

## In The Country Leads a Norwegian Creative Movement

# Ears Wide Open

There are about two jazz clubs in Oslo,” said Norwegian pianist Morten Qvenild about the relatively small size of Norway’s jazz scene. In fact, the entire country of Norway has a population that’s about half of New York City. But over the last decade the city has emerged as one of the most fertile and exciting breeding grounds for cutting-edge creative music, where a half dozen indie labels are capturing a singular esthetic at work.

“One of the reasons that the sound of improvised music is different in Norway is that it’s outside everything—it’s a mountain country and we’re not in the European Union,” said Stian Carstensen, the multi-instrumentalist who leads the quirky Bulgarian-tinged Norwegian band Farmers Market. “Sweden and Denmark had lots of American musicians living there in the past, like Dexter Gordon and Kenny Drew. In Norway there was nobody, so we had to make up our own improvised music.”

Musicians like Jan Garbarek, Terje Rypdal and Jon Christensen first blazed the trail in the late ’60s with an influential series of recordings for ECM. “They inspired us to work hard and find something that’s original and to be honest about doing it,” Qvenild said.

The new sound of Norway is much different that what those pioneers accomplished, dispensing with that ethereal improvisation for something more gritty and wide open, and Qvenild’s trio In The Country is emerging as a focal point for the new scene. This group, with bassist Roger Arntzen and drummer Pål Hausken, has been compared to other Scandinavian acts like E.S.T. and the Tord Gustavsen Trio, but aside from shared love of sweet lyricism, their sound is all their own.

The band’s debut album, *This Was The Pace Of My Heartbeat*, released last year by the Rune Grammofon label, is packed with gorgeous melodies that unfold slowly and calmly. Qvenild’s rangy piano successfully brings a vocalic quality to the fore while the rhythm section delivers a roiling, slow burn to create an exquisite tension. One can hear traces of Paul Bley’s deceptive simplicity and the measured minimalism of Morton Feldman—both acknowledged influences—but In The Country draws upon a much larger canvas of ideas: country music, Norwegian folk melodies, pop hooks and classical sonorities among them. But as with so much of the current Norwegian scene, such amalgams never sound calculated or artificial. The various ingredients are meticulously and organically fused.

“We like different things and we’re trying to do what’s most natural for us in our music,” said Qvenild, in Chicago in February for a gig. “It’s about expressing something or telling a story. I’m into country and singer-songwriter stuff, so it feels natural to hook that up to the classical tradition and find out where they touch. Our dream is to do things that are beautiful but not shallow. It’s difficult to describe, but when I write, even if the tune is nice and soft,

there’s got to be something raw behind it.”

“Some of my artists come from jazz and draw on jazz but only few of the releases would be seen as jazz by most people,” said Rune Kristoffersen, the owner of Rune Grammofon. “On the other hand, if you say that improvised music per definition is jazz, then a lot of my releases are jazz. But I don’t necessarily see it that way. Lately we’ve had music academies that encourage students to break free and find their own voice. People who love music with a strong dedication are not happy to only listen to or work with one type of music. That’s restrictive for your development.”

Indeed, Qvenild points out that nearly every musician working in Oslo attended one of two progressive music schools: the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo or the Trondheim Music Conservatory.

“There’s a special environment. You have a building that’s called a school and you can do whatever you want,” Qvenild said. “In Europe or the United States, you go to jazz school and have to learn bebop or jazz harmony. But in Norway you decide what you want to study. If I wanted to play Morton Feldman for four years it’s OK.”

Because playing opportunities are limited, there’s a weeding out process, and only the most distinctive players generally succeed. “You have to find your own voice to get through,” Hausken said. “There can’t be 10 great bebop drummers in Oslo. There’s no place for them all.”

There’s also an exceedingly open, cooperative atmosphere, and looking at the personnel on recordings released by Rune Grammofon and other important labels like Jazzaway, Jazzland, Sofa, Curling Legs and ECM shows a sublime amount of collaboration.

Before he recently limited his activities to In The Country and his electronically oriented art-pop duo Susanna and the Magical Orchestra, Qvenild was playing in loads of different projects. He was a founding member of the jazz-electronica band Jaga Jazzist, played piano and arranged for the singer Solveig Slettahjell, worked with the experimental jazz ensemble Shining and was a member of the chart-topping pop group National Bank. This is in addition to scads of session work.

The scant number of gigs within Norway forces musicians to work in a wide number of projects like this—which provides a rich degree of artistic cross-pollination. Another key factor in the scene’s artistic incubation is strong financial support. In The Country has largely been supported to develop, tour and record. It seems to be working; In The Country as well as artists like Supersilent, Wibutee and Maja Ratkje are beginning to make an international splash, allowing them to tour abroad, an essential situation for self-sufficiency. But even as more acts are performing outside of Norway there seems to be no shortage of players poised to take their place. **DB**





Morten Qvenild (left), Pål Hausken, Roger Arntzen



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