



**Ellery Eskelin
Trio Willisau
Live**

FLÂNEUR JAZZ

Meandering

The best way to write about meandering music is to do it in a meandering manner. So let's take a leisurely detour ... to Kansas City where in the 1930s – that is, in the swing era – the daring daddy of the tenor saxophone, Coleman Hawkins, reportedly ended up jamming with the “local tenor men” Dick Wilson, Herschel Evans, Herman Walder, Ben Webster and Lester Young. As the pianist Mary Lou

Williams put it, “Hawkins was king until he met those crazy Kansas City tenor men.” There is doubt about how much of the story is really true. But to quote a line from the Western “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance”, “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

The fact is: in 2015, Ellery Eskelin, Gary Versace and Gerry Hemingway played at the Willisau jazz festival; the recording of the highly-acclaimed concert has now been released on CD. The opening piece is over 50 minutes long and thus a prime example of meandering music (in comparison, the *Alpine Symphony* by Richard Strauss is just as long). Music speaks louder than words – still! we want to drop a few lines (those who pick them up cannot expect a reward).

“Old masters”

A few lines, for instance, about Eskelin's admiration of the “old masters” (which also includes an obsession with old saxophone models). And so no wonder he was aptly described in *The New Yorker* as a musician “with a romantic streak that runs parallel to his experimental leanings”. In his blog “Musings from a Saxophonist” Eskelin writes: “If you've been paying any attention to this blog, over time you'll know that I've been immersing myself in the listening of early jazz and finding all kinds of inspiration from the sound, emotional directness and above all the rhythm of this music.” And about the great saxophonists of the Swing era he writes: “There was a type of virtuosity in their delivery (the sculpting of sound, the attention to timing) in which every nuance was magnified and deeply meaningful, the results sounding quite audacious to my ears today.” But Eskelin wouldn't be Eskelin, if he just tried to copy the “old masters” – rather he draws on their energy and elegance to extend his expressive range (including, of course, his sound, which has greatly matured under the influence of the “old masters”).

Trio = 3

It would nevertheless be a big mistake to attribute everything to Eskelin's artistic evolution. Nine times out of ten, the great quantum leaps in jazz are instigated by bands. Let's take two particularly striking examples: What would Bill Evans have been from 1959 to 1961 without Scott LaFaro and Paul Motian? And what would Miles Davis have been from 1964 to 1968 without Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams? In 2011 Eskelin recorded the first CD with his Trio New York, the second studio album followed in 2013. Finally, a live recording of this remarkable Trio Willisau has been released, this time, though, with Gerry Hemingway as a kind of guest of honour on drums. (I consider Eskelin's Trio

New York the most exciting trio in contemporary jazz since Paul Motian teamed up with Bill Frisell and Joe Lovano.) Gerald Cleaver usually completes the New York threesome. And since Cleaver and Hemingway are two completely different drummers, the album by the current incarnation of the Trio Willisau sounds completely different too. The dynamics and aesthetics of a real jazz band are NEVER determined by the leader alone, they are always the result of a highly complex dialogue between all members.



The larger the band, the more difficult it is to leave space for all the idiosyncrasies of its members – this is why the spirit of jazz is generally in the best hands with three- to five-piece ensembles (the Duke Ellington Orchestra from ca. 1940 is a phenomenal exception to this rule).

“Must-hears”

Eskelin’s trio is a jazz band that knows how to mix and match a great variety of elements and facets (incidentally, Eskelin loves to wear hats and is in this respect, too, within the noble jazz tradition): swing and Surrealisms, sentimentality and subversion, action and abstraction, humour and sincerity, old and new. Furthermore, the trio never rushes things. Quite the contrary: it rambles and meanders freely, takes circuitous routes and secret passages. This trio has translated the high art of flânerie* into music (which rather than seen as a product is understood as a process!) – the seemingly unintentional mingles with utter concentration. And every now and then in the course of its rambling the trio comes across well-known “must-hears”: songs from the “Great American Songbook” and “We See” by Thelonious Monk.

Copy right!

Of course Eskelin, Versace and Hemingway approach these pieces with absolute respect, that is, they love them and they know them inside out. However, they clearly put the tunes in a jazz context: they use them as a source of inspiration and make their own rhyme or reason out of them

(that is, they never play the pieces 1:1, but always in a metamorphosing mode). And they also show how absurd the Eurocentric copyright in jazz is. Absurd but true: When Charlie Parker or Jim Hall or Keith Jarrett improvised over “All the Things You Are” (and the other band members should be named here, too), the copyright remained with Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II (the latter wrote the lyrics, which don’t actually occur in an instrumental version). The bizarre equation behind this concept is: composition = 100%, improvisation = 0% (in a good jazz performance the ratio is more like composition = 10%, improvisation = 90%). Furthermore, there is of course no such thing as a copyright for brilliant jazz licks: here, there is no limit to copying. This encouraged Charles Mingus to come up with a wonderful title for a piece: “If Charlie Parker Was a Gunslinger, There’d Be a Whole Lot of Dead Copycats”. The music of Eskelin’s trio is probably hard to copy, for it is too unpredictable, too rebellious, too eccentric. Ideally, however, the spirit behind this exemplary way of making music that is both spontaneously interactive and inspired by tradition should be practiced more again in today’s jazz.

* flânerie, like swing, has become an outdated activity, which in the age of digital monotony is on its way to falling into oblivion, even though these activities are more fun than both Twitter and Facebook together. And you don’t need a smart phone! Try it out!

translated by Friederike Kulcsar

Ellery Eskelin Trio Willisau

We see many familiar faces each time we perform in Willisau and it's always wonderful to reconnect with our friends over the years. It's that warm feeling combined with a heightened awareness of the special nature of this annual event that makes this place, these people and these performances so memorable. This concert was recorded for SRF 2 Kultur and the combination of good vibes (on the part of the audience) and technical acumen (on the part of the recording engineers) resulted in a document that I feel is worth sharing. Please note that any distortion you may hear in the sound of the Hammond organ was original to the instrument and not introduced in the recording process. These vintage instruments each have their own particular character and Gary Versace truly brought this B3 to life in all it's glorious grit and soul. Gary's nearly telepathic musical mind along with Gerry Hemingway's absolutely unique approach to the drums infused the music this evening with a very special and rare chemistry. It was a great pleasure for me and I hope you enjoy listening.

Ellery Eskelin, November 2015

Ellery Eskelin Trio Willisau Live

Ellery Eskelin *tenor saxophone*
 Gary Versace *Hammond B3 organ*
 Gerry Hemingway *drums*

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|---|---|-------|
| 1 | On (or about) ... | 27:21 |
| | <i>Ellery Eskelin, Gary Versace,
Gerry Hemingway</i> | |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601445 | |
| | My Melancholy Baby | 7:13 |
| | <i>by Ernie Burnett</i> | |
| | Blue and Sentimental | 7:12 |
| | <i>by Count Basie, Jerry Livingston,
and Mack David</i> | |
| | East of the Sun | 10:00 |
| | <i>by Brooks Bowman</i> | |
| | Total Time Track 1 | 51:37 |
| 2 | We See | 11:10 |
| | <i>by Thelonious Monk</i> | |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601446 | |
| 3 | I Don't Stand A Ghost Of
A Chance With You | 6:57 |
| | <i>by Victor Young</i> | |
| | ISRC CH 131.1601447 | |
| | Total Time DDD ²⁴ Bit | 69:48 |

"On (or about)..."

27:21 by Ellery Eskelin, Gary Versace and Gerry Hemingway, published by TUHTAH Publishing/SUISA.

The index point on track 1 is for convenience only and not indications of divisions of these works.

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File under: Jazz/Free Improvisation

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LOGY

Albort Ayler Quartet
 European Radio Studio
 Recordings 1964
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Anthony Braxton
 Quartet (Santa Cruz) 1993
 2nd set
 hatOLOGY 714

Cecil Taylor
 Garden - 2nd set
 hatOLOGY 720

Uwe Oberg
 Work
 hatOLOGY 740

Ellery Eskelin
 Trio Willisau - Live
 hatOLOGY 741



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