

In Switzerland, jazz is in full swing

Americans might claim the genre as theirs, but European musicians have come a long way

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ, Freelance September 18, 2010



Swiss pianist Colin Vallon's third album will be released by ECM next year. Photograph by: Courtesy of Colin Vallon

Whenever jazz critic Tom Gsteiger comes to Montreal, I get my "fix" of jazz CDs from Switzerland. Say what? If the Swiss image of precise timekeeping, cheese, chocolate, and secretive banking seems the antithesis of creative jazz, the nation's stereotype might be the problem, says Gsteiger, who writes for *Der Bund* and *Basler Zeitung* and teaches jazz history in Basel and Lucerne. In its many permutations, Swiss jazz is the last under-heralded scene in Europe, but not for want of originality.

And if European jazz in general has a hard time attracting American ears, it's because, Gsteiger says, "Americans still think jazz is American music."

Which begs the question: Does jazz belong to any particular country, race or creed anymore? The question still draws arched eyebrows or guffaws in the U.S., where it is reverently known as "America's classical music" - which seems to put Philip Glass and Steve Reich, not to mention George Gershwin, in no man's land.

Historically, jazz will always be considered the 20th century jewel of American culture -for a couple of decades as roaringly popular music, now consigned to elite tastes.

However, just as the British usurped rock 'n' roll a decade after its founding, effectively making it an international pop form, jazz is long removed from its golden years (the 1920s through the '50s), when it was virtually 100 per cent identifiably American. By American, I mean you could hear the blues and other root forms (stride, swing, bebop) within the music.

Of course, this is no longer the case. European musicians have come such a long way -and create such original music -that jazz as a genre has expanded its horizons in their hands. But try telling that to certain American critics.

Case in point: *Jazz*, by Gary Giddins (longstanding Village Voice critic) and Scott DeVeaux (author of the seminal *The Birth of Bebop*), published this year and intended as the pre-eminent one-volume reference, abjectly ignores jazz from Europe (except for Django Reinhardt). It's as if the authors cling to the notion that Europeans can't swing naturally or improvise with conviction.

Yet, Munich-based ECM -accenting European musicians as well as Americans and, often, inspired

pairings between them - placed first as best record label in the recent *Downbeat* critics poll.

And the European imprimatur has always been crucial to American jazzmen: French critics were the first en masse to recognize jazz as an art form - replacing "jungle music" descriptions it received at home; jazz was received as a sort of liberation music in Europe after the Second World War; many black American musicians sought refuge there from the racism at home. The smallish continent's sophisticated transportation system connects to avid fans in large cities and small, a gravy train for U.S. musicians. To put it bluntly: no Europe, no major jazz career.

All this rubbed off on Europeans, and eventually its jazz musicians made the transition from copycats to originals; trumpeters Enrico Rava and Tomasz Stanko (from Italy and Poland, respectively), saxophonist Jan Garbarek,

and avant-garde pianists Irene Schweizer and Sylvie Courvoisier (both from Switzerland) are originals in any language.

That Americans think New York remains the centre of all things is understandable, Gsteiger says, yet the lack of curiosity for Europe baffles him. When I asked him if European jazzers might be considered too cerebral, he referred to a Keith Jarrett quote: "Americans swing too much and Europeans think too much." Gsteiger added: "That's only a slight tendency. It's not a black and white situation. I think a lot of great stuff is still going on in the States as well as Europe. And there's bullshit everywhere."

Switzerland turns out to be a jazz oasis. As Tony Judt, the American commentator on European politics, wrote: "Switzerland is a striking instance of the possibilities -and, therefore, the benefits -of blended identities. By this I do not mean the mixture of languages (German, French, Italian, Romansch), or the striking -and often neglected -topographical variety. I mean contrast ... The contrast that matters most is that between the fickle surface sheen and the steady depths below."

Gsteiger recalled a 1970 essay, *Discourse Restricted*, in which Paul Nizon lamented the provinciality of Swiss art. "Tempi passati," Gsteiger writes. "Firstly, rebellion against this narrowness has led to a critical cosmopolitan view; secondly, you can discover the world in the provinces; thirdly, Switzerland is an ideal place to shuttle back and forth between urban thrills and idyllic retreats; fourthly, you can leave quickly and inexpensively ... It is the smallness of the country that is an invaluable advantage to the jazz scene: a lively exchange between language regions, cantons and cities, which guarantees a stimulating mishmash of mentalities, does not necessitate passing across time zones."

ECM records four Swiss musicians: Irish Nik Bartsch's Ronin, wispy singer Susanne Abbuehl, daring pianist Courvoisier (all played the Montreal jazz festival in recent years) and drummer Pierre Favre. Next year, ECM will release an album by French-speaking pianist Colin Vallon, from the French part of Switzerland, whose second record *Ailleurs* (on Hat Hut) is a precocious little classic.

Gsteiger observes: "Vallon recalls the interplay of the original Bill Evans Trio, which appeals to (ECM founder) Manfred Eicher, but in a (modern) way. They play their own songs, integrate some Balkan stuff (his grandmother is from eastern Europe) and they play contemporary pop songs, but in a more open way than The Bad Plus, and they go back to old gospel songs."

Switzerland also boasts important labels in Hat Hut, Unit and Intakt: the former home to U.S. "outcats" like Anthony Braxton and Steve Lacy; the latter's 25th anniversary will be capped next year by a two-week residency in New York at John Zorn's club The Stone.

The quality of Swiss jazz schools (the first founded in Bern in 1967) has produced an eclectic young generation that places an almost obsessive premium on originality, clarity over showboating, and does many different things very well. "This diversity is hard to sell," says Gsteiger, "and everybody's fighting for gigs in Germany, France or Italy."

Consider two recent releases by saxophonist Donat Fisch, among the first Swiss to embrace the outbound ideas of Ornette Coleman. The fascinating serpentine *Circle & Line 2* finds him duetting with decade-long drummer partner Christian Wolfarth in a journey revealing new twists and turns with each listening. *Lapland* features a quartet in which he trades a constant flow of ideas -fleet, delightfully abstract, nuance-filled but never overplayed -with his mentor, Andy Scherrer, a dean of Swiss jazz.

We Concentrate, by the piano trio Wiesendanger/Weber/Ulrich, mixes straight interpretations of quirky works by Carla Bley and Annette Peacock with quirky sorties through standards like *Embraceable You*. It's brilliant, singular program music, as imaginative as anything you'll hear in jazz.

Manuel Mengis Gruppe 6 is all over the map on *Into the Barn*: blending shambling rock with muted Miles with far-out raves in long compositions that constantly change textural character. Fitting: Trumpeter Mengis is a part-time mountain guide.

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