



DEPART SOKAL - KÄNZIG - VALIHORA REFIRE

Harry Sokal Tenor & Soprano Sax, Effects
Heiri Känzig Bass
Martin Valihora Drums

Recorded June 1 - 3, 2013 by Andy Neresheimer at Hardstudios Winterthur for Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen. Recording producer for SRF: Peter Büri. Edited, mixed and mastered by Harry Sokal at Marchfield Studio, Breitsätten, Austria. Liner notes: Christian Rentsch. Photos: Francesca Pfeffer. Graphic design: Jonas Schoder. Produced by Depart and Intakt Records, Patrik Landolt

Intakt CD 241 / 2014

Anyone who has seen him on stage – rocking and stomping with his feet, skipping and jumping, his upper body tense, shooting forward, sketching melodies like lines in the air with his saxophone, the instrument soaring up, then pounding down like a hammer blow onto the final accent of a phrase – knows that Harry Sokal is a hard working musician, not someone who sits in his study worrying about how to express musical theories via sound, or how to shock his listeners with unusual notes and noises. He prefers to practice his instrument – for hours each day, even now – so that the tone and the timing are right, so that his fingers and lips do just what he wants them to; he is a perfectionist.

Harry Sokal left a lasting impression on me a few years ago when I got to hear the Vienna Art Orchestra practicing; Sokal was an integral part of the group from the start. Mathias Rüegg was going to great lengths to tell the musicians the precise trick for getting a difficult passage right. At some point Sokal, who had been listening attentively to the complicated explanations, said “if it sounds right, it is right,” with which the problem was done and dusted, and the situation made clear.

Born in March 1954 in Vienna, Harry Sokal grew up in a musical family. His father played Broadway tunes and German *Schlager* on his accordion, his aunt accompanied him on the guitar, his mother or one of his cousins sang along (badly, Sokal explicitly notes), his brother was allowed to play the maracas, while Harry himself was initially forced to content himself with the recorder. At the age of ten he switched to the clarinet, which was not only good for his musical development; it also boosted his self-confidence, as from now on he had the loudest instrument in his family band, which sometimes played at the local *Heurige*.

At sixteen or seventeen Sokal made friends with the gypsy musicians Jano and Harri Stojka, cousins from a prominent Roma dynasty and members of Karl Ratzner's band Gipsy-Love, later of the Objektiv Truth Orchestra formed by pianist Peter Wolf, who subsequently worked with Frank Zappa. In the daytime Sokal practiced with the Stojka cousins and the Polish saxophonist Leszek Zadlo; in the evenings he played in Vienna clubs. At the same time he was studying clarinet, saxophone and harmony at the music academy and the jazz conservatoire. “I was a real hippy at the time, with long hair and everything which went with it,” Sokal says, “and I also went busking.”

Sokal made several tours with the Hungarian pianist Béla Lakatos, made recordings with Peter Wolf for André Heller, and spent time in the USA (“I told my mother, ‘I’m going there for good, I’ll never come back to Austria.’” After three months he was back in Vienna.) Then he formed his first group, Timeless, with Heiri Känzig on double bass, Uli Scherer on piano, and Jano Stojka on drums, Joris Dudli joining them later. They were still together into the mid eighties and were to form the hardcore of Mathias Rüegg's Vienna Art Orchestra.

Of these musicians Känzig was always Sokal's closest musical collaborator as well as a personal friend. Born 1957 in New York to Swiss parents, he studied in Zürich, Vienna and Graz and lived in a turbulent shared house with Mathias Rüegg throughout this period. “Heiri was already such a good bassist that the amazing Art Farmer, whose quintet I also played in, booked him to play bass as soon as he heard him on our Timeless record.” (Känzig returned to Switzerland in the late seventies and, like Sokal, played with many different European and American musicians, from Pierre Favre, Daniel Humair and Lauren Newton, George Gruntz, Franco Ambrosetti and Matthieu Michel, to John Scofield, Gary Thomas und Mark Feldman, as well as artists such as Dieter Meier (Yello), the harpist Andreas Vollenweider and the tango musician Michael Zisman.)

For the next decade the cornerstones of Sokal's musical development and career were the Vienna Art Orchestra – which he was an integral part of from its first concert as the Premier Orchestre d'Art de Vienne, May 1977 at Gittis Jazz-Club, to its definitive end in July 2010 – and the Art Farmer Quintet – which he remained with till the great American trumpeter died in 1999. Alongside and in between all this, the busy, hard working Sokal played constantly with countless other groups, with European and American musicians, from Friedrich Gulda and Joe Zawinul, Michel Portal and Daniel Humair, via Art Blakey and Johnny Griffin to Carla Bley, Dave Holland and Terje Rypdal. Between the Vienna Art Orchestra, which began as a bunch of frenzied anarcho-musical clowns and ended as a rigid parade-ground for Rüegg's increasingly virtuoso arrangements, and Art Farmer, the perfect, tasteful gentleman musician of the modern mainstream, Sokal was able to develop his unbounded stylistic range and his perfectionist, highly-skilled musicianship, as well as his exuberant delight in playing, his alert spontaneity and effervescent imagination.

In 1985, together with Heiri Känzig and the drummer Fredy Studer, Sokal founded the trio Depart. After only a few concerts Studer was forced to withdraw; a karate master, he had broken his arm during training. His ‘replacement’, the Swiss drummer Jojo Mayer, from a famous Zürich



Depart, 2013
Photo by Francesca Pfeffer

family of musicians, only seventeen at the time and enjoying child-prodigy status, proved to be a lucky find, certainly in the initial Depart years. His spectacular, impetuous playing, and the stylistic expansion into contemporary pop, drum 'n' bass, funk and electronic beats brought a new, younger and very enthusiastic audience. With Känzig's groovy bass riffs, the lilting motifs derived from Alpine folk music, and Sokal's funky saxophone lines, Depart succeeded in both brightening up and heating up the slightly industrial, dark, inner-city sounds of Mayer's techno and house aesthetic with jazzy, folkloric warmth. It was no coincidence that one critic described Depart's music as "new Alpine-country gospel."

After nine years and two CDs (*Depart. Live in Moers*, 1987; *Letters from Nowhere*, 1992) the band seemed to have exhausted its supplies of shared musical ideas. Sokal was working with other musicians; Känzig and Mayer each had personal projects. Between 2006 and 2009 there were two revivals, with successful tours and two further CDs (*Reloaded*, 2006; *Mountain Messenger*, 2008). Above all it was Jojo Mayer, with his electronic post rock, ambient and drum 'n' bass, who had taken a direction in which the jazz idioms in Sokal and Känzig's work no longer played a role.

With the young Slovakian drummer Martin Valihora, who lives between Bratislava and New York and has also collaborated with American musicians such as Hiromi and Anthony Jackson, the current Depart line-up is less of a stylistic new start, more of a return to form, recalling the infectious playing of Depart's early days. "Obviously we want Depart to continue playing highly explosive, groovy music," Sokal says, "but above all our music has become unpredictable and surprising again. Within a precisely delineated framework we have all three become more capricious; that ensures the tension and spontaneity which keeps our music alive."

Although Depart is Harry Sokal's band, as with all previous Depart CDs, Heiri Känzig's musical influence on this CD is just as important as Sokal's. Seven of the thirteen compositions were written by Känzig. This is no coincidence; Känzig is the leading melodist among European bass players. And anyone who thinks that after a hundred years of jazz history the wellsprings of great tunes might have started to dry up will be pleasantly surprised. Like fairy-tale motifs, Känzig's motifs appear to originate from the immeasurable global wealth of folklore, and yet are thoroughly new and brimming of contemporary musicality. Almost all his pieces are so surprisingly accessible – without descending into folksy populism – that you feel you could sing along; their sophistication reveals itself only when you actually try it. And the seasoned melodist Känzig is not afraid to be a melodist; the tunes are heartily cheerful.

The first few bars of "Talking 58" alone demonstrate that Depart's music 'works'. Incorporating a 5/8 beat, Känzig's incisive bass riff is as inspiring as it is challenging – to the listeners but above all to the musicians. "We don't simply need stimulation; we also need the challenge, so we aren't tempted to knock out empty, hackneyed lines and phrases." Like most of his compositions, "Chambers' Room", clearly rooted in the jazz tradition and dedicated to the bass player Paul Chambers, shows a typical characteristic of Känzig's compositional methods: many of his pieces are put together from isolated, contrasting jigsaw pieces which still manage not to collide abruptly, instead giving way smoothly to each other while still providing the musicians with highly varied 'backdrops'. "It takes a lot of work – in the studio later too – till the tracks gel organically but at the same time remain flexible enough for new things to happen on stage."

In "Choral", a composition by the Freiburg pianist Thierry Lang, with whom Känzig has also played for many years, in "Barrock", "Funky Straight", or the traditional tune "Erzherzog-Johann-Jodler", Sokal doubles and multiplies his saxophone part with an electronic multieffect processor which can change the octave of individual notes or split them into whole chords. Without making a big deal about it, what Sokal is doing here is the continuation of what pioneers such as Eddie Harris tried in the 1960s, turning their instruments into an entire saxophone section. As on previous CDs, Depart have again reworked two original folk songs: the Styrian tune "Erzherzog-Johann-Jodler" and the Swiss "Guggisberglied".

However these two old warhorses have rarely been heard in such funky, groovy versions. "We couldn't just leave these pieces as they were," Sokal says, "we had to take them apart, twist and turn the individual parts, playing and experimenting, till something personal came out of it, till it became our "Erzherzog-Johann-Jodler", our very own personal "Guggisberglied". Depart Refire is not complicated or difficult music. Harry Sokal, Heiri Känzig and Martin Valihora do not make music in order to advance the history of music, but to entertain their audience and make them happy. However their way of providing entertainment involves musical sophistication, intelligence and craft, along with good taste, witty playing and inventiveness. It takes a lot of work, as you can tell when you see Harry Sokal and his fellow musicians on stage, to make it sound right.

Linernotes by Christian Rentsch / Translation: Steph Morris