

THE NORWEGIAN JAZZ ARCHIVE:

a Centre of Authority

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Introduction

Once the First World War was over, the latest American fashion caught on across the continent of Europe. Even in the Norwegian capital everything was “jazz”, and the jazz concept signified everything that was wild and new. “Jazzdansen” [the jazz dance] was the height of fashion, and was duly demonstrated at Christmas balls in the schools of Christiania at that time.¹ In 1921, two of the first foreign jazz bands came to the capital: these were the English “Feldman’s Jazz Band”, and “The Five Jazzing Devils”, who, according to their publicity, arrived “direct from America”. These first overseas musical visitors were an important inspiration for the formation of the first jazz band in Christiania during the 1920s.

But already from 1908 the accordionists of Norway had been recording lots of ragtime melodies and other jazz-related American music, and these tunes were one way of preparing Norwegian ears for what was to come. The Norwegian jazz pioneers of the 1920s played the most popular dance melodies of their day in a light, syncopated style, a far cry from what future generations would call jazz, and only well into the 1930s do we find the first “real” Norwegian jazz recordings.

From these humble beginnings jazz became part of Norwegian cultural life. It is possible to follow its peaks and troughs, its stylistic development, the production of recordings, the rise and fall of jazz clubs, visits by great overseas artists, training, journalism, organisational activity, research and the international recognition of a genuinely Norwegian jazz music.

Objectives and Duties

As an institution, the Norsk Jazzarkiv aims to look after all aspects of Norwegian jazz into the future. The history of jazz in Norway must be seen as a part of the whole history of Norwegian music and placed in the context of our knowledge of Norwegian music. Thus the most important, and principal, objective of the Jazzarkiv’s activity is “to contribute to knowledge and information about jazz in Norway in the past and present, through documentation and competent collection building, and to make this knowledge available to as many as possible”. So the Norsk Jazzarkiv [hereafter NJA], since its foundation in 1981, has had collecting, documentation, information and research as its most important objectives.

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¹ *Oslo, the Norwegian capital, was called Christiania [Kristiania] between 1624 and 1925.*

Objectives

The NJA was set up in 1981 by a group of enthusiasts, with the collector, discographer and jazz historian Johs Bergh at its head. The Archive is constituted as a private foundation, and its management comprises representatives from large research, archival and specialist music institutions.² The specialist work goes hand in hand with the selection of specialist staff. The formal organisation arranges appropriate administration by influential institutions that, in part, do equivalent work to the NJA, and have a strong base of jazz expertise. The NJA receives an operating grant in addition to a national budget. Modest grants pay for one established post, but the archive takes on additional staff members for finite projects.

The Collections

The Archive has, over the years, built up extensive collections of varied types of material that together comprise a unique collection of documents about the development of jazz in Norway. The most important is the recordings collection, which contains both private recordings from clubs and festivals and commercially-produced recordings. There are also collections of photographs, videos, press cuttings, magazines and books. The collections contain both familiar and rare materials. It is with a certain awe that we handle the original archive of Norway's first jazz club, the Oslo Rhythm Club (from 1936), which Johs Bergh enthusiastically described as "jazz history's Dead Sea Scrolls". There is also Jan Garbarek's rare first LP, "Til Vigds" of 1967, the original hand-painted advertisements for the concert where the LP was recorded, and photographs of the event. The NJA's most important resource is its collections, together with the skills brought by its staff and by other, specially chosen, workers. A precondition for building up our collections is that the institution has the confidence and good opinion of potential donors.

Research

As a research area, Norwegian jazz history has to a modest degree become an object of interest in the academic sphere. When the NJA opened, large areas of Norwegian jazz history had not even been described, and were thus unfamiliar. An important task for the Archive was thus to initiate research into the field. It was outside the academic field that the very basic research into and documentation of Norwegian jazz history was to occur. Three research projects into the topic from its humble beginnings up until the 1960s were carried out by Johs Bergh and Bjørn Stendahl under the direction of the NJA. Since Johs Bergh's death in 2001 Bjørn Stendahl has continued the work alone.

The NJA is delighted that, at the present time, more and more students choose assignments on topics concerning the story of Norwegian jazz. The first doctoral study came from the University of Trondheim in 1995, being Tor Dybo's study *Jan Garbareks musikk i en*

² The following institutions are represented on the NJA board: Institutt for musikk, NTNU; Institutt for musikk og teater, Universitet i Oslo; Musikkinformasjonscenteret [the Norwegian Music Information Centre]; Nasjonalbiblioteket [the National Library of Norway]; and the Norsk Jazzforum.

kulturell endringsprosess [Jan Garbareks' Music in a Process of Cultural Change]. It has also been important to strengthen the scholarly focus around the NJA itself, and to this end we have arranged two Norwegian conferences, the latter in 2002.

Dissemination

The NJA has, in the course of its daily help to students, journalists and researchers, prioritised work on jazz history of the type begun by Johs Bergh and Bjørn Stendahl. Central to the Archive's productions, which consist up to the present of thirteen publications, are three jazz history books, in addition to Johs Bergh's discography.³ We should also note Bergh and Jan Evensmo's "solography",⁴ and Steinar Kristiansen's contribution on new Norwegian jazz history.⁵

Sound is absolutely central to jazz, and the NJA has been keen that jazz history books should be accompanied by recorded examples. Together with the recording company Herman Records the Archive has produced three CDs containing representative sound examples that cover the same period as the three books by Bergh already referred to.⁶

The Archive's internet presence is via the "jazzbasen" website at www.jazzbasen.no. The website was set up in collaboration with the National Library and provides a knowledge base for Norwegian jazz history. The central element is an advanced database of discographical information, based on the *Norwegian Jazz Discography 1905-1998*, but with some additions. There are also biographies of important Norwegian jazz performers, surveys of jazz history, a photo gallery and, not least, two hours of recorded examples from the history of Norwegian jazz. Access is available in both English and Norwegian. In addition, the Archive has produced and contributed to historical exhibitions, has arranged "themed" evenings, and has contributed to several fora by way of lectures on historical aspects of Norwegian jazz.

Conclusion

Jazz in Norway today is strong, and Norwegian jazz musicians get noticed by other countries. The music has developed, changed and grown steadily from small beginnings. In the same way that we document the earliest impulses in Norway's jazz history, we also have to document the expression and activities of contemporary society. Events in the news also

³ *The three books are Johs Bergh, Jazz not og swing: Jazz i Norge 1920-1940 (Oslo: NJA, 1987); Sigarett Stomp: Jazz i Norge 1940-1950 (ibid., 1991); and Cool, Klover og Dixie: Jazz i Norge 1950-1960 (ibid., 1997). The discography referred to is Bergh's Norwegian Jazz Discography 1905-1998 (Oslo: NJA, 1999).*

⁴ *Johs Bergh and Jan Evensmo, Jazz Tenor Saxophone in Norway 1917-1959 (Oslo: NJA, 1996)*

⁵ *Steinar Kristiansen, Norges musikkhistorie (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2002), vol. 5.*

⁶ *These recordings are numbered HJCD9001, 9002 and 9003. They respectively accompany volumes 1, 2 and 3 of Bergh's study.*

affect how we interpret (and listen to) the past. In this regard there are plenty of tasks still to be tackled. NJA is a very small and specialised institution. Maybe this kind of activity still has an important part to play in a world where dissemination and information increasingly appear approximate and imprecise, and where technology makes it possible to disseminate without deeper meaning. The provision of large databases remains important to such an implementation.

NJA's most important resource is its material, along with the staff who connect with it. The Archive wants to be able to contribute to general historical, biographical and discographical knowledge via the material in its collections, and to offer instruction on, and research into, the study of jazz in Norway by students, journalists, researchers and others. We hope for a steady increase in the possibilities for use of the materials in our collections, and to make use of them in the development of our knowledge of jazz in Norway, and of the story of jazz in general.