

Dictated dichotomies: Locating Scandinavian jazz

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ABSTRACT

Scandinavian jazz is arguably the most established appropriation of the genre outside the United States, with a uniquely defined cultural identity stretching back to the early 1970s. The region's repurposing of an acculturated American music has resulted in the imagining of a canon that exists independently to, yet inextricably intertwined with, the music's American narrative.

Where the imagining of the Nordic jazz canon has afforded a supra-American point of difference, it has also placed demands on what the listening public and the music's mediators have come to expect from Scandinavian musicians.

This paper will examine pressures brought to bear on the jazz musician through the prism of current jazz practise in Scandinavia. The Scandinavian experience represents a unique and interesting point of focus at a time when the region's cultural exports are enjoying unprecedented worldwide interest and reception in the fields of literature (Stig Larsson, Henning Mankell, Sjövall & Walöö, Jo Nesbø et al), film (Von Trier, Dogme) and television (Borgen, Forbrydelsen, Broen/Bron).

Taken together, such distinctive takes on the fields of creative expression have given rise to an imagining of "Nordicness" that dovetails with perceptions of Scandinavia's utopian ideals and utilitarian design sensibilities.

Within this highly stylised cultural landscape, Scandinavian jazz musicians often find themselves caught between distinct and heavily policed dichotomies. These will be discussed relative to: the canon – American vs. Nordic; education – Berklee vs. Trondheim Conservatoire; repertoire – standards vs. originals; aesthetics – authenticity vs. innovation; social function – "Happy Jazz" vs. serious; text and lyrics – English vs. mother tongue; performance – composition vs. improvisation; stylistics – acoustic vs. electronic; value chain – commercial vs. artistic; and in national identities – sovereign vs. Scandinavian.

Within these binaries, a multifaceted Scandinavian jazz scene will be discovered that challenges and explodes its all-too-often essentialised depictions.

The global spread of jazz, since the early years of the last century, has given rise to vigorous debate over both the authenticity of its product and the identity of its makers. A music that is widely accepted as having been forged in the cosmopolitan crucible of turn of the 20th Century North America has become a distinctive cultural feature in our local cultural landscapes, wherever we might call 'home'. As musicians and scholars we are all caught between paying our dues to the fathers of jazz while, at the same time, locating the genre within our own contextual frameworks.

How we represent our individualised relationships to jazz, whether to our audiences or our peers has, to my mind at least, become increasingly complex. Jazz is, after all, in a continual state of flux subject to, or responding to, the diverse conditions under which it is made. Stylistically, jazz is an ever-broadening church, which nonetheless has deep roots in a simpler, pre-digital age. Our interaction has become very differently mediated in modern times through seismic changes within the music industry and resultant shifts to the nature of cultural gatekeeping and dissemination on the Internet.

It is within this context that we are now charged with balancing the "facts" about jazz with our own experiences and beliefs. Because jazz is more than its history: it is an evolving language capable of communicating the gamut of lived experience and aspiration.

Great lengths have been gone to over the past 30 years to delineate jazz from Scandinavia as different in style, and to some even genre, from its erstwhile American roots. Musicologists point to the absence of traditionally conceived 'swing feel', the simplification of the harmonic and melodic language of the American jazz canon, use of space and the inclusion of indigenous folk and classical music as being central to the defining tenets of the Nordic appropriation of jazz. Aesthetically, Nordic Tone is purported to conjure up the imagery of mountaintops, fjords, snowfields and glaciers, while musically mirroring the narratives of Norse mythology and sagas.

To illustrate my point, here are some examples of how Nordic Tone is described by various pundits:

“Garbarek’s music projects the stark imagery of nature near the Northern Lights.”

(Stuart Nicholson, Jazz Times, 2000)

“... whispers glitter like frosty breath over [Arild] Andersen’s rapidly ascending bass and percussion sparkles like unexpected snow”

(Colin Buttmer, Jazzwise, 2005)

“Folk melodies nestle alongside classical structures, the whole thing imbued with a tangible sense of Nordic melancholia.”

(Ian Mann reviewing Espen Eriksen Trio “You Had Me at Goodbye”, 2010)

“Dark and lyrical, characterized by patience and wide-open spaces, this style of jazz has been linked to the lonely grandeur of Scandinavia’s fjords and mountains so many times that the cliché barely functions anymore.”

Peter Margasak (2014) Previewing Tord Gustavsen Quartet in Chicago

As can be clearly observed from Margasak’s admission of the cliché, there are limits to the usefulness of employing the stereotypical range of definers when talking about jazz from Scandinavia.

What most critics mean by “Nordic Tone” (and even “Scandinavian Jazz”) is, in fact, jazz from Norway. Rarely are Danish or Swedish musicians included in this narrative. I particularly enjoy Margasak’s (I’m assuming tongue-in-cheek) reference to “Scandinavia’s fjords and mountains” – if you go looking for these in bicycle-friendly Denmark you’ll be largely disappointed.

So perhaps a good place to start unpicking the problems inherent to the Nordic moniker is by seeking geographical and etymological meanings?

The very term “Nordic” is, in my mind at least, uncomfortably loaded. It conjures historical ideas of a Nordic master race, ideas that contributed to early 20th Century thinking on eugenics, Social Darwinism and “racial hygiene”. It gave its name to the Nordic League – a (happily short-lived) 1930s UK far-right organisation.

In its subsequent makeover the term has, of course, come to engender something quite different: political and social utopia, gender and pay equality,

enlightened arts funding, progressive child-care and health policies, eco-sustainability and forward thinking education systems. Indeed, in the current Scottish Independence debate (2014), the Nordic countries are put forward as exemplars of what an Independent Scotland could aspire to. Anecdotally, however, many friends in the Nordic countries describe a rather more nuanced and somewhat less rosy reality when discussing the rise of the right wing and increasing tensions surrounding immigration in their home countries.

The Nordic Council, which describes itself “as an inter-parliamentary forum for cooperation amongst its member states”, is unambiguous about countries included under the Nordic banner: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. That said, others include the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Nordic concept.

Scandinavia comprises the “three brothers” Norway, Sweden and Denmark, although the rest of the world likes to include Finland also – In fact many Danes that I have talked to aren’t themselves 100% sure that Finland is not included. The combined history of the Scandinavian countries is almost as complex and loaded as that of the countries of the UK, although they have arguably reached a more fruitful collaborative understanding.

The world perceives Scandinavia through its cultural heritage as much as its geographical scenery. As well as its enduring Viking past, more recent cultural “highlights” include the National Romanticism of composers Edvard Grieg (ironically a self-styled cosmopolitan) and Johan Svendsen; the Expressionism of painter Edvard Munch and playwright Henrik Ibsen; the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard; the Arts and Crafts Movement painter Carl Larsson; the children’s fiction writing of Astrid Lindgren, Selma Lagerlöf, Hans Christian Andersen and Tove Jansson ... (oh, hold on, she’s Finnish); and, in the past few years, the Procedural Crime Fiction and “Nordic Noir” of Sjöwall and Wahlöö, Henning Mankel, Stig Larsson and TV series such as *Forbrydelsen* (The Killing) and *Broen* (The Bridge). Oh, and we should not forget the iconic flat-pack world of IKEA and LEGO’s building blocks.

My point is, that from such (let's face it, often limited) combinations of geographic and cultural 'knowledge' we come up with things like when this describing jazz from the region:

"Spacy, atmospheric music ... cinematic, minimalist, Nordic, ECM cool"

Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival brochure describing Haftor Medbøe Group, 2014

So, is there really such a thing as Nordic Tone, or Scandinavian jazz. I would argue not (really). There is doubtlessly jazz created by musicians that inhabit these regions but unless overtly drawing on folk culture (as in the case of Garbarek and a handful of others) greater influence is drawn from personal culture and that of the wider world. When I speak with Nordic and Scandinavian colleagues, they communicate a widespread sense of aggrievement in being placed within a cultural framework not of their own making. Many feel damned by the marketing success of an aesthetic ideal as linked to the ECM label and the ease with which promoters and pundits buy into Nordic stereotyping.

One musician said: "You think I draw influence from mountains and fjords? I'm a jazz musician! So I'm more likely to find inspiration in the studio or in a bar than out in nature – you can tell by how pale my skin is." Most musicians maintain that, in this interconnected world that we now inhabit, their inspiration has, for many years now, been drawn from global sources rather than local. Jazz musicians from Scandinavia, and indeed more generally, often cite such influences as being drawn as much from popular music and the indigenous musics of other ethnicities as from the North American jazz canon or their own folk and classical traditions.

In the absence of a definitive Nordic tone, why then is jazz from the North so visibly on the map?

In the case of Norway there are a number of important factors behind its musicians' less restrained attitudes to jazz and their being able to present work on national and international stages:

Firstly, the scale of the country's arts funding – looked on with envy by many around the world and made possible by a sovereign wealth fund built on canny and forward thinking exploitation of oil revenues.

Arts funding stood at €1.2 billion in 2012 with the aim of a further increase of €100 million over the following two years to reach the goal of 1% of total government spending being ring-fenced for the arts. By way of contrast, government funding for the arts in England (with a population some 10 times that of Norway) decreased from £472m in 2012/13 to £451m in 2014/15, within a climate of ever-shrinking Regional Government coffers and an increasing reliance on National Lottery funding and private benefaction.

The open-mindedness of Norway's funding bodies is illustrated by a quote from former Music Information Centre director, Kristin Danielsen:

"A lot of people say that you can forget about getting funding if you're not doing something crazy," Danielsen says. "You know, if you do something experimental and you live up north, you're sort of home free for life, because you're so 'correct.' Whereas standard repertoire played in the traditional way — the sort of thing you can see all over America all the time — if we try to do that in Norway, it's like, 'Why should we do that? There's enough of that.'"

Secondly, support for Norwegian jazz musicians and their industry: Norway has since 1953 had a member and interest group organization for the country's jazz community, working to promote the profile of jazz on a cultural-political and artistic footing through the Norsk Jazzforum (Norwegian Jazz Forum).

Performance opportunities at home are, at least when you consider the country's population of just over 5 million, enviable. Norway boasts 400 music festivals of which 20 cater specifically to jazz audiences and a cultural engagement policy that spreads culture beyond the city limits and into the provinces. Touring subsidies can be applied for through Stikk.no and Norwegian Jazz Launch and Music Norway describes itself as the "Norwegian music industry's new export facilitator and promotional organisation."

Kristiansand's Punkt remix festival (in which live concerts are remixed in real-

time) is a good example of innovative programming in Norway. As Jan Bang describes:

"I think it's good that we as musicians improvise with electronics. It puts you in a situation that you're not necessarily comfortable with. It's good for creativity. And you could always question people working with jazz, 'How much is actually improvised anyway, or how many licks have you stolen from other people, being it Miles Davis or John Coltrane?' So this is a new way of working with improvised music."

Thirdly, education: The Jazz programme within the Music Conservatory at NTU in Trondheim was established already in 1979 and, in their own words, their “graduation list reads like a who’s-who of Norwegian jazz musicians”, from pianist Tord Gustavsen to the band Supersilent. The programme’s pedagogical ethos is distinctly different to the more traditional curricula offered by most American and European HE courses in jazz. Perhaps this ethos is best described by one of its alumni, guitarist Stian Westerhus:

"I basically made my own curriculum for what I wanted to do," says Westerhus, who's won some of Norwegian jazz's most coveted awards since earning his master's degree at Trondheim in 2005. "I think the freedom of not being taught aesthetics, in combination with being in a tiny environment with some of Norway's most talented young musicians, was for me a near-perfect bubble to enter for two years. It taught me to trust my own music — and the value of hard work."

And by Programme director Erling Aksdal who describes his teaching philosophy as reflecting the:

"highly egalitarian culture in Norway where authority of any kind is always questioned and people's general sense of self-value is high."

To wrap up, Norwegian jazz is more than “fjell” (mountains), fjords and folklore and characterised better, perhaps, by funding fairness and freedom. Arguably the most significant gift that Norway’s nature has bestowed on the country’s jazz musicians is through the discovery of oil. This gift has afforded investment in culture, an investment that allows for risk and innovation and

recognizes that jazz occupies an important place in local as well as global culture.