

# Nordic Tone: Redrawing borders of culture and boundaries of style

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## **Abstract**

Historians and educators have traditionally presented the century long evolution of jazz in a linear, canonical fashion. Applications of this model are often limited to the music's domestic evolution, paying scant heed to activities outside the USA. Even where the existence of non-American jazz is acknowledged, it is more often than not excluded from the parameters of historiography and critique.

Over the past forty years, the Nordic contribution to jazz has in many ways come to mirror the multicultural melting pot that first spawned the genre at the beginning of the 20th Century. Nordic Tone is identified as such despite having roots in the American tradition, coupled with a 'receptive ear' to global contemporary and historical influences. In championing ethnically and stylistically diverse cultural fusions under the Nordic Tone banner, labels such as ECM and Rune Grammofon have established an alternative imagining of established jazz practice and presentation. The hybridized outcomes of these approaches have confounded traditional conceptions of the jazz tradition, challenging discourses of historical succession and genre identity.

Despite its breadth of cultural inclusion, Nordic Tone has nonetheless been consistently represented as an essentialist ideal by commentators and critics, imagined within the sphere of geographically based, national identity. Nordic scenery and folklore are liberally applied in the contextualisation of this branch of Northern European jazz, most often ignoring the complexities in cultural background of its musicians and supporting industries. This paper will use practice-based and academic research to show how an ostensibly American musical form has been appropriated and reinterpreted to enable the expression of cultural individuality that, more than simply drawing on the national heritage of its creators, is both outward looking and receptive to global influence.

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## INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin my presentation by showing a short clip from the 1976 Swedish film, Sven Klang's Kvintet. Set in the 1950s, the film highlights the potency of the "jazz germ" by telling the story of a parochial Swedish dance band augmented by the arrival of a new saxophonist. The saxophonist is Christer Boustedt who brings with him the worldly jazz sophistication that his travels with the army have afforded him.

CLIP 1. Sven Klang's Kvintett (dir. Stellan Olssen - 1976) (2:10)

[ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AP7NERmz2\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AP7NERmz2_8) ]

In attempting give focus to discussion on individualised national identities in jazz, the complexities present in a globally conceived understanding of the genre ought first to be examined.

Since its nascence as a defined genre in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century United States, considerations of identity have been central in the conception and evaluation of jazz. The coalescence of cultures and ethnicities in its accepted cities-of-birth, such as New Orleans, gave rise to a musical language built on the diverse living and inherited experiences of race, tradition and community belonging of its instigators. These diversities are patently reflected in the myriad of global strands present in the genre's musicological unravelling, and the ongoing debates surrounding genre-authenticity and the guardianship of jazz heritage. Identity, as examined through the lenses of musicology, sociology, politics and commerce, remains a 'hot topic' amongst academics, commentators, musicians and their followers in their attempts to pin down the essence of jazz for a variety of purposes.

Throughout its history, jazz has been appropriated (or vilified) for their own ends by imperialist powers, dictatorial regimes and diverse social classes. It has given a cultural voice to the oppressed, the liberated - and to the politically and socially complacent. In the latter half of its evolution, the genre has been subject to a transformative image makeover – from the sonic representation of outsider non-conformity to the music of an intellectual and 'culturally informed' elite. The reception of jazz might be said to have migrated

from its roots in the drinking-dens and dance halls of the 'common people', to the concert halls and cocktail parties of the bourgeoisie. The struggles of personal, racial and social politics inherent in its development are all too easily ignored or forgotten with a champagne flute in one's hand.

The musicians of jazz, historically auto didactically and experientially trained in their craft, are today routinely schooled through formalised college and university programmes. The tools of the trade accumulated on the bandstand and after-hours jam sessions are now as likely to have been acquired in a synthesised, even institutionalised, environment. A music informed (if not defined) by the creative expression of individuals and the communities that they inhabit has in many cases become the study of an abstracted cultural ideal – often at odds with the idiosyncratically innovative fervour of its originators. In attempts to illustrate a standardised account of stylistic development, rigid timelines are routinely imposed that imply a doctrine of progress, rather than acknowledging the complexities of an intertwined history – and, in doing so, also suggest that each stylistic epoch is a cultural cul-de-sac. In reality, as can be experienced in the jazz clubs of any of the world's major cities, all of the stylistic strands of jazz co-exist, often with overlap between their musicians and their audiences.

Commercially, jazz has evolved from a *gebrauchsmusic* for the purposes of drinking and dancing to the first 'popular' music of the age of massification and technology-driven duplication and distribution. Many jazz fans have forsaken their dancing shoes in favour of the comforts of armchair listening; its 'popular' status has subsequently been supplanted by that of 'niche interest' and the livelihood of its musicians, once afforded by the recording industry built around the music's popularity, is increasingly threatened by ever-diminishing internet-age revenue streams and waning public engagement in the genre.

Nonetheless, and over the course of a century of rapid change, jazz has represented a cultural chameleon, responding to, and in some cases acting as catalyst for, the changing social and political environments in which it is created.

## **NORDIC JAZZ**

Arriving on European shores within a decade of its recognition as a distinct genre, jazz embodied the exoticism and foreignness so desirable to its increasingly globally aware audience. This new American music form, unfettered by European tradition, drawing both on so-called primitive and high-art cultures and transmitted through the modern machineries of radio and gramophone, proved irresistible to its new audience. The music, introduced through American involvement in both World Wars, quickly grew roots and jostled for position within the existing tapestry of European culture.

What was at first an attempt by European musicians to emulate this new sound in the mould of its originators, gave way in time to innovation and development of the genre within regional and national parameters. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the influence of American musicians remained central to European jazz scenes, most notably in France, Scandinavia, Germany and the UK, as here they were extended a non-segregated and financially lucrative welcome that was in stark contrast to that experienced in their native America. (It is indeed an irony that African American musicians were promoted in the name of US cultural diplomacy abroad, at a time when they were racially segregated in their home country). The journeyman American jazz musician acted as educator and inspiration to many a European rhythm section.

In an increasingly interconnected world, European jazz began to take influence not only from the music's founding fathers and their offspring, but also from the musical culture of their own indigenous societies, neighbours and trading partners and immigrant diasporas. In France, by example, Manouche combined swing era jazz with the music of Romany cultures, where in England jazz was infused with influence from London's Caribbean and South African immigrants.

The Norwegian "golden age" of jazz culminated in the late 1950s with a mushrooming of jazz clubs and domestic bands taking inspiration from the

American ideal as brought to them by radio and gramophone. The arrival in Scandinavia of musical revolutionaries, George Russell and Don Cherry in the 1960s, provided the impetus for Norwegian musicians to look to their country's folk and classical traditions for individualised musical identity. Elements of North Germanic and Sami folk melodies were intertwined with the National Romanticism of Grieg and Svendsen in the reinvention of the borrowed musical language of jazz in a nationalised mould.

The 1970s ECM recording "Afric Pepperbird" by Garbarek, Andersen, Rypdal and Christensen has been widely credited for having lit the fuse for what has subsequently been dubbed "Nordic Tone". This term, a favourite amongst journalists, has come to, albeit inexactly, define jazz of a Nordic origin. There are, however, significant and far-reaching limitations in both its imagining and its use.

Employed most often in conjunction with depictions of Scandinavian stylised ideals of fjords, glaciers, design aesthetic and societal utopia, Nordic Tone conjures an image of a mono-cultural, nationally defined form created in some sort of a cultural backwater. On closer examination, this is of course far from being the case.

The father and guardian of the Nordic Tone aesthetic might be said to be the influential producer and owner of the German registered ECM record label, Manfred Eicher. The fact that his ECM label also presented the music of American musicians Keith Jarrett, Pat Metheny, Bill Frisell and others in a similar aesthetic is most often conveniently ignored. The Tone's most famous son, Garbarek, is of Polish extraction – the son of a former Polish prisoner of war – and was, one might suspect to Norway's chagrin, as a result stateless until the age of seven. Garbarek's musical collaborations also clearly position him as a cultural fusionist, through his work with musicians as diverse as Egberto Gismonti, Nana Vasconcelos, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Shenkar, Zakir Hussain, Miroslav Vitous, Anouar Brahem among many others. Indeed the overwhelming majority of the musicians identified under the Nordic Tone sobriquet of the 1970s and '80s can be defined by their leanings towards multi-cultural fusion.

More recently, prominent musicians associated with Nordic Tone, such as Arve Henriksen and Niels Petter Molvær are similarly awkward to culturally shoehorn. Henriksen's distinctive trumpet technique, conjuring the performance aesthetic of the Japanese Shakuhachi flute alongside his Arabic inflected singing style can hardly be said to conform to accepted ideas of any known Norwegian folk tradition – nor can Molvær's use of technology and his sampling from globally inspired musical sources.

Nordic Tone, despite its inference, fails also to define a geographic compass. It is applied selectively to music of ostensibly Norwegian origin, and only sparingly to the output of its Scandinavian neighbours. Swedish pianist Jan Johansson's 1964 album *Jazz På Svenska*, (Jazz in Swedish) featuring twelve re-workings of his country's traditional folk songs in jazz piano-trio setting, might fit more convincingly within the notion of a "Nordic tone". Niels Henning Ørsted Pedersen's reinterpretations of Danish folk songs such as I Skoven's Dybe Stille Ro and Det Var En Lørdag Aften similarly, one might argue, capture a more convincing expression of national identity - drawing, as they do, directly on the folk music of his country of birth.

Having yet to meet, or indeed hear of, any musician that professes to playing within the genre or style of "Nordic Tone", one is forced to assume that the term is one invented by journalists and commentators for their own convenience in separating this jazz stream from its American imagining.

Much is made of the absence of 'blues' in Scandinavian jazz – or, rather, the different nature of blues employed – as if suggesting that the musical language of Blues is solely racially defined and experienced. Similarly, the concept of swing feel is subject to equally essentialist treatment in analyses of Scandinavian jazz against its American 'ideal'. There are even those who take Ellington's paradigm that "it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing" quite literally, in claiming that this element of rhythmic subdivision must exist for musical performance to qualify as jazz. Each stylistic branch of jazz of course has its yeasayers and naysayers, whose arguments, for the sake of brevity, will respectfully have to be put to once side for the purposes of this paper.

Where essentialist analyses fail, is in their contrived assumption that all American jazz has Blues and Swing at its musical core and that all Scandinavian jazz does not – ignoring, as it does, the breadth and scope of historical and contemporary creation in the broad church of jazz – both in its country of birth and its countries of adoption – that have enabled the genre to adapt and respond to the diverse situations in which it is made. Just as there were “East Coast” musicians playing in a “West Coast” style and vice versa in the Cool Jazz/ Hardbop dichotomy of the 1950s and ‘60s, musicians’ stylistic manifestations are not (and have never been) simply subject to geographical or historical anchoring.

That the Scandinavian jazz scene is stylistically recognisable can more convincingly be attributed to state investment in jazz clubs and festivals, and in imaginative education programmes, such as Norway’s Trondheim Academy and Denmark’s Rytmiske Højskole, in its response to a genre so enthusiastically received from across the Atlantic. At a time when nationalism is, once again, demonstrating its darker side, attempts to culturally essentialise different streams of a genre that celebrates the diversity amongst individuals seems to me at best lazy and at worst of negative value to its creators.

As I’m sure is apparent to all assembled, this topic has become somewhat of a hobby-horse to me during my professional life as a jazz musician. Having had my music described simultaneously as “conjuring the smell of Scottish heather and whisky” by Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet, and as “reminiscent of a blizzard in down-town Oslo” by the BBC, I’m left wondering what on Earth is being heard or being imposed on music that was written with neither influence in mind. At this year’s Edinburgh Jazz Festival I have been billed (despite requests for its copywriters to avoid such language) as presenting a show that is “Scandi-bjorkesque”. I’m not sure what this means and I’ve been unable to find reference to it in any dictionary. The irony of course is that the show described as “Scandi-bjorkesque” is being presented in collaboration with a Dutchwoman, a Scot and a Pole. Aside from my possession of a Norwegian passport this project has very little to do with either Scandinavia or Iceland’s celebrated singer and composer, Bjork.



Perhaps as a result of current Scandinavian prominence in popular culture through the international successes of Stig Larsson, *The Killing*, *The Bridge*, *Borgen* etc. it is just too tempting for programmers and journalists to co-opt any artist of Nordic extraction into their vision of “Scandinavian Cool”.

In conclusion, I believe that there is a need for greater pluralism in how we relate to jazz, its stylistic variants and the individuals that create within them, and to avoid the temptations of broad-brushing, shoe-horning and reductionism in the forming of a false understanding of an intrinsically complex cultural form. A musical form that cuts back and forward through its own history – borrowing, re-presenting, innovating – simultaneously guarding its heritage while pioneering the development of musical language to reflect the conditions in which it is created.

And finally, I’d like to conclude with a 2009 Oslo Jazz Festival presentation of bassist Arild Andersen featuring singer Ellin Rosseland and trumpeter Arve Henriksen. This pan-generational, Nordic super-group I feel convincingly demonstrates the open-eared cultural diversity present in contemporary Norwegian jazz.

CLIP 2. Arild Andersen, Hyperborean – Oslo Jazz Festival (7:00)

[ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTOJGGdr\\_Hs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTOJGGdr_Hs) ]