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Doug Ramsey on Jazz and other matters...

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Ystad Jazz Festival: The Wrapup

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The 2019 Ystad Sweden Jazz Festival encompassed far more concerts than it would have been possible for anyone to attend. Here are impressions of some of that I managed to hear. And, just to remind us of Ystad's physical attractiveness, here's a photo taken from a window of my hotel room, complete with the Swedish flag, and St. Mary's church in the distance.



The festival opener, as usual, was a jazz parade through the streets of this medieval village, whose charm and warmth are central factors in the festival's success. The band called Funk Off led the parade. They are from Italy. It is possible that the name of the group is not Italian. Described as a marching band, Funk Off does more than march. They accompany their blues-laden, R&B-oriented music with coordinated, infectious, choreography.



Funk Off's second appearance came the day after the parade on the grounds of Bergsjohölm castle, a spacious green estate on a hillside a few miles outside of Ystad. Slowly, concertgoers awaiting the event became aware of music coming from behind them. (above photo) When they looked back, they saw the twenty-odd Funk Off musicians grooving and jiving their way out of the woods and up the hillside. They were individually equipped with wireless microphones so that no matter where the listeners were seated or how distant the players, the music had stage-quality presence. At the end of their arrival march, the band went into a stage formation with the Funk Off drum corps in the rear and the trumpets, trombones and saxophones in front. There were moments when the standard configuration gave way to mobility and musicians would wander into the audience to sit beside a listener who may have been surprised to find a baritone saxophonist or trumpeter was next to her gazing deeply into her eyes.



Hannah

Svensson has become an Ystad favorite, frequently performing at the festival with her guitarist father Evan. In this instance, the Svenssons were joined by drummer Zoltan Czörsz Jr., the veteran bassist Matz Nilsson and a pianist whose mysterious advance billing in the printed program was “secret guest.” To the surprise of almost no one who keeps up with trends in Swedish jazz, the guest turned out to be Jan Lundgren, the pianist who is artistic director and co-founder of the Ystad festival. In addition to star turns in his own group and with the unusual trio Mare Nostrum, Lundgren frequently accompanies Ms. Svensson. The presence of Czörsz in the accompanying group might have been another giveaway; he is the drummer in Lundgren’s own trio. All of the members of the band made much of their generous solo opportunities but it was Ms. Svensson’s singing that the Per Helsas Gard audience came to hear. She beautifully performed her own compositions including the bittersweet “Not Meant To Be” and the cleverly constructed “Friday Afternoon,” which contained one of several instances of Ms. Svensson’s individual approach to scatting. There is about her singing a sweetness that has taken on added richness, but it’s the growing depth of musicianship that is most impressive in her current work. Her phrasing of Andy Razaf’s lyric to Fats Waller’s “Honeysuckle Rose” was an example of that in this Ystad concert

Traditional jazz got its due—and then some—in a concert by the Paul Strandberg Quartet called “The Great 1920s.” Working with his frequent collaborator cornetist Kiki Desplat,



clarinetist Strandberg’s

session brought a decided traditional flavor

from the music's early days, thanks in great part to Ms. Desplat's cornet playing. She revived the spirit of Bix Beiderbecke in a festival that generally hews to the mainstream of 1940s, '50s and '60s jazz



rather than to one of the music's earliest manifestations. Pianist Tony Baldwin added touches of Fats Waller that worked nicely with Desplat's Bixisms. A number of listeners appeared to be in their late teens or early twenties, perhaps an encouraging sign for early-jazz fans who are always hoping for a 20s revival. Ms. Desplat played a number of solos that were not merely imitative of Beiderbecke, but captured his spirit. Strandberg and Ms. Desplat both sang. Her rendition of "Am I Blue?" was an audience pleaser, as was "Hands Across The Table," a '20s ballad rarely performed these days.



The singer Hyati Kafe immigrated to Sweden from his native Turkey in 1962 and has long been known by Swedes as "The Crooner." According to the festival's printed program, Kafe specializes in singing with large aggregations. At Ystad, he was accompanied by the Roger Berg Big Band which the festival program says "specializes in swing classics." In a succession of songs, many from the late 1930s and the 1940s, Kafe displayed good phrasing and intonation, although his swing feeling on some of the pieces seemed more forced than felt. His opening number, "Sweet Georgia Brown," was one of the most successful in regard to rhythm, Sammy Fain's and Lew Brown's 1937 hit "That Old Feeling" another. Berg, or whoever wrote the arrangement of the Fain-Brown song, gave that swing-era classic an inventive held-note tag.



Mimi

Terris's seven-piece band featured her singing and resourceful arranging. She was born in

Göteborg, but her base of operations in recent years has been Malmö, 30 miles or so from Ystad. She arranges with an attractive balance between mainstream values and suggestions of outré edginess. Among the attractions of Ms. Terris's writing for the septet was the harmonic blending of her voice and the instruments, especially in segments shaped for her to become, in effect, an eighth horn. Her conducting encompassed an attractive style of subtle dancing in place—not a Thelonious Monk shamble but movements that signaled changes in rhythmic emphasis. Her set had effective solos from several members of the band including trumpeter Mårten Lundgren, guitarist Måns Persson and accordionist-pianist Johann Ohlsson.

It wasn't billed as a jam session, but the Ystad Festival's tribute to the late violinist Svend Asmussen frequently had



the robust spirit of a jam. With several of her fellow Danes in the lineup, the featured singer, Sinne Eeg, found herself in comfortable surroundings. When he played at Ystad, Asmussen, who died in 2017 at the age of 99, was a consistent inspiration to other musicians and to his listeners. If the enthusiasm of the audience at this tribute is an indication, his status as an icon of the festival is likely to continue. His widow, Ellen Bick Asmussen, was in attendance and when she was introduced received warm, sustained, applause. Early that morning in her own session at the Hos Mortens Café, Mrs.



Asmussen (pictured left) spoke movingly and at length about her life with him. The featured players in the tribute included guitarist Jacob Fisher, who was a prominent member of Asmussen's quartet; Danish singer and tenor saxophonist Mads Mathias, a formidable, enthusiastic and harmonically gifted scat singer. Mathias and Ms. Eeg had several scatting exchanges. Each of them demonstrated refined harmonic sensibility that too often takes a back seat to raw enthusiasm when singers venture into sophisticated vocalise. Ms. Eeg's "Melancholy Baby," sung at a profoundly mellow tempo, was one of her triumphs. "Makin' Whoopee" and "Skylark" were others, the latter concluding on a perfectly sustained long note. Swedish harmonica player Flip Jers had an impressive evening before what amounted to an enthusiastic hometown crowd. The bassist in the Asmussen tribute was the powerful German Hans Backenroth, who received huge applause after each of his solos.

Pianist Jan Lundgren combined his trio with the 22 members of the Göteborg Wind Orchestra in a concert devoted to arrangements of well-known Swedish folk themes. Lundgren's regular trio members—bassist Mattias Svensson and drummer Zoltan Csörz Jr.—rounded out the ensemble, whose history as a Swedish cultural institution goes back 114 years. This was one of several Lundgren appearances in the festival that he helped to create and has served for years as its artistic director. The concert title, "Jazz pa svenskt vis" translates into English as "Jazz in Swedish way." One of Lundgren's earliest and most popular albums, *Swedish Standards*, followed that concept, which he has kept alive in his repertoire ever since.

The next night, Lundgren reunited with French accordion master Richard Galliano and Italian trumpet virtuoso Paolo Fresu in their third Ystad festival appearance as Mare Nostrum. Their three albums under that name have given them footholds with both dedicated jazz audiences and listeners whose predilections might be described as easy listening. The Lundgren composition "Mare Nostrum" opened their set, as it has in previous Ystad appearances by the trio. Lundgren's "Love Land" is one of the group's consistent favorites. This version of the piece is from the ACT record company promotional video.

According to Lundgren, Fresu has a lost luggage problem when he travels. That accounted for his appearing on the Ystad stage barefoot. There was no evidence that playing shoeless had an affect on his music.

Ronneby, named for the town where Lundgren grew up, had a distinctively Swedish country dance feeling and a lilting melody. Again this version is from an ACT video on *YouTube*.

In one of the most satisfying and most sparsely attended early morning sessions of the festival, Michael Tucker traced the history of the ECM label. Tucker is an historian whose book *Deep Song* about saxophonist Jan Gabarek was once called by the influential NRK Music Magazine "the bible of Gabarek studies." In his session, Tucker drew



the audience into an intimate history of the label and illustrated his talk with recordings of Gabarek, Keith Jarrett, Thomas Stanko and other ECM artists. "On ECM," he said at one point, "less is more." In the end, it was the simplest educational experience—an expert sharing his knowledge and a few listeners absorbing his wisdom and the music. Tucker's final ECM musical example was an early Charles Lloyd recording.



Lloyd himself, the imposing tenor saxophonist and flutist, played the final concert of the Ystad festival. His band included the stimulating and inventive guitarist Julian Lage, bassist Reuben Rogers and drummer Eric Harland. A second guitarist, new to me, was young Marvin Sewell, whose playing, embedded in country blues, occasionally also reflected jazz's bebop heritage. Lloyd opened on tenor sax with Billy Strayhorn's "A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing." He played flute on his second piece, which he did not introduce by title, and augmented the rhythm section using hand-held shakers, as he did occasionally in the course of the concert. Lage's guitar solos were unfailingly rhythmic and harmonically inventive. At one point a Lage passage suggested intimate familiarity with the music of J.S. Bach. The other guitarist, Sewell, tended to solo longer than was



necessary to get his down-home message across, but his most effective moments effectively tapped a strain of blues that goes back at least to the 1920s and, most likely, beyond. His sound has lots of bass. At his most effective he manages to be at once magnetic and liquid. Lloyd gave the sidemen thorough attention when they soloed and seemed enormously pleased by what he was hearing.

As he has from his “Of Course, Of Course” days of the 1950s, Lloyd at his most intense has the ability to immerse the listener in his sound. The encore piece—again unidentified—may have been a folk or country traditional song. It was at first played by only Lloyd on tenor and Harland on drums. Lage, Sewell and the others slid into the music for a minute or so, it became Calypso for a few seconds, then Lloyd’s music, the concert and the festival were over.

(Lloyd photos by Marcus Fägersten, others by Anna Rylander)