the second piece, full of squeaks, swooshes and hyperfast interchange, and Taborn's eruption in tandem with Rainey during the same number. The only disadvantage of the seven-piece group was that it meant there was less of Laubrock the instrumentalist.

Taborn, a local favorite ever since his college years, also staged a short solo set. During the three spontaneous pieces he swerved from the meditative to the driven. He started with single notes, gradually increasing the intensity of the strike, before engaging an off-kilter staccato from which a rhythm emerged and then incrementally evolved. His final piece encapsulated his approach, opening as a reflective ballad but then, as the crystalline shimmering darkened, abruptly morphing into abstracted ragtime patterns, his right hand laying down repeated figures, his left pursuing a completely different tack.

Pianist Kris Davis, bassist John Hébert and drummer Tom Rainey pushed at the boundaries of the trio format. Although they followed charts, their actual influence seemed subliminal rather than overt, as they began from a place of unexpected trills, furtive scurries and haunting vibrations. Both tricky unisons and unfettered improv benefited from Rainey's maverick ingenuity. Davis veered between muscular Cecil Taylor-like ferocity and fluttering tremolos with minimalist variation. One of the four pieces was a John Zorn "Bagatelle" (Davis had been part of the ten-hour marathon in NYC a week previous) she made entirely her own. Their music was sophisticated yet visceral, like being punched with a silk glove.

Other notable performances came from French flutist Sylvaine Hélyary's Spring Roll, which mixed contemporary classical with chamber jazz. Sylvain Lemêtre's unconventional percussion gave the band a distinctive flavor, as did pianist Antonin Rayon's unobtrusive electronics while Hélyary's flute/voice combination on a piece by Kris Davis was a standout. It was the last date of their tour and it showed in practiced transitions and taut interplay. Also mid-tour and similarly slick, the Claudia Quintet navigated drummer John Hollenbeck's knotty arrangements and reveled in the nooks and crannies within the structures. Further evidence of Hollenbeck's skills came in his scores for the UoM Jazz Ensemble on the last evening, "Flock", inspired by wild geese in Scotland, being particularly memorable. Another well-oiled machine, Conference Call pursued their inside/outside track with vigor, showcasing particularly intense and rewarding exchange between pianist Michael Jeffrey Stevens and reed player Gebhard Ullmann.

Vocalist Andrea Wolper, bassist Ken Filiano, drummer Michael TA Thompson, with guest Vinny Golia on an assortment of reeds, gave a moving and dynamic tribute to recently deceased pianist Connie Crothers, who had been scheduled to appear with them. Bassist William Parker's quartet closed out the Friday evening with the leader in spirited rhythmic communion with drummer Hamid Drake, their ever-changing grooves drawing heated contributions from alto saxophonist Rob Brown and the wonderful Cooper-Moore on piano. Violinist Jason Kao Hwang's Burning Bridge premiered an intriguingly multifaceted new composition, "Blood", which brought forth thrilling outings from cornet player Taylor Ho Bynum, trombonist Reut Regev and the leader himself.

It might be hard to top such a lineup next year, but there's no doubt that if you want to hear accomplished music in an intimate space with excellent sound in the company of a respectful crowd, Edgfest is the place to be.

For more information, visit kerrytownconcerthouse.com

quiet keenings. Gabriele Evangelista and Enrico Morello are, respectively, the best young bassist and drummer in Italy. This quartet is four distinct creative voices, whose collective volatility is always contoured into finished form. There is no one like them in America.

Alto saxophonist Lee Konitz played with the Big Band RTS (Radio/Television Serbia). Viewed objectively, it was a train wreck. Konitz was sometimes out of tune and often missed his entry and exit cues. His solos were discombobulated. But only someone with a heart of stone could view a performance by Konitz, at 89, objectively. He is still the Pied Piper. He still has that cool, luminous, irresistible alto saxophone sound. "Body and Soul" was affecting but "Lover Man" was something outside of time, so moving precisely because it was so halting and fragmentary. Anytime you hear a great jazz musician, you can never assume you will hear him (or her) again. The people in Pančevo could not assume they would hear Konitz play "Lover Man" again. There were not many entirely dry eyes in that house.

The last show of the festival was by the James Carter Organ Trio. With Carter's first shattering tenor saxophone honk, he set the tone for the evening. A Carter concert is a celebration of the power and exhilaration of music. His chops on three saxophones (tenor, alto, soprano) was so outrageous it made you grin. They say that speed kills, but for Carter, speed is ecstasy. He does not know how to play one line at a time. Every idea is engulfed by myriad variants, in torrential onslaughts. Gerard Gibbs plays ferocious, musical organ and can dance sitting down. Drummer Alex White functions as the voice of reason in this band. An entire program of Django Reinhardt tunes was a bold decision. It worked. Reinhardt's sweetly piercing melodies ("Pour Que Ma Vie Demeure", "Impromptu") were always there, like tensions pulling Carter back from the brink. His mastery of his saxophones enables him to play outside their limits. He makes music from ultra-high-frequency squeals and clicks and jackhammer blasts. The encore was "Nuages". On tenor saxophone, he laid it to waste. Sometimes Carter goes overboard with his saxophone tricks. You wish he would let a beautiful song come through as itself, with minimal interference. But going overboard is the point. He indulges in wild extravagance because he can, because he believes the purpose of virtuosity is to spread joy. He ended the Pančevo festival on a triumphant crescendo, drenched in sweat.

For more information, visit kulturnicentarpancevo.rs

Juhani Aaltonen represented the old vanguard of Finnish avant garde jazz on Saturday night. Longtime associates of the late drummer Edward Vesala, the two performed together in duo for the first time ever in an intimate and relaxed improvised session. Björkenheim's band Krakatau, active since the late '80s, also performed twice during the festival. In one show, they collaborated with Senegalese percussionists (Yamar Thiam on tama; Libasse Sall, Ousseynou M'baye and Pape Sarr on sabar), whose buoyant West African rhythms were a refreshing foil to the band's high-octane rock melodies.

This year's American headliners were a mixed bag. The inimitable saxophonist Charles Lloyd and his quartet (pianist Gerald Clayton, bassist Reuben Rogers and drummer Kendrick Scott) was one of the highlights. Lloyd's distinct soul and emotionally powerful arrangements were on full display, especially in "La Llorona", Lloyd's interpretation of a Mexican ranchera. Clayton brought a distinctive poignancy to the piece with his measured tempo and heart-

wrenching mezzo-piano. On Friday evening, James Carter Organ Trio's late-night party was just the right pick-me-up to keep the audience dancing late into the night. Carter's full-bodied range and organ player Gerard Gibbs' gospel-inspired solos were relentless against young drummer Alex White's relaxed beats.

In comparison, saxophonist Donny McCaslin's quartet and Aziza, a new project from bassist Dave Holland, saxophonist Chris Potter, drummer Eric Harland and guitarist Lionel Loueke, were underwhelming. McCaslin's group (keyboardist Jason Lindner, bassist Jonathan Maron and drummer Zach Danziger) played David Bowie covers and originals from the recent *Beyond Now*, influenced by McCaslin's experience with Bowie on his swan-song album *Blackstar*. Though there were moments where the band really swung, most pieces were missing an essential oomph. Similarly, Aziza's allstars were technically sound but ultimately their music felt too cerebral.

The European headliners made a much stronger impression, presenting a wide spectrum of projects ranging from meditative free jazz ensembles and a large-scale experimental orchestra to an opera-jazz mashup. French pianist Eve Risser debuted her largest ensemble yet, the 11-strong White Desert Orchestra. Taking full advantage of the rich instrumentation, Risser pushed the boundaries of prepared piano and painted industrial sound palettes with electronics (Céline Grangey) and a talented woodwind section (Silke Eberhard on alto saxophone, clarinet and bass clarinet; Benjamin Dousteysier on tenor and baritone; and Sara Schoenbeck on bassoon). Charismatic 30-year-old Norwegian saxophonist Marius Nestet soared to new heights with his quintet (drummer Anton Eger, bassist Phil Donkin, vibraphone and marimba player Jim Hart, pianist Ivo Neame), especially with the addition of the expressive cellist Svante Henryson. The latter's pizzicato was achingly soulful while Neame's virtuosic command of the grand piano shone through in solos throughout the show. In the same meditative vein, The Necks, from Australia, celebrated their 30th anniversary—and their triumphant return to TJH after 15 years—doing what they do best: long-form free improvisation. The trio (pianist Chris Abrahams, bassist Lloyd Swanton and drummer Tony Buck) explored an aural palette of tribal percussion and organic nature tones that kept the audience in a spiritual trance for almost an hour.

Tenor Battle, the brainchild of Norwegian tenor saxophonist Håkon Kornstad, was hands-down the most interesting genre-bender. Exploring his newfound passion for opera, Kornstad added new layers to Neapolitan arias and Straussian operas with his powerful tenor voice and jazz-influenced instrumentation (Sigbjørn Apeland on harmonium, Lars Henrik Johansen on harpsichord and cimbalom, Mats Eilertsen on bass and Øyvind Skarbø on drums).

Sly & Robbie Meet Nils Petter Molvaer, a fusion of Jamaican reggae and Nordic jazz, seemed promising, but was ultimately underwhelming. Drummer Sly Dunbar and bassist Robbie Shakespeare had a strong grasp on the rhythm section, gracefully moving the band toward Jamaican dancehall beats and reggae rhythms, but there wasn't much chemistry with Molvaer's trio (Molvaer on trumpet, Eivind Aarset on guitar and Vladislav Delay on keyboards).

One of the festival's greatest strengths is that it showcases the full spectrum of jazz' range and reach. What better way to drive that point home than to conclude the four-day festival with a multi-faceted Danish electronic quartet. Kalaha (drummer Emil De Waal, guitarist Niclas Knudsen, electronic DJ Spejderrobot, synths and effects artists Rumpistol) was a breath of fresh air after an afternoon of opera and jazz fusion, getting the audience up and dancing with their part-industrial jazz, part-electronic dance set.

For more information, visit tamperemusicfestivals.fi/jazz