

The compass of Nordic tone: jazz from Scandinavia

In common with the rest of Northern Europe, jazz arrived in Scandinavia during the early inter-war period. A music with roots in African American culture, jazz was both exotic and intoxicating in its 'otherness', while at the same time posing moral and cultural threats to the establishment.

Newspapers at the time presented jazz as a rude and primitive music and as a threat to highbrow culture. The Danish composer, Carl Nielsen, commented in the publication "Hjemmet" in 1925 to the effect that jazz had no content, or roots, in Danish culture and would, therefore, eventually die out of its own accord.

Despite such mistrust of jazz by the highbrow echelons of Scandinavian society, jazz was already being introduced into the Danish public educational system by 1934. In order to bestow jazz with a degree of legitimacy, the cover-all term 'rytmisk musik' was developed laying the foundations for a music pedagogy that included "improvisation and a rhythmic-bodily musical culture". (Pedersen, 1989). In both Norway and Sweden, jazz took rather longer to become established beyond its function of entertainment.

With the outbreak of the 2nd World War, jazz was to fare differently in each of the Scandinavian countries. Jazz, along with radio and all things American, was officially banned during the Nazi occupation of Norway. Ingenious strategies were employed to keep jazz alive during this period including the rebranding of Norwegian jazz clubs as 'sewing circles' to safeguard the listening to and playing of jazz under the noses of their oppressors.

In Denmark, jazz was to a greater extent tolerated by the occupying forces. Perhaps due to Denmark's less troublesome capitulation, the threat of American influence was downplayed. Nonetheless, jazz assumed the role of protest music amongst dissenters of the Nazi imposition and thrived during the occupation despite a ban on import of American records. The ambivalence towards jazz amongst the dominant powers during this period is typified by the Royal Theatre's (Kongelig Teater) presentation of Gershwin's

Porgy and Bess – albeit with an all-white cast – in the face of fierce criticism from German and Danish Nazis (Pedersen 2013).

Due to the country's wartime neutrality, jazz in Sweden enjoyed an unbroken rise in popularity. Jazz could be enjoyed in restaurants and jazz clubs throughout the country but, nonetheless, still had its detractors. Alice Babs brought jazz to national consciousness in the film *Swing it, Magistern (Swing it, Professor)* in 1940 but, in doing so, attracted harsh criticism from establishment critics for the film's portrayal of the use of jazz as an alternative to traditional music pedagogy.

At the conclusion of the war, the import of American jazz recordings resumed and jazz became the sound of a liberated Europe and a new world order. Jazz, alongside Coca Cola, chewing gum and Walt Disney, offered Scandinavians a window to, and a proxy-participation in, the 'American dream' – and listening to jazz was seen as an act of rebellion against Europe's old guard.

All three Scandinavian countries refer to Golden Ages of jazz during these formative years but, in my opinion at least, these were still to come.

In 1964, Jan Johansson made the now seminal album, *Jazz På Svenska*, on which was featured a selection of Swedish folk songs performed on piano and double bass. The musical language of these interpretations was sparse, cool and deeply design-conscious. Although doubtlessly drawing inspiration from Miles Davis' *Birth of the Cool*, the album is a corner stone in Scandinavia's break from the American jazz tradition.

Until this point, Scandinavia's jazz musicians (just as others throughout Europe) had essentially been reverential copyists of the jazz that had reached out to them from across the Atlantic. Jazz in Scandinavia had, until then, been lovingly made in the mould of its originators. Now, a sense of ownership of the music was being established.

This newfound autonomy coincided with radical global reappraisals of the status quo, not least through the Civil Rights Movement in America. America's apartheid had led to many African American musicians travelling to, and often settling for periods, in Europe. Copenhagen, like Paris, was an international

hub and became home to a long list of American jazz luminaries. Some ventured further North to Stockholm, and a few even made as far as Oslo. Their influence had been profound since the 1930s European tours by Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and others, but now their inspiration was to take a different shape.

Americans George Russel and Don Cherry, both of who lived in Sweden for a period during the late 1960s, encouraged their Scandinavian musical counterparts to bring their own cultures (whether living or inherited) into the music. As black American musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie began to look to their African roots, so Scandinavian musicians began to incorporate their own heritage and world-view into jazz.

Among this new wave of musicians were saxophonist Jan Garbarek, guitarist Terje Rypdal, bassist Arild Andersen and drummer Jon Christensen, who's first release on the nascent ECM record label, *Afric Pepperbird* signalled the precursor to what has become known by some as the ECM aesthetic and others, the Nordic tone in jazz.

Their music marked a departure from the rulebook of American jazz. Swing-feel and Blues, and the Great American Songbook, that had underpinned the imported American music were now sidestepped and replaced by a spacy, impressionistic and coolly detached approach. The instrumental line-ups may still have reflected the American small-band tradition but the roles of the instrumentalists were markedly different. The triplets of swing-feel were replaced with a looser, straighter feel and the blues with what some have called a Nordic melancholy. The compositions deviated from 12 bar or AABA song structures and the sounds of the instruments were reimagined and distinctly personalised.

It is somewhat ironic that this music, which has come to be regarded as quintessentially Nordic (or Scandinavian) was developed through the Munich-based ECM label under the autocratic guidance of its German owner and producer Manfred Eicher. Even more ironic that its 'favourite son', Jan Garbarek was the child of a Polish soldier and Norwegian mother and, as such, was considered stateless until the age of 7.

There are other major fault lines in the conception of a Nordic tone. It is applied most liberally to the legacy of ECM, of which there are still many musical adherents, and specifically to jazz from Norway, but ignores the existence of a multitude of alternative approaches to the composing and playing of jazz in the Nordic region. Also, only a very few Swedish and Danish musicians (notably pianist Esbjorn Svendsson and trumpeter Palle Mikkelborg) are included under the Nordic tone banner. In short, the term serves to essentialise and idealise a particular corner of Scandinavian jazz culture while ignoring the rest.

The real question lies in the origins of the term. We can be fairly certain that it did not originate with the musicians themselves. Unless concerned with the preservation of a folk-heritage, musicians are typically cosmopolitan in outlook and omnivorous in cultural consumption. Even Edvard Grieg, I'm told, was troubled by the nationalism attributed to his music, declaring that his compositions dealt with more universal human conditions.

Rather, it is critics and commentators that have, somewhat lazily, attributed the most banal cultural references of 'fjell and fjord' to the music, the imagery of which has also been adopted by the music industry as a useful tool for branding this new, non-American jazz.

This is not to say that Norway's musicians have not benefitted, and on occasion played up to, the Nordic brand. Garbarek's music is full of 'runes', 'sagas' and 'joiks' and album cover-art often references the Nordic ideal. But to many of Scandinavia's musicians, Nordic tone has become as inescapable an aesthetic straitjacket as the American jazz tradition from which they struggled free.

The constraints and expectations of tradition and marketing aside, jazz remains an important and vibrant pillar of contemporary Scandinavian culture. Jazz is embedded in music pedagogy, arts, entertainment and social wellbeing, and in cultural export.

Carl Nielsen was, in hindsight, wrong in his predictions for jazz. But at that time in history he could not possibly have foreseen the mutations that jazz has

weathered both on global and national arenas. Jazz is often described as chameleon-like – reflecting and adapting to its environment. It has survived numerous jazz-averse dictators, being knocked off its populist pedestal by the onslaught of Rock and Roll, endured its post-modernist fusions with other music forms and continues to be a music at the forefront of artistic and technological innovation.

The Scottish jazz scene often looks, with no small degree of jealousy, to the success of jazz in Scandinavia and the power of its brand. Jazz, within Scandinavian culture, appears to command greater value in society, benefitting from substantially more generous funding for recording and touring, a more enlightened pedagogical system and a stronger sense of cohesion as a scene.

It might be argued that jazz has yet to be holistically assimilated into Scottish culture and remains seen as a music of ‘the other’, or as an American import. By way of illustration, the Scottish Jazz Federation recently promoted a tour under the name “The J-word” suggesting that the word itself is problematic for Scottish concertgoers despite jazz having become firmly established in formal and informal education sectors.

During the past 20 years, Scottish jazz musicians have made several attempts at fusions between jazz and Scottish traditional music – John Rae’s Celtic Feet and Colin Steel’s Stramash are perhaps the most notable examples. But there has been no talk of Celtic jazz as there is of Nordic. Personally, I’m glad that Scottish jazz has escaped the yoke of nationalist appropriation. Jazz, after all, is both cosmopolitan by birth and cosmopolitan by nature.

By way of example, I’d like to play (as much as we have time for) a clip of Arild Anderson’s Hyperborean. Recorded for NRK at Oslo Jazz Festival, I think it illustrates an outward looking, assimilation of world cultures whilst at the same time recognising the foundations of local heritage.