

# Cultural identity and creative autonomy in Nordic jazz

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## ABSTRACT

Historians and educators have traditionally presented the relatively short evolution of jazz in a linear, epochal fashion. Applications of this model are often limited to the music's domestic evolution, paying little or no heed to activities outside the USA. Even where the existence of non-American jazz is acknowledged, it is more often than not excluded from the parameters of historiography and critique.

Over the past forty years the Nordic contribution to the music has in many ways come to mirror the multicultural melting pot that first spawned jazz at the beginning of the 20th Century. The 'Nordic sound' is identified as such despite having firm roots in the American tradition coupled with a 'receptive ear' to global influences. In championing ethnically and stylistically diverse fusions under the 'Nordic sound' banner, labels such as ECM and Rune Grammofon have established an alternative imagining of the genre. The hybridized outcomes of such projects have confounded traditional conceptions of the jazz tradition, challenging discourses of historical succession and genre identity.

Despite deeply conceived individual national identities, the relative proximity and freedom of movement between the Nordic countries and their neighbours has enabled significant transnational cultural exchange. The sum of such exchanges are arguably more defining to an emergent and evolving jazz than is the case in the USA, where a stronger focus is often given to the reclamation and refinement of the music's domestic heritage. This paper will use practice-based and academic research to show how an American musical form has been reinterpreted to enable the expression of cultural individuality, at the same time encouraging stylistic crossover and innovation.

This paper will examine the emergence and development of the 'Nordic tone' in Norway within the context of its origins and through comparison and contrast with developments in Scottish jazz over the same period. The rationale for a comparative investigation is based on both countries being, at least in a pre-Nineteenth Century conception, Nordic; both sharing a similar population size of c. 5 million; and both identifying as cultural units within a larger union, albeit in markedly different political circumstances. Norway is often lauded as a utopian example of national autonomy by the Scottish independence lobby, although practical, comparative investigation has yet to be applied to Scotland's cultural sector.

The key factors of national culture; education; government funding and industry support bodies; platforms for presentation and receptions will be examined in relation to their role in the nurturing of nationally informed variance in jazz music.

## **THE GLOCALIZATION OF JAZZ**

The term 'Nordic tone' is employed to describe the culturally and aesthetically distinct sound of Scandinavian jazz as typified by, although not exclusively, the output of the ECM record label. Often nationalist in its interpretation, its roots are argued to stretch back to the individualism of 19<sup>th</sup> Century romantic classicism (Hyldegaard SJ, 2009). The term both describes the synthesis of Scandinavian influence and separates this branch of jazz from an otherwise American conception. Although originally geographically conceived, the term is perhaps better defined as a musical aesthetic created in the image of its originators and their followers.

Nordic tone has since the 1970s come to represent an uncomfortably essentialised homogeneity that ignores not only the distinct cultural identities of the Scandinavian countries but also those of the music's individual practitioners. Norwegian, Swedish and Danish musicians interpret and interact with the glocalized jazz model in markedly different ways. Finland is conspicuously absent from any Nordic tone discourse despite having a rich jazz tradition of its own.

As documented through the recorded output of Manfred Eicher's ECM label, Norwegian musicians Jan Garbarek, Arild Andersen, Jon Christensen et al trail blazed a reworking of the imported American jazz idiom. With encouragement from visiting jazz luminaries George Russel and Don Cherry (Nicholson S, 2005), a glocalized imagining of jazz was conceived, drawing as much on influence from Norway's indigenous musical culture as legacy of American jazz history. The Nordic tone has come to symbolise the musical representation of national culture, environment and design aesthetic. Freed from the historically informed constraints of the American model, it has provided a vehicle for expression that more meaningfully reflects the cultural representation of the Nordic countries and their global position.

Nordic tone is by no means the only manifestation of a glocalized jazz aesthetic. Manouche or "Gipsy Jazz", as typified by the Quintette du Hot Club de France, enjoyed distinction from the American jazz conception as early as the 1930s. Fusing jazz with Romani music, this hybridized music has become popular far beyond the borders of its native France. Perhaps due to an early establishing of stylistic rigidity, Manouche became a victim of its own 'otherness', innovation often being relegated in favour of authenticity.

Where American jazz is traditionally presented as having evolved in a linear, progressive fashion (Berendt J, 1952), this new conception of jazz, with its freer rhythmic conception, alternatively informed melody and harmony and distinct production processes, has provided an incubatory environment for divergent interpretations. Be it on recordings such as Garbarek's 'Madar' (1993) or Nils Petter Molvaer's 'Khmer' (1997), music from different cultures, whether geographically or aesthetically defined, have been incorporated into the Nordic tone conception. At a time in our history where nationalism is so often exclusionary in its interpretation, there is surely some comfort to be found in the cultural hybridity present in such a nationally conceived music.

Where, by virtue of the Nordic tone, jazz from Scandinavia has enjoyed critical autonomy from its American roots for almost half a century, Scottish jazz has as yet to establish a similarly defined national sound on domestic or global platforms. Despite boasting a vibrant domestic jazz scene, festivals in both

urban and rural settings, an established (if limited) national circuit of jazz clubs and a burgeoning jazz education system, jazz from Scotland has so far only flirted with the concept of national identity in its presentation. Notable practitioners that have taken influence from their Scottish musical heritage include artists such as Colin Steel (ACT), Graeme Stephen (Fabrikant Records) David Milligan and Celtic Feet (Caber Records).

As Scotland's political will for independence from the United Kingdom gains momentum, questions of national identity as they pertain to the country's cultural life come to the fore. Is jazz music created in Scotland distinct from that of its English neighbours, its American forebears or its Scandinavian cousins? And if so, what factors stand in the way Scotland's national jazz music gaining international recognition on a par with that of the Nordic tone?

## **FUNDING AND SUPPORT**

Jazz in Scotland has enjoyed substantially less financial and infrastructural support than its Scandinavian neighbours. This is perhaps no surprise when, by example, taking into account Norway and Scotland's (as included within the UK) HDI ratings of 1<sup>st</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> respectively.

Funding has traditionally been distributed across all music forms in Scotland with the lion's share apportioned to classical and traditional music sectors (ref). Jazz and popular music have remained poor relations, receiving only relatively sporadic and isolated grants.

Norsk Jazzforum was founded as early as 1953 and the country boasts 5 regional jazz centres in Norway, each receiving funding from government, regional and municipal sources and working together in tour co-ordination, archiving and research. In contrast, the Scottish Jazz Federation founded 2005 to provide a collective voice for an industry that was previously perceived as an outpost of British jazz under the UK-wide administration of Jazz Services.

As is the case with their American counterparts (Hyldegaard SJ, 2009), Scottish jazz musicians therefore often tread a more furrowed path in their interpretation of the jazz idiom in an attempt to reach its established audience

and thereby maximise financial returns for their efforts. Much of the commercial opportunity for Scottish jazz musicians exists in the corporate entertainment sector – a sector not known for its receptivity to innovation.

As a result, any nationally conceived reinterpretation of the idiom has been the preserve of the individual musician or ensemble. Operating outside of any coherent cultural manifesto or funding directive, such innovations often struggle to gain momentum and acceptance into the wider consciousness or the marketplace.

## **PERFORMANCE AND RECORDING**

Scotland's jazz festivals and jazz clubs are vastly outnumbered by those of Norway, presenting significant challenges to the possibility for cultural product development and its exposure.

There is also a paucity of Scottish based record labels specialising in jazz release. With the exception of Linn Records, largely concerned with the release of vocal jazz, the remaining labels are DIY initiatives run by musicians themselves to fill the vacuum. Since the demise of the SAC and National Lottery funded Caber Records (1998 - 2004), these small independent labels are run with little to no investment and therefore struggle to make critical and commercial impact.

Following the championing of the Nordic tone by the Munich based ECM label, Norwegian labels such as Rune Gramophone (incl. Arve Henriksen, Elephant9, Supersilent) and Jazzland Records (incl. Audun Kleive, Bugge Wesseltoft, Eivind Aarset) have provided a consistent platform for the country's established and emerging artists.

With the exception of limited regional play on regional and national radio (The Jazz House, Jazz on 3 etc), jazz enjoys relatively little exposure through terrestrial radio in Scotland. This is in contrast to Norway's NRK having a dedicated jazz station (albeit not offering an exclusively domestic play list) in addition to stylistically themed programming on its other channels.

## **EDUCATION**

Jazz education is another field of discrepancy between the experiences of the two countries' musicians. There have been jazz streams embedded within wider music programmes for over two decades but only as recently as 2010 has Scotland provided a dedicated jazz programme through the RSAMD at graduate and post-graduate level. This has resulted in Scotland's musicians travelling abroad for schooling, most often to England or the United States. In contrast, the NTNU programme established in Trondheim 1979 has produced a formidable roster of graduates (ref - link).

The legacy of Scottish musicians having undertaken their studies abroad has naturally had a significant impact on the development of the country's jazz identity. Whether returning from Berklee, Boston (US), or Leeds College of Music, Birmingham Conservatoire, Trinity College or Guildhall School of Music and Drama (UK) much external influence is brought to bear on the Scottish scene.

Conversely, the NTNU programme, as well as affording Norwegian musicians a jazz education in their home country, has also striven to encourage its students to develop a voice outside of American convention whether as expressed through national, cultural or aesthetic perspective (Knowles N, 2011).

At the time of writing, a report on the state of jazz education in Scotland is being collated by Nod Knowles on behalf of the Scottish Jazz Federation. By interviewing jazz educators throughout the country, it is hoped that a clearer picture of current provision will emerge and provide a basis for political lobby and collaborative approaches amongst practitioners.

## **MUSICAL HERITAGE**

The cultural positions and structural features of the two countries' traditional musics are also factors in the practicality of their assimilation with the jazz idiom.

Scotland's Gaelic and Scots musical heritage is argued to have been a critical influence in the emergence of jazz at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Hardie D, 2004). The transference of improvisatory embellishment, the rhythmic triplet of the reel, and the flatted 7<sup>th</sup> of the bagpipes to African slaves from Scottish masters all came to part-inform the integral features of emergent jazz. Shetland guitarist, Peerie Johnson (1920 – 2007), 'brought the music back home' by fusing the jazz guitar style of his idols, Eddie Lang and Freddie Green with the music of the Western Isles. Scottish traditional music has thereby gone full-circle by both influencing and being influenced by American jazz.

This relationship of exchange and trans-culturation between Scotland and America perhaps serves to bind the two cultures within the context of jazz. Despite sporadic attempts to define jazz within the Scottish image, it is nonetheless still the norm to hear Scotland's musicians performing in one or more of the historically defined American styles. There even still exists a reactionary tendency amongst Scottish musicians to perform in the formal attire associated with 1940s American Be Boppers. In many cases, it is as though an almost classical form of jazz is being aspired to. This is of course not to discount the many innovative musicians operating outside the parameters of a nationally informed musical language.

The assertion that the strength of a country's traditional music has direct bearing on its presence in a glocalised jazz conception (Nicholson S, 2005) may have currency when applied to the Scandinavian countries but requires further discussion if applied to the jazz of Scotland. Unlike, for example, the folk music of Denmark, Scottish traditional music remains extremely robust and a fiercely protected bedrock of the country's cultural make-up, while enjoying international recognition and appreciation. It is perhaps the strength of its identity and the rigidity of the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic features of the music that present challenge when conjoined with the jazz idiom.

More prominent in assimilation than its traditional music is the integration of elements of popular music. These assimilatory elements, where challenging



the jazz norm, are most often globally rather than nationally sourced, in spite of the existence of a richly innovative Scottish popular music scene.

Conclusion – that Scottish jazz might further examine integrating not just its traditional music but also its popular music. Danger in the fusion of two distinct entities (e.g. Manouche) – danger = instant tradition (akin to the mixing of two primary colours – differing shades as opposed to a full spectrum of colours to choose from. Scottish icons such as Cocteau Twins, Mogwai, et al in the way that Norwegian bands such as Xploding Plastix, Super Silent, Jagga Jazzist etc have done.