

Jazzstories

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Nils Petter Molv er: Colors, Noises, and Moods

Trumpeter/composer Nils Petter Molv er is a prominent exponent of Nordic Jazz – a geographic ramification that has acquired, especially during the last decade, the status of an independent genre. He has created his own style by combining traditional instrumental elements with electronic sound processing: a fusion characterized by pregnant rhythmical patterns and a meditative mood.

Nils Petter, how would you define your music in a single word?

I have spent the last 15 years trying to find that word. I would define it as open.

How would you describe it in many words?

I would describe it as the energy created by the tension between contrasts.

There must have been a moment in your evolution when you realized that you are a musician and you would be doing your own thing. Can you identify that moment?

Sure. I was 16 or 17 years old, and I was working as a bricklayer, building a swimming pool. I remember that at some point I told the guy I was working with: "You know, I think that I am going to be a musician". At that time, I had some private music lessons and I was playing in a band. Shortly after that, I applied for the music school and got admitted. I was in that school for two years, together with very nice musicians. Later I went to Trondheim to the conservatory, but I couldn't get admitted because I didn't have the secondary school certificate, and you cannot do the exams without it. I was supposed to attend the classes on the side, but I never really did, and almost two years later I left for Oslo. After that, things went very fast. Soon the group Masqualero was founded, and from then on I was living from music.

When did you start composing music?

I started to write quite early. At first, when I was with the band in the school I started writing the instrument parts, and I wrote right from the beginning of the Masqualero group. I made

a song called "Remembrance", and on the second album I started to write tracks, which were kind of leading to what I do now. Then a strange thing happened. One day, a very good friend of mine, singer Sidsel Endresen, brought me a cassette I had given her in the late eighties with music I made on the computer – I started doing music on the computer very early. I could recognize quite a few things there, and because she didn't use them I took those songs and developed them into the project *Khmer*. In those days, I also started making music for ballet shows.

Can you follow an evolution course here?

For me personally, the work I did with a Norwegian traditional singer, Sondre Bratnald, who now is almost 80 years old, was very significant. I always liked rhythms and grooves, and I started to hang out in clubs and work with DJs, and then there came a time when I wanted to merge these things together. I was trying to find a form that summed it all up. And the result was *Khmer*. If you look at the references, you can see that I and Bugge Wesseltoft were working almost on the same thing but separately. We used to have a band in the late eighties, like a quartet, with Audun Kleive and Bjørn Kjellemyr as rhythmical section.

And now?

The way I work now with the band is more open. What you will see tonight is totally improvised. It kind of developed naturally from the way I improvise. Now I try to work more with colors than with chords; I work with noises and moods. I make skeletons which I can interact with.

What factors have defined your style and your choices?

A significant reference leads back to the beginning of the eighties. In that time, I wasn't listening to much jazz. I was somehow tired of the trumpet, and I was playing kind of hard. Then I heard the duduk players, the shakuhachi players, also Jon Hassell the trumpet player, and that was like a revelation for me. Then I started working with the traditional Norwegian singer I mentioned before, and he told me how he experienced things.

So at one point, instead of hiding the trumpet, I began working with it on this new basis. I didn't want to sound like anything else. I didn't want to sound like a saxophone and I didn't want to show off; what I wanted to create was more like a voice. Technique can be beautiful, but for me it was more important to create a voice. A voice can be soft, but not only that: it can be angry, crazy, frustrated, whatever. And then I heard the ney flutes from North Africa and Central Asia, and the sounds from Armenia, Bulgaria and Romania – very beautiful sounds. All these traditional sounds affected me much more than jazz. I also listened to a lot of Brian Eno, and I found those things quite fascinating.

Have you been consciously working on your tone or it did it come up naturally? Miles Davis once said that after he'd been down and out, he needed three years to get his tone back.

I can work on it, of course. It is a matter of what you want it to sound like, and then you try to focus on that and use the appropriate technique. For me now, it is more of an organic thing. It is my voice. There are managers who try to make you sound like something else, and I always tell them that it is not possible. Actually the whole process is more a matter of finding your own voice than of building it consciously.

Nordic jazz has developed tremendously, especially during the last decade, and today contemporary jazz music is no longer conceivable without this dimension. Do you have an explanation for that?

I can speculate. You know, we are a small community in Norway; it is kind of transparent. We are all involved in small projects with traditional musicians, classical musicians, and noise artists. And then there is a quite strong musical tradition that doesn't have anything to do with the American music. I enjoy the music coming from there, but we improvise from quite different platforms. They improvise from swing, from standards, from the musicals of the twenties. That is all fine, but we come from a different place. I don't know how it evolves and why it develops in the way it does, but then again, there is no competition. It is a very open community, or at least I feel it that way, and you work with all kinds of musicians who create their own synergy.

What would you identify as characteristic for Nordic Jazz?

Musicians like Jan Garbarek, Terje Rypdal and Jon Christensen took swing away from more straight jazz without being totally conscious about it, but I think that they have mainly shown that it is possible.

Many people say that if something doesn't swing or groove, or is not black music, it is not jazz. What is jazz for you? Do you see it as a restrictive term?

Jazz is everything from Louis Armstrong to Cecil Taylor. That's a very big step, in a way. For me, the minute you start putting it into a category, you actually box it in. I think that most musicians want to be in a different place. I don't talk about my music as jazz; I just leave that to others. For me, jazz has to do with interaction and improvisation and what you improvise from is not so important as long as it is rooted in something real. Jazz for me is a platform from which I can improvise. Sometimes what we do is in many ways older and freer than what most Americans players do.

Are you aware of the impact this group of jazz musicians had on the evolution of European jazz? Would you like to comment on that?

I don't know, actually. I think about it, but as I musician I can't see it so well. I can see where we started, and that now we are traveling around the world playing, people like it. But what I try to do is focus on the music. This question is something for the critics or journalists, I think.

The rhythmic pattern, instrument processing and the long tones that you have so successfully influenced and developed render a certain hypnotic or ritual quality that sets the public in a state similar to trance. Do you think that this corresponds to an intrinsic musical evolution or that it also has a social implication?

What I try to do in every concert is to create a state where you simply exist, then and there. I wouldn't call it being in trance, but rather being in the stream. But on the other hand, yes, you are right; I think that people need that particular flow of energy in order to let go of the quotidian and their daily worries. It is a bit like looking at something beautiful or like having sex; you just let go. I think it is a give-and-take situation people need to experience more these days.

Now that you are mentioning the energy flow, what happens when you close your eyes and there's just music around you, and you are there with your instrument? What are you thinking about in those moments? Is that something you can describe?

I close my eyes in order not to have any distraction but the sound, and also in order to concentrate fully on what I am doing – to go with the flow, to find the path. For me, it is more like not thinking at all; it is more like a state of meditation that helps you center yourself.

Do you have communication with the public then? Can you tell the difference from public to public?

Absolutely! That's when you communicate best. You can tell the difference by the vibrations, by the energy that is set in motion. It is the same thing when you meet an individual. You can tell right away if they have a good energy. It like a big, organic thing and you can tell right away if there are good vibrations or not. And if it is really, really good, you always remember it.

As you are touring the whole world – you are just coming from Strasbourg and are heading for Spain and then Poland – do you sense a difference in perceptions? Are there regions that you would define as warmer than others?

Sure. By the way, the Poland tour just got canceled because it looks like the promoter ran off with the money (laughs). But yes, there are quite a few warm areas on the map. There's a club called Roxy in Prague that comes to my mind, and there's a small place in Poland I remember very well, also most places in Germany are very receptive to our music, like here at the Enjoy Jazz festival.

Germany has remarkable public support for all musical genres, maybe because Germans are such a melodic people.

True. In general, the countries from Eastern and Central Europe also have a very open approach to our music and a very open attitude. We just had a tour in the Middle East and there's a fantastic place in Istanbul called Babylon – a very picturesque location too. The place is always full and emanates very good energy.

Why those countries?

I think the reason is that they have been part of a closed system for such a long time and now, when they have opened up, they are fresh and hungry for new things as compared with New York or Paris, where there is such a strong tradition and where people, so to speak, grew up with jazz.

Last year you performed at the Garana Jazz Festival in Romania. What was your impression?

Garana was fantastic – an incredible place. There was a huge storm, but the whole atmosphere was magical. They have a very good public there.

What has been the biggest place you have performed at so far? How big can a place get for jazz?

I think the biggest would be the open-air show in Karlsruhe, called Das Fest, where we had 60,000 people.

You are quite active doing film music. In what way do you interact? Are you illustrating?

I try to find something that sort of encapsulates the soul of the character. I would rather say that I am amplifying. When you have a landscape you can illustrate it, but when you do real music you try to go in and be the soul of the character.

When is a film good? Is it when you remember the music or when you don't?

I think that both the film and the music are good when you remember the main theme. Have you seen *Dancing with Wolves*? I didn't really like the score there. What I like are the scores in Spielberg's movies, think about the theme in *Jaws*, or Stanley Kubrick films. Do you remember the theme in *Eyes Wide Shut*? And then you have those fantastic, beautiful themes like in *Deer Hunter* or the music of Ennio Morricone or Goran Bregović. If you come to think of it, generally in movies there are very few themes that try to amplify the soul; most of the time it is mere illustration.

Famous last question: plans and projects?

I try to stay healthy, take care of my body and my brain now that I am over 50, and enjoy being with my kids. In the first half of January, I am going to develop some ideas in the studio and start working on a new album (ed. note Baboon Moon). If all goes well, it will come out in the autumn or maybe even earlier. I am going to do music for two movies, one of them for a Polish project, and I have quite a few tours next year.

Are you working alone?

I am working partly alone but also with my new guitarist, Stian Westerhus. We'll see what comes out of it. We want to keep it open.

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Libris.RO

Avishai Cohen: Mystical Changes

Israeli bassist and vocalist Avishai Cohen, together with pianist Omri Mor and drummer Amir Bresler, recently participated at Romania's Garana Jazz Festival with a two-hour act of electrifying musical virtuosity. Most of the songs the trio performed are featured on Cohen's recent release, *Seven Seas*. This interview took place before a show that would become memorable in the history of the festival, for the artists and audience alike.

Avishai, you've been touring throughout Europe for quite some time now, playing almost every night. What makes each show different for you?

It is just how you can tell the difference between every day of your life. It is the same thing, not only the fact that it happens somewhere else in the world, potentially, but under that aspect it is as different as possible from the other day. Of course the shows have their own "personality"; sometimes it is a higher show, sometimes it is a lower show, but it is always fun because it connects. We don't hide, we bring music to others; we always connect. The difference is the beauty happening, wherever it happens.

I think the main component in this communication is the audience, their degree of reception and feedback. Are you able to outline the audience's profile from up there? Is the communication functioning that way too?

I can't put my finger on it, but everything has an effect, you know. The audience changes us every night in a mystical way. Look at this; mountain, rain, Romania. You feel it even during the sound check. We are very receptive to the environment because the music helps us to reflect it back.

You are in the widest sense a citizen of the world, biographically and musically. You are well loved in France. Do you have an explanation for that?

We get love in many places, but something happened in France that just blew up. France is one of the great cultural centers of Europe. They accept and consume culture in a natural way. The country is very supportive of culture. We have good success in Sweden as well. It is nice to see how sometimes it is not exactly happening overnight, but it is a success you can

actually catch in a small frame of time. You don't have to go through a five or ten-year period anymore, but you can watch it happening like a resurrection. Seeing the people come along and receiving that amount of love from them is one of the greatest rewards of my life; to be recognized and wanted and loved, and to watch it grow.

When did you really have the feeling that it exploded?

It actually happened with "Lyla" in France. "Lyla" has a particular melodic line and that caught in France. They started playing it on the radio, and the audience knew it already when they came to the concert. It is there we had our first big fan infrastructure. Then it started growing, and we grew too. Now I know that I can give something back to them. I have to keep them interested. I can't keep doing the same thing, in a way. I mean we are musicians and we improvise, that makes possible for you to do the same thing for a long time but we also develop as improvisers. I saw Paul McCartney on TV the other day. I was amazed about the way he was singing "Let It Be". It sounded great and you could tell that he loved it. When it is good, and you believe in it, you can do something forever, but you always have to put a bit of yourself in it.

You can go out there and give them what they expect but to some extent I think that you can also educate them.

In a way, you are. If they want to follow, that is. Education is one of the great things in life, which is only really happening when the people are willing.

Your sound is a peculiar, unusual combination of oriental and Latin tones. Even Seven Seas has a Latin undercurrent. Is it, do you think, mainly due to your mother's Sephardic line of heritage or rather due to the exposure you had to Latin music in New York?

I think that Latinity is a natural place to be for me. Even as a child, whatever Latin connotation I had – which was very little – I embraced it right away. There are many things of Latin origin that attract me immediately. I have always been attracted by rhythm. I love the Spanish language. It is a beautiful language for music and some of my favorite music comes from there: the flamenco, Eddie Palmieri, the New York salsa, the Afro-Cuban, the Ladino.

Aurora was the album where you became a singer. Where did this need arise?

I started messing around with singing in New York around 2000, where at some point I had a rock band together with a guy, and I did some background vocals. On the album *Lyla* I actually sang two pieces, and hated it. My mother sings a bit, so when I got home from vacation to Israel I used to sit with her and sing some Ladino songs. I even recorded some of them. So I got closer to the voice in that way and started singing for myself and writing some songs. When I went back to live in Israel six years ago, at a certain point I started writing in Hebrew as well. So I had this intimacy and closeness to the music that is unchangeable and I thought,

if I do it just for myself I am kind of hiding something, which is OK, you don't have to show everything. But then I thought, "Why don't I try to do something very scary?"

Is singing scary for you?

Yes, I am still very scared when I have to sing, even if afterwards it is so soothing and connective. But in the beginning it took me a while to accept my voice. It's a process you have to go through.

What is the relation to your instrument? Are you using your voice to underline the bass line or to complete it?

Sometimes I do both. I use it as a second voice especially with the bow, or in company with pizzicato. I use it in unison with the bow, there's a lot of effect that you can get like that. It sounds like bass clarinet or something similar.

When you are composing your music, is the approach conceptual or rather accidental, inspirational?

It is usually just a sequence in my life. I stop somewhere and say; OK I have all these compositions, let's start working on them. And then you look at what goes on a record. Whenever I do a record, that's also a recording of my own life and of where I have been in it at that time. When I write, it may be accidental but I trust myself enough to care and provide a life for it. You have to trust yourself and be very alert at the same time. It is a combination of letting yourself go, and not knowing where you are going.

Do you remember how you came to your first composition?

I was sitting at the piano at home. I was probably nine or ten, and my sister had a piano in her room. She used to study and I sat there and things came up – that was before I had even studied – and I sort of identified some patterns. All my knowledge of music I had at that time came from the radio. I remember I was very interested in it. So I started studying.

Jazz is synergy and connection. How much in an album is you, and how much the others in your group?

The music is just as good as the people who are playing it. The musicians have a huge influence on it, but, with due respect, the composition is not the end of the story; it is only a part of it, a structure and an identity. It is very important what you make of it after that.

On Gently Disturbed as on most of your albums, there is a certain rhythmical brand, a kind of syncopation or counterpoint, which gives a tremendous inner drive. Did anything special happen there that made that pattern so pregnant?

Many things happened there. It was in a global sense a very favorable moment – the sky and the moon were aligned (laughs). Beside the atmosphere – the identity of the record – it was the way we played it. We were very much alive when we recorded it and that's why it came out like that.

I know what Jaco Pastorius means to you. Nevertheless, are you also following an inner model, are you relating to a certain personal evolutionary pattern?

When I was younger I wanted to be an influential musician, a big thing. Today I have reached that state of beauty to be one, if I may say that. Now that I have become somewhat influential, I just want to keep it that way, to live up to it.

This is indeed a beautiful thing because it also implies a sense of responsibility.

Always. A composition would not exist without responsibility, and that's the basis of the real influence through art. This is something you have to keep up with. It is an ongoing process. You have all these young eager musicians, the young masters, the new talents, who can play the music and they have an attitude as well, so through and with them I have to make sure I am staying. They are like a mirror. Their input is very potent.

You are very busy all through the year, but leave a few summer months free. Are you actually still practicing?

Not so much in the classical sense, because you play a lot almost every day, and after a while you reach a certain level of expertise. We practice in a different way. In our head, which is a very important thing – visualizing music, working out music and dreaming it. The music never dies in that sense; it is ever going on in your head. Sometimes when you are practicing, you don't have the capacity or the ability to go through other things in your head as much as when you listen to music. And some other times you don't want to listen to music because you have to listen to the music that goes on inside your head. As I am maturing I find myself more often studying the music without an instrument.

Do you get time to listen to music? What are you listening to these days?

Always. Everything. I am listening to whatever is played. I listen to Bach, and I listen to Mozart. I listen to Paco De Lucia and to new records or bands I hear about or I receive, because I receive a lot of records. I listen to anything. I listen all the time and I absorb it and I process it. Take Bach. Bach is still the most challenging music I've ever heard.

Are there goals you aim to attain in a concrete manner?

I am writing for a string quartet and oboe. This is something I will want to bring out next year, or in 2013. I am also very interested in doing a project in conjunction with flamenco musicians, with a Ladino connotation.