

# THE NORWEGIAN JAZZ SCENE

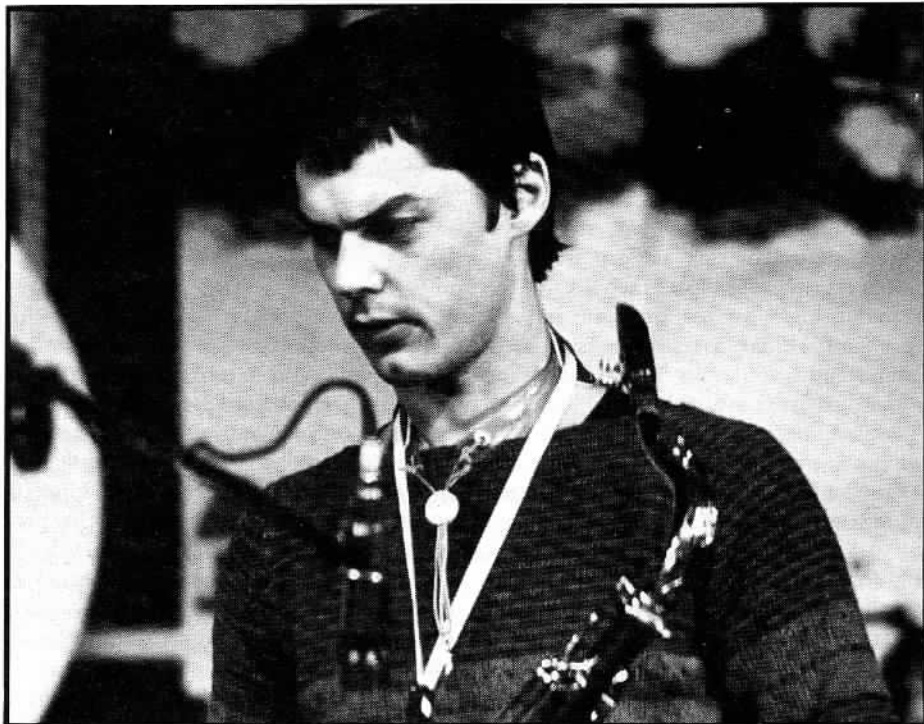
Where does one begin when given the opportunity to discuss jazz in Norway? There is no one set answer, but by posing this very question, we open up ourselves to a vast world inhabited with wonderful music, phenomenal musicians, and a variety of support networks that bring into focus many broader cultural issues.

In general, to an outsider looking in, the state of the Norwegian jazz scene might seem somewhat difficult to immediately grasp, with its array of diverse groups that exist on both musical and bureaucratic levels. At first, it is hard to know what to make of the Norwegian Jazz Federation, the Union of Norwegian Jazz Musicians, the Jazz Archives, Music Distribution Ltd., and the numerous jazz societies, which are just some of the organizations devoted to keeping the music alive in Norway. In time, though, one begins to see how these apparently disparate agencies, in cooperation with the musicians themselves, seem to come together to create a viable national scene, and a fairly healthy one at that. Visitors need only take note of the proliferation of jazz festivals, and the ever-growing number of recorded musical groups, to confirm to themselves that Norway, with its effective infrastructure, is truly one of the most vital centres for jazz in the world.

The very thought of this country, though, as a ferment for creative composition and performance might seem a bit odd to some readers. How can a nation so removed from the centres of European activity wield any influence on a world level? To make matters worse, Norwegians are in the peculiar (and familiar) position of being influenced by many American ways, while yet at the same time, continually striving to cultivate their own centuries-old folk forms.

This problem is not a new dichotomy, but *is* one that sheds light on the relative strength of the Norwegian jazz scene. Although the tendency to keep an open ear to the American jazz tradition is common among musicians, it is perhaps the desire to create a unique national culture, that accounts for the drive to promote their own music on a national level.

Indeed, in a country as topographically varied (and regionally isolated) as



Norway, jazz is one of the few things perceived to link the physically diverse country together, a common cultural tie between Bodo in the north and Stavanger in the south. And this is perhaps why the government has begun to develop an ongoing interest in helping to nurture such a national scene. Any number of musical groups receive support from the government in order that they may present their work. In turn, organizations like the Norwegian Jazz Federation (N.J.F.) and the Union of Norwegian Jazz Musicians (U.N.J.M.) act as official agencies on behalf of the various jazz clubs and musicians in Norway. (Since both make interesting points of discussion, we will return to them shortly).

Although such government support is a relatively recent development in Norway, the ongoing performance of jazz music most certainly is not! In fact, jazz has existed here in some form since the early years of this century. From about 1920 on, several Norwegian towns boasted their own jazz band, which was more often than not oriented towards playing a type of orchestral dance music. One of the most popular groups of the twenties was a jazz orchestra named **Sixpence**.

This scene continued to grow and mature as American records made their way into Norway via the Oslo-New York

intercontinental steamers; in turn, more and more musicians became interested in trying their hand at this new music. One of these newly formed groups in the 1930s, a quartet dubbed the **Funny Boys**, did several successful tours in Central Europe. At the same time, the first jazz societies saw the light of day, and the interest for jazz rapidly spread among the general public, with an increased demand for concert presentations, and a number of restaurants opening up to the music.

Meanwhile a new generation of musicians was making its presence felt, with trumpeter **Rowland Greenburg** and guitarist **Robert Normann** being among the foremost figures. The latter was a key member of **String Swing**, one of the most prominent pre-war orchestras, well represented on a number of fine recordings. Jazz had obviously hit Norway in a big way.

Unfortunately, any further activity came to an abrupt halt as the Second World War and its accompanying devastation hit the European continent. All contacts with outside innovations were subsequently severed, and the music, when it was played, was illegal, or at least subject to German censorship. The post-war period (a time of rebuilding) also proved to be a slow time for jazz: few recordings were produced, and new

developments on the U.S. scene only trickled into Norway. Many up and coming, talented musicians like tenor saxophonist **Bjarne Nerem** were compelled to move elsewhere in order to find an outlet for their music.

Fortunately by the early 1950s, once the Norwegian economy had stabilized, another period of rich activity was well underway. Groups like the **Big Chief Jazzband**, and younger musicians including pianist **Einar Iversen**, bassist **Erik Amundsen**, saxophonist **Bjorn Johansen**, as well as trombonist **Frode Thingnaes** all contributed to a general resurgence of jazz music on all levels.

On the club scene, in Oslo the **Metro-pol Jazzhouse** opened its doors to a music policy six nights a week, with several visiting foreign players brought in as well. By all counts, jazz activity in Norway had struck an optimistic note.

The year of 1953, though, proved to be most important insofar as the future of Norwegian jazz is concerned. During the course of that year, representatives of the independent jazz associations around the country met to form the **Norwegian Jazz Federation**, a coalition devoted to organizing concert and club activities in twenty-five different towns and cities. The Federation is also responsible for serving the various jazz societies and amateur big bands, as well as setting up tours and seminars. In addition, the N.J.F. has published its own periodical (*Jazznyt*) since 1959, and has also established an independent record company, **ODIN**. Significantly, the N.J.F. is also very much interested in cooperation with other countries on the basis of an exchange principle whereby Norwegian musicians are given the opportunity to tour abroad, while foreign musicians are given the opportunity to work in Norway.

Over the years, the N.J.F. has had its share of problems, but a constant beacon through certain hard times has been the **Molde jazz festival**, inaugurated in 1961. Now in its 27th continuous year, it ranks as one of the world's oldest jazz festivals. (Numerous other towns have looked to the success of the Molde event so that currently, festivals also abound in Bergen, Voss, Harstaad, Arendel, Konsberg, Trondheim, and Oslo).

At the same time, a number of Norwegian jazz musicians began to record

music for issue on lp — the first production being a compilation from 1963, "**Metro-pol Jazz**." After this release, vocalist **Karin Krog** made her first two albums in 1964 and 1966; in turn, a joint production effort in 1967 resulted in the recording of a twenty-year old, very promising saxophonist, **Jan Garbarek**. ("Til Vigdis," by the way, is a genuine collector's item — only 500 copies issued!)

One good thing that came out of the otherwise deteriorating musical situation of the mid and late sixties (a lack of recording opportunities due to the emphasis on rock music) was the growing conviction among artists and administrators that jazz would need some kind of government support in order to be presented properly. It wasn't until 1970, though, that **Karin Krog** and **Jan Garbarek** individually received official grants — the first jazz musicians ever to garner such recognition in Norway.

The volunteer-based jazz organizations, including the N.J.F., in turn continued to lobby throughout the seventies for such similar aid. Finally, in 1978, public funding reached a modest enough level to allow for a certain "professionalizing" of the N.J.F.: the establishment of an office and the hiring of a full-time president/secretary. In addition, the number of jazz societies and the quality of jazz musicians in Norway had reached an all-time high, with international recognition to follow. Names like **Karin Krog**, **Jan Garbarek**, **Terje Rypdal**, **Arild Andersen** and **Jon Christensen** soon became important figures in the jazz world, and have kept that position ever since, followed by a steady flow of younger musicians.

In 1979, a new organization saw the light of day, the **Union of Norwegian Jazz Musicians**. As the name implies, the U.N.J.M. is geared towards taking care of the interests of the musicians, though not in the form or authority of a union (the actual negotiation of fees is left to the **Musicians' Union**). The main task of the U.N.J.M. has been to apply for and direct government funds towards subsidizing tours for Norwegian groups, funding instructors for seminars, publishing information on Norwegian jazz musicians, and aiding the various individual jazz societies. In other words, the U.N.J.M. works on the premise of putting its money literally to work for the members,

namely jazz musicians.

Given a solid foundation of sixty years, one might say, then, that jazz came of age in Norway during the 1980s. The early years of this decade witnessed a tremendous amount of recording activity compared to previous years, mostly due to the fine efforts of a few newly organized labels founded to counter the poor exposure and distribution given Norwegian musicians by international recording companies.

**ODIN**, an independent production company (and publishing firm) managed and administered through the **Norwegian Jazz Federation**, was the first of these labels to become established, in May 1981. To date, **ODIN** has issued twenty-two recordings, the most recent of which is an adventurous big band recording by a group called **Oslo 13**. Generally the mandate of the company has been to record groups playing in a more modern idiom, an area in which there was a lack of recording opportunities for Norwegian musicians. Nonetheless, a survey of the **ODIN** catalogue shows that a great variety of music has been recorded, from the bebop-oriented **Bjorn Johansen** quartet to the frenetic and often humorous **AHA!**

In the wake of **ODIN**, guitarist **Jon Larsen** established the company **Hot Club Records**. This label was originally intended for issuing records by his Django-inspired "**Hot Club de Norvege**" group and related trad acts, but over the first six years of operation, the catalogue has grown to over thirty titles, covering virtually every stylistic aspect of jazz.

Several other idealistic companies have also been established on a smaller scale, such as **Gemini** (swing and bop) and **Herman** records (primarily traditional jazz). In addition, the **Norwegian Music Distribution Ltd. (N.M.D.)** was set up in 1984 by a number of different record companies (along with financial support from the **Norwegian Cultural Council**) in order to distribute Norwegian records nationally and internationally, and to import music for the Norwegian market.

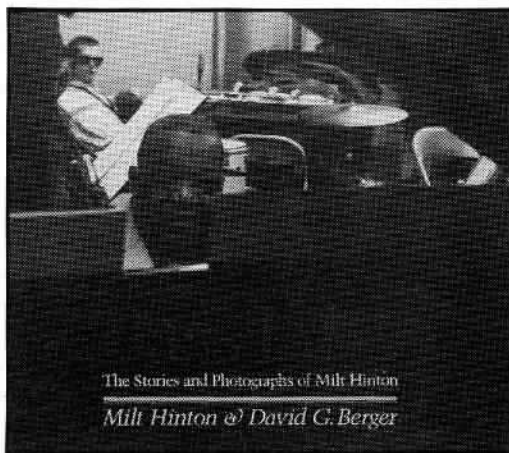
By all counts, then, between diverse musics and official support for those musics, the jazz scene in Norway looks quite impressive to an outsider. One is hard pressed to find a country of comparable size and physical makeup with such a highly developed infrastructure for

the marketing of its own music.

In fact, if last summer was any indication, things continue to be very much on track as far as the Norwegian jazz scene is concerned. During the month of June I was privileged to attend a three-day presentation in Bodo of some of the best Norwegian groups, held under the auspices of the Norwegian Jazz Federation, at lib Jazz Club, and the Norwegian Cultural Council. Although it is hard to centre out any one individual, when pressed to come up with standouts, one might cite the passionate music of **Masquelero**, or the swinging quartet of tenorman **Bjorn Johansen**. On the other hand, artists such as pianist/composer **Jon Blake** or **Eiven One Pedersen** (keyboards) and **Erik Balke** (reeds) should not go without mention. (J. Balke rehearsed and presented an ambitious commissioned work for seven percussionists and jazz ensemble, while Pedersen and E. Balke stretched several musical boundaries to their respective limits in a cross-cultural romp through a program of whimsical and challenging original compositions. Of course, I've neglected to mention many others, but for behind the scenes work, ad lib Jazz Club organizer **Leif-Erik Larsen** deserves a medal for his infinite patience and perseverance. Needless to say, my small taste of the Norwegian musical fabric left me wanting much more.

What emerges for the jazz fan and cultural observer, then, is a picture of a country from which one could obtain much musical and organizational knowledge, a country that has the potential to become one of the world's most important musical centres as we enter the 1990s.

The author of this article is indebted to the Norwegian Jazz Federation for the historical information contained within its booklet on the Norwegian Jazz Scene. For readers wishing to obtain information regarding catalogues/records, contact: Music Distribution Ltd., Sandakervien 76, Bostboks 4379, Torshov N-0402, Oslo 4, Norway. General information on the Norwegian jazz scene can be obtained from: The Norwegian Jazz Federation, Toftesgate 69, N-0552, Oslo 5, Norway. Some Norwegian records are available from the Jazz & Blues Record Centre, 66 Dundas Street East, Toronto, Ont. M5B 1C7 Canada (416) 593-0269.



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