

JAZZKAAR

BY ANNIE MURNIGHAN



Kadri Voorand

Tallinn, Estonia's Jazzkaar festival celebrated its 30th anniversary (Apr. 19th-28th) with a program of over 80 concerts and nearly 180 events spread out across the city and beyond, including special happenings in nearby towns. It almost feels inadequate to refer to the ten-day affair as a music festival; beyond a remarkably diverse array of musical acts, Jazzkaar also included numerous talks and exhibitions celebrating the city's commitment to its thriving arts scene.

The festival is just one example of Estonia's emphasis on promoting the arts in the wake of its 1991 independence from the Soviet Union, which marked the end of over 50 years of artistic and cultural oppression. Walking the streets of Tallinn today, one will find posters for festivals, concerts and art exhibitions lining the cobbled walls of the medieval city and the first stacks on display at Tallinn's three largest record stores are all dedicated to local artists.

One Estonian artist whose (well-deserved) hype preceded her is Kadri Voorand, who performed in duo with bassist Mihkel Mälgand multiple times throughout this correspondent's five-day visit. The first was one in a series of "home concerts", in which small groups of lucky listeners were invited to take off their shoes and witness intimate performances by similarly sock-clad musicians in the homes of local families. On Sunday night, as the soft light of the sunset cast a warm glow on the wide-open living room, Voorand and Mälgand created massive polyphonic landscapes that rippled and pulsed throughout the space. Voorand, mainly a vocalist, also spontaneously switched between various instruments (including violin, piano, glockenspiel and mbira) with the assistance of a deftly handled looping pedal. Mälgand provided the perfect backbone on upright bass and bass guitar, responding instinctively to Voorand's theatrical vocal dynamics and balancing her whimsical spoken word interludes, which one audience member aptly compared to the work of Laurie Anderson.

Voorand was one of many artists to challenge the limits of jazz as it is traditionally defined. However, in the festival's designated "Experimental Music Night", the performances varied, both in quality and in how each performer defined the vague descriptor. Saxophonist Peter Brötzmann was up first, performing in duo with Heather Leigh on pedal steel guitar with effects. As Leigh created distorted, almost folksy reverb-drenched drones, Brötzmann ripped out frantic, endlessly captivating lines with his characteristically harsh and robust tone. Though they often appeared to exist within separate sonic landscapes, the magic of their collaboration emerged when their disparate styles suddenly overlapped in mystifying ways.

Swedish vocalist Sofia Jernberg began by

alternating between soulful melodies and uncanny timbral utterances pushing the limits of the human voice. A palpable silence fell over the audience as the crowd strained to hear each and every fascinating sonic detail hidden within her rasping, squeaking, high-pitched and guttural exhalations.

Somewhat less successful was Estonian saxophonist Maria Faust with bassist Tim Dahl and drummer Weasel Walter. The performance struggled to maintain momentum after sound issues early on; a shame, given the group's riveting mixture of jazz, noise rock and post-punk. A comparable fusion of styles came later in the festival from New York electronic noise rockers paris_monster. Geoff Kraly (bass and electronics) and Josh Dion (drums, electronics and vocals) set the mood with swirling electronic sequences before incorporating distorted bass riffs and stuttering rock rhythms.

American vocalist Somi presented a collection of songs from her album *Petit Afrique* to a packed crowd on the Vaba Lava stage, conveying a sense of intimacy through her deep personal connection to the material, drawing directly from her own experiences to send soulful, mesmerizing messages on race and identity. Her powerful, mutable jazz vocals shifted from a rich tenor to a delicate vibrato to deliver highlights such as her silky smooth ode to Harlem and an upbeat, funky rallying cry against gentrification.

Another strong set from a local artist came with pianist Kirke Karja and The Klingons, comprised of reed player Liudas Mockūnas, saxophonist Pierre Lapprand, bass player Etienne Renard and drummer Hans Kurvits. The group delivered serious music with no interest in playing it safe. Though often played with dissonance, Karja's ideas flowed out in a mesmerizing and fluid stream of consciousness set to a driving beat anchoring the unsettling and unsettled atonal melodies. Though at times the horn solos tested the audience's patience, the group's zeal was infectious, as their mysterious and meandering tunes unexpectedly unfolded to reveal a strange, lyrical grace.

Hungarian violinist Félix Lajkó on the Vaba Lava stage held nothing back, shredding out expressive folk lines accompanied by Attila Sidoo's nylon-string guitar strumming and József Horváth's jazzy upright bass. Lajkó kept the momentum going with aplomb, dramatic dynamic shifts displaying the group's impeccable timing and synchronicity.

Appearing in Estonia for the first time was the Joshua Redman Trio, who played originals as well as pieces like Richard Rodgers-Oscar Hammerstein's "Surrey with the Fringe On Top" and Oscar Pettiford's "Tricotism". The saxophonist, bassist Reuben Rogers and drummer Gregory Hutchinson kept it light and cool, with impeccable timing and musical sensitivity. As Rogers held down smooth harmonic lines and Hutchinson wowed with a rhythmic finesse, Redman soared. The group was so in sync even the most simple of melodies were elevated to a level of mastery.

The America-centric evening continued as DC-bred rapper Oddisee took to the Vaba Lava stage, backed by his five-piece band Good Compny. The floor was opened up to a packed standing room crowd as soulful keyboard harmonies, bright electric guitar and dramatic, shimmering drums built up into a tight groove. The set was one of the most lively this correspondent saw all week.

By the end of the week, after an inevitably taxing run of three to four shows per night, the highlights shone clearly from among the less memorable. As this correspondent's trip came to a close, there was a moment of reflection on one of the first shows of the week—a riveting offering from the German pianist Martin Kohlstedt. Beyond his technical capability, it was the curiosity apparent in his playing that rendered the performance so memorable, reflecting the general mood of the week's program. ❖

For more information, visit jazzkaar.ee



VINCENT HERRING PRESENTS

New York Japanese Jazz Festival

June 25 - 27, 2019

SMOKE Jazz Club

2751 Broadway, New York, NY

Tuesday, June 25

7:00 pm

Akiko Tsuruga Quartet feat.

Fukushi Tainaka (ds)

9:00 pm

Takahiro Izumikawa

Quartet feat. Vincent

Herring (as)

10:30 pm

Tomoaki Baba Quartet

Wednesday, June 26

7:00 pm

Tadataka Unno Trio

9:00 pm

Miki Hayama Quintet

feat. Mark Shim

10:30 pm

Rina Yamazaki Trio

Thursday, June 27

7:00 pm

Migiwa Miyajima Sextet

9:00 pm

Erena Terakubo & Nana

Quintet feat. Louis Hayes (ds)

& David Kikoski (p)

10:30 pm

The Maguire Twins Quartet

feat. Steve Nelson (vib) &

Benito Gonzalez (p)

For more info:

newyorkjapanesejazzfest.com