

# Switzerland - A Drummer's Country

by Dieter Ulrich

Where to start? - Maybe with the surprising fact that elderly people who still know well our regional Swiss-German dialect call a trap set "a jazz"! - This simply means that this alien instrument, bringing all those dangerous sounding grooves into their everyday dance music, immediately became a synonym for the entire idiom. It took the drums to make it jazzy for the Swiss.

Looking back at the history of Swiss jazz, we were probably not more open-minded towards that new ecstatic sound (mostly presented by African-Americans) than in the countries surrounding us. But I would consider it typically Swiss that you could find in Switzerland an impressive amount of jazz concerts already in the '20s and '30s, with stars as famous as Louis Armstrong and Coleman Hawkins playing with their bands up in the smallest mountain villages - Hawkins even recorded a couple of shellacs in Zurich in 1936. Back in the late '20s Zurich had three dance halls with regular jazz bands.

With the Fred Böhler Orchestra and especially Teddy Stauffer's Original Teddies, Switzerland already had two internationally renowned jazz orchestras years before World War II had started. But, if you think this helped jazz find wider recognition, you are wrong! Jazz was not liked more in Switzerland, only accepted more easily, more self-evidently than in the rest of Europe. And considering the fact that the drumset - "the jazz" - was the only instrument that did not even exist before that musical style was coming up, this little country in the middle of a fascist continent, was at least ten years ahead when it came to mastering this new instrument!

There was almost no remarkable European drummer born before 1930, the Swiss Stuff Combe an important exception (besides Brit Phil Seaman). But, of the five leading European drummers born between 1930-40, four were Swiss: Charly Antolini (1937), Pierre Favre (1937), Daniel Humair (1938) and Hans Peter Giger (1939). The fifth, Tony Oxley, was born in Great Britain, the other non-fascist country.

In central Europe these four artists soon represented four different stylistic schools in jazz, like cardinal points almost: Antolini, a technically brilliant and traditionally-trained 'drum-player', whose main inspiration was Louie Bellson, set the ground work. In contrast to him, Daniel Humair always was more into

experimental handling of groove, rhythm and interplay. Shortly after 1960 his style was already very personal and modern (there was not a shadow of "trying to play like..." any more). Pierre Favre, whom you can hear at The Stone this month, always was a very different personality. More than his two compatriots, he progressed through different styles, times and conceptions, starting as an exceptionally talented and already well-trained youngster. He played with Chet Baker and many other greats - with Louis Armstrong even (!) - at an early age. But, his elegance in style and outstanding sound culture soon made him detect and develop the more percussive, even ethnological sides of his instrument. Experimenting with musicians like Peter Kowald and Irène Schweizer, Favre soon reached a different and clearly 'European' level of piano trio, then later on in duo playing. That in the '70s he got more and more known as a solo performer was only logical. Hans Peter Giger in many ways was something like a king-sized version of the others. Starting his international career mainly in the oldtime jazz field, he was soon recording with Ellington and Strayhorn. Returning to Switzerland, he was co-founder of the then first professional jazz school in Bern, leading the Family Of Percussion and playing and recording with everyone, up to Archie Shepp in 1980. An incomparable early master of polyrhythms and odd meters he, as a player and teacher, gave Switzerland's drummer community much more than we tend to remember!

With these four outstanding stylists on drums, Switzerland was already well equipped in earlier days, when jazz was starting to establish itself in Europe as a new international art. But there are at least three other reasons why the drums were easier to learn and easier to be played in Switzerland in the first half of the last century. As in America, a vivid brass band tradition produced a constant need for young drummers. Every village, every association had and still has its own band, playing old corny marches right up to the Duke Ellington repertoire. Due to a very decentralized political and cultural structure, almost every Swiss town at that time built up its own almost independent little scene, had its own bands, festivals, clubs and little coffee shops and nowadays jazz schools. Only for illustration: the National Amateur Jazz Festival was founded in Zurich in 1951 and Switzerland, with its only 6.5 million inhabitants, has seven jazz schools and in five of them you can get a professional diploma! And finally, Switzerland was not destroyed after the big war; there was money, safety and a future and although most of the jazz players were not professionals at that time, they were able to develop and, if really talented, they could start an international career.

For the following generation, Switzerland's lead had already finished, but the seed was growing. Among well-educated youngsters of wealthy backgrounds, it became hip to play jazz. Many of the best players - and there were some very good ones - did not need to make a living with their music and when the big late '60s jazz crisis also hit our country, they returned to family businesses and turned into semi-professionals or started something new on their own.

But the local scenes all over the country, supported by a growing cultural state system, made it evident how creative these little entities could get. In Zurich the Africana club played the main role in the late '60s and beginning of the '70s. Being the first station of the South African musicians community, later fully moving to London, the Africana was the place where they left their distinctive musical traces. Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), Dudu Pukwana, Johnny Dyani and many other South African musicians impressed the locals in Zurich as much as they did later on in London. Drummer Makaya Ntshoko (mainly known for his fabulous work with Hugh Masekela) even settled there, becoming a respected 'European' drummer and a member of the Basel scene.

But if you started to play jazz at that time and were interested in its roots and did not have a teacher who had all the old records, you had better be good in paleontology! Of Charlie Parker you would only find some obscure bootlegs of even more obscure club dates, sometimes containing not more than his naked solos and many a record salesman would get a puzzled look trying to understand why you saw Miles Davis belonging to the jazz instead of pop-rock department in his shop. When I started to get into drumming in the mid '70s Heinz Lieb and Fredy Studer, both into a more rocky vein, were coming up and soon were the most successful younger jazz drummers around. But it was the four older guys who had already made Switzerland a 'drummer's country' for the rest of Europe. ❖

*Ulrich is at The Stone Mar. 4th as part of Objets Trouvée, Mar. 6th with Oliver Lake and Christian Weber and Mar. 9th with Jan Schlegel and Ray Anderson. See Calendar.*

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## VOXNEWS

by Katie Bull

Let's span the inter-generational vocal panorama in our olde and ever-young New York City. In the same way an instrumentalist's sound can mature into deeper dimensionality, the sound of a fine elder jazz singer carries richness of nuance in phrasing, ease of invention, an 'it-goes-without-saying' level of entrainment and total solidity of expression. You can't buy that. You can't auto-tune that either. But you can often notice a foreshadowing of wise elder-energy in younger singers. One of the many great things about jazz vocal listeners in this town is your age-blind listening. By supporting music first, you are enacting defiance towards our culture's ageism.

At Dizzy's Club (Mar. 27th-Apr. 1st), "Generations of Jazz Vocals" will feature the sonorously unadorned Sachal Vasandani holding his own alongside the seasoned fountain-of-youth Jon Hendricks. I just witnessed 90-year-old Hendricks tear it up for Scott

Seigel's classy Nightlife Awards in Town Hall with stunning energy! The Grande Dame of interdisciplinary jazz wildness, Shelley Hirsch, will blow you away with her in-the-moment free association inventions at Roulette (Mar. 29th and 31st). Another boldly idiosyncratic veteran singer/composer up this month is an artist cut of jazz cabaret cloth, Nora York. She will lead her Amazing Band in "Power/Play" at the BAMCafé (Mar. 9th), featuring the bluesy fusion sounds of Sherryl Marshall in an original socio-politically themed jazz-theater event. More classic jazz cabaret - where the singer is an improvising instrumentalist - will be on display with legendary pianist/singer Barbara Carroll appearing at Highlights in Jazz (Mar. 8th). For those who respect the lineage of the classic genre, you will need a dose of Carroll to absorb this news: the famed Oak Room at the Algonquin is closed for good. Amy Cervini offers an ode to Blossom Dearie, stepping back in time on *Digging Me Digging You* (Anzic). Cervini has a pristine ebullience;

she never guilds the lily, every note counts and her band is boss, appearing at 55Bar (Mar. 6th-7th). Weaving lightning scat, lyrics from life and bluesy grit, the Grammy-nominated singer/composer Gregory Porter will celebrate *Be Good* (Motéma) at the Highline Ballroom (Mar. 16th). Major news for Sheila Jordan fans; a previously unreleased recording made 12 years ago brings the perfect ease and simpatico between her and bassist Harvey S to our ears again on *Yesterdays* (HighNote). And if you love the combination of bass and voice, Sandy Patton's deep alto range matches Thomas Durst's strings as they swing, slink and groove in conjoined impulse on *Painting Jazz* (Unit). In contrast, genre-busting saxophonist/singer Jessica Lurie blasts away at your expectations with *Megaphone Heart* (Zipa). Last but not least, Steve Colson & The Unity Group features the totally free Iqua Colson on *Triumph* (Universal Sound). Although a series of individual pieces, the sum feels like an inter-woven extended free-form improvisation. Sorta like...life. ❖