

KATHRINE WINDFELD - DETERMINATION

The young Danish composer, arranger and pianist is one of the most interesting figures to emerge recently in the singular and multicolored world of big bands.

First let's start with where you grew up, and what got you interested in music?

I Grew up in Svendborg in southern Denmark. My parents are not professional musicians, but we sang and played piano at home, so I was exposed to music from my early childhood on. But while my mum and aunt played classical piano, I couldn't concentrate on reading notes. Instead, I loved to sit by the piano and compose and improvise freely. So from the start, my compass pointed clearly towards a creative and curious approach to music.

How did your sound evolve over time? What did you do to find and develop your sound?

In general, I have always been most fascinated by the vertical level of music: rhythm and harmony. A deeper exploration of the horizontal level with melodic lines came to me later. That might be typical for a pianist: Horn players tend to think melody first. Different instruments can dictate from which angle you hear and understand music, and that's very interesting.

The traditional jazz language didn't speak to me at first, because of its lack of polyrhythm and extended harmony. Instead, I listened to Bulgarian folk music and played expressive Argentinian pieces by Alberto Ginastera to develop my polyrhythmic confidence. But in the folk music I missed the complex harmonies, and in the classical music I missed the improvisation. Thus, I gradually went into jazz and transcribed modern composers who work organically with odd meter stuff: Aaron Parks, Jonathan Kreisberg, Chris Potter and Dave Holland. In my ears, they all manage to let the melody and harmony shape the rhythmic flow. If you do the opposite, force a melody to make it fit into a fixed rhythmic grid, it easily gets stiff and calculated. But, at the same time, you also want to challenge your ears and teach yourself a new advanced groove by counting at first. When composing, I often start out with a groove or a set of chords, and then I try to sing melodies on top of it.

What practice routine or exercise have you developed to maintain and improve your current musical ability especially pertaining to rhythm?

I analyze and play along with tunes that inspire me. Dave Holland Big Band has been the main source of inspiration for my big band writing in terms of rhythmic content. Playing standard tunes in odd meters is a good exercise too.

Gradually, the traditional jazz language with swing and bebop has become a natural part of my vocabulary. Especially the bebop language with chromatic structures and unique possibilities of creating tension and movement has been very important for my writing and playing. In my tune ORCA, you can hear the chromatic influences in the polyphonic middle part. Harmonically, I experiment a lot with triads, putting them together in untraditional

ways. My tune "We Will Depart" contains a lot of different triads with a bass note from outside the given tonality.

How to prevent disparate influences from coloring what you're doing?

In terms of musical influences, I think in the opposite way: How do I manage not to ignore unexpected sources of inspiration? In terms of distractions from the world outside of music, I am very selective with my time, and avoid activities that don't lead anywhere, unless they give me a healthy break from working intensely.

How do you prepare before your performances to help you maintain both spiritual and musical stamina?

A key word is being in a good shape technically. As long as you can count on your muscular flexibility - also in tough conditions with far too little sleep and heavy weighted piano keys - you have a fair chance to create a musical flow on stage.

Mentally, I try avoid too many distractions from the rational part of my brain: "did I send the invoice, when is soundcheck.." etc. Those thoughts block the creative flow and ability to be in the very moment. In the beginning of my big band career when I managed everything myself and hardly had time to practice, I really struggled with distractions keeping me distant from the musical substance.

What do you love most about your new album 2021: Kathrine Windfeld & Bohuslan Big Band - Determination, how it was formed and what you are working on today.

I love the powerful, expressive ensemble- and solo playing on a tune like Determination. I feel that the musicians understand the "DNA" of the piece.

You can easily tell when the musicians are committed and take the music to new levels. But that's not something you can control. The only thing I can only do is preparing the material in detail and shape the optimal conditions for the magic to happen.

The album was formed over a period of eight months in 2020 where I alternately sat composing in Copenhagen and visited the band in Göteborg and tried my material. After having their inputs and my own experiences I went home and finished the given piece and went on until I had written approximately 60 minutes of music.

And how did you select the musicians who play on the album?

Bohuslän Big Band consists of permanent musicians so I didnt have any influence on the lineup. But I knew the group and some of the individual qualities beforehand.

What's the balance in music between intellect and soul?

Intellect is a shortcut to the musical soul. The intellect makes the way to great ideas shorter via music theory and notation, but should never stand in the way of the spiritual substance. Communicating your visions via rational systems or theory can lead to a deeper understanding of the underlying vision. Especially as a big band leader you are very much in contact with your intellect because of a huge amount of details, both musically and

practically. In smaller and looser constellations I often tap into the “space” almost immediately.

There’s a two-way relationship between audience and artist; you’re okay with giving the people what they want?

That’s a tricky one. You don’t want to lose the audience completely when playing sophisticated jazz. At the same time, you absolutely don’t want to be a pleaser. I often use humour and talk in colors when speaking in between tunes on gigs. I try to find some common codes that non-musicians can relate to, without devaluing the music.

Lately, I have made some Danish interviews where I had to explain and almost defend what I am doing. I hate to fight against the conviction that jazz is strange and impossible to grasp for non-musicians.

Please any memories from gigs, jams, open acts and studio sessions which you’d like to share with us?

A general observation I would like to share is, that playing with (and for) accomplished and established musicians can be much less stressful than playing for students or musicians in the beginning of their artistic development. The reason is, that experienced and artistically grounded musicians tend to focus more on the spirit and energy in your playing, and less on mistakes and gaps in your knowledge. Less experienced musicians, often with a lower self confidence, might try to detect weaknesses and less successful moments in your performance in order to boost themselves.

How can we get young people interested in jazz when most of the standard tunes are half a century old?

Standards are a great way of connecting with jazz musicians all over the world. It’s our songbook that transcends borders and spoken language. But I believe that the main encouragement for younger musicians comes from making your own music in permanent groups where you can experiment and develop a unique sound over time.

John Coltrane said that music was his spirit. How do you understand the spirit and the meaning of life?

Music makes my life meaningful. I am very worried about the climate changes and suffering in general all around the world, inequality and mental darkness. I have a very sensitive mind, but the music gives comfort because it mirrors the outside world and gives it color and makes life more meaningful.

If you could change one thing in the musical world and it would become a reality, what would that be?

I wish that people and media in general had a sharper sense of quality and depth when it comes to music. It surely is a matter of taste and commercial interests as well - but if you compare to the world of sports, it’s super clear who is best and have worked the hardest to get there. A lot of musicians get massive exposure in radio and TV without deserving it, while a lot of my deeply skilled fellow musicians never enjoy that acknowledgement.

Who do you find yourself listening to these days?

I am currently diving into Oscar Peterson's work, his phrasing and language. I recently transcribed a Chris Potter solo on the standard "Easy To Love" from his album "Pure". An impressive flow and development of ideas - and an outstanding trio sound with Al Foster and Larry Grenadier.

What is the message you choose to bring through your music?

In spite of my political viewpoints and concern about terrible conditions globally, I don't want my work to be attached to a specific political statement.

I want to welcome all sorts of listeners from left and right wing - but at least through the material and performance, I want to indicate that I am not satisfied with the overall situation. If I were, I think my tunes would sound much more smooth and straight ahead.

Let's take a trip with a time machine, so where and why would you really wanna go?

I would have loved to hear Michael Brecker live. So I would travel to Newport Festival August 16, 1987 and hear Michael Brecker Band.

I have been asking you so far, now may I have a question from yourself...

Hummm.... I cant think of anything right now!

So putting that all together, how are you able to harness that now?

I am very happy that I get the chance to play frequently with my big band and sextet or as guest artist with other bands in Europe. I am now enjoying the outcome of many years of hard and consistent work, but also of good timing and a little luck. Nevertheless, I feel that I have just begun and am aware that I have a lot to discover and work on. It's a never ending journey where you have to balance joy and self-criticism.