

A Pioneer of the Great European Songbook Biography: Jan Lundgren

Jan Lundgren was born in the South of Sweden in 1966. His first serious tuition was already under way at the age of five...in the form of both piano lessons and tennis lessons. He proved particularly talented at both, and some were convinced by the time he was a teenager was that he would become the new Adolf Wiklund, whereas others were already hailing him as a new Björn Borg. It is to the good fortune of jazz fans of that Lundgren decided in the end to go with music. As might be expected, his first musical explorations were in the classical realm, but once he found out about jazz – rather accidentally and much later – he found that this newly discovered world was very much to his liking and the one that he really wanted to immerse himself in.

He went on to study at the renowned Malmö Academy of Music when he was 20. According to a story which often does the rounds, he was accepted on the condition that he would also take up the position of pianist in the well-known Monday Night Big Band. He was soon playing with all the best-known jazz musicians in Sweden, from his mentor Arne Domnerus to Putte Wickman and Bernt Rosengren. But he also travelled regularly to the USA from an early stage (and still does so to this day) to work with legends such as Benny Golson or Johnny Griffin. Thanks to his outstanding technique and his classical grounding, Lundgren quickly acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of the tradition of American jazz piano, and was soon cognizant across all styles from early to modern jazz. And was all put to good use as raw material from which to create his own music, as quickly became apparent.

Lundgren's highly acclaimed debut album "Conclusion" was released in Sweden in 1994, and a year later he founded his own trio with fellow students Matthias Svensson on bass and Rasmus Kihlberg on drums (from 2000 on the drummer was the Dane Morten Lund, and since 2007 it has been the Hungarian Zoltan Csörsz). The trio didn't have to wait long for a breakthrough: the album "Swedish Standards", released in 1997, became a best-seller and its success was to prove durable. The album made it into the Swedish pop charts and – with a re-release in 2009 – became something of a standard in its own right. Six further, award-winning and commercially successful albums with this line-up followed in the years until 2003. The trio's intensive touring activities culminated in a concert at Carnegie Hall in New York in June 2000. This was in the context of "Swedish Jazz Salutes the USA"; it made Lundgren the first Scandinavian jazz pianist to perform in this hall, so steeped in history.

As befits the immensely hard-worker that he is, Lundgren always has other projects on the go, and throws himself into them whole-heartedly. To date, Lundgren has recorded more than 50 albums under his name or as co-leader for high-profile labels (from 2005 to 2009, and again since 2014 he has recorded exclusively for ACT), plus dozens more as accompanist. He has worked with almost all of the important Swedish musicians and with numerous international jazz stars such as Mark Murphy, Harry Allen, Lee Konitz and Stacey Kent. He has also produced several CDs himself. In 2010 Lundgren founded the "Ystad Sweden Jazz Festival" in the southern Swedish town, where he has lived since 2005 and which is known worldwide as the setting for Henning Mankell's Wallander TV crime series. The "Ystad Sweden Jazz Festival" quickly became established as one of the most important jazz festivals in Europe. Lundgren maintains a strong attachment to it as its artistic director. Since 1991, Jan Lundgren is an Associate Professor at The Malmö Academy of Music .

As a pianist and composer, Lundgren has been one of the pioneers in the process of emancipating European jazz from American jazz and has set the direction for the generations that have followed him. His playing combines several things: the virtuosity, the way of shaping sound and an awareness of form which are typical of European classical music; a conscious memory of his own folk music traditions; the canon of American jazz; and the unfettered joy of improvisation. This makes him an ideal person for all kinds of music-making across genres, and the list of activities is impressive. It includes work with the classical trumpeter Håkan Hardenberger on creating an exciting blend of modern classical and free music. There has been an interdisciplinary experiment with the Swedish writer Jacques Werup. Lundgren has focused on Renaissance sacred music with bassist Lars Danielsson and the Gustaf Sjökvist Chamber Choir in "Magnum Mysterium". There has been a tribute to the pianist Jon Johansson who died far too young. Johansson was a pioneer who combined jazz and Swedish folklore in a specific "Nordic sound" and is thus an overtly acknowledged and direct role model for Lundgren. This was recorded and released as "The Ystad Concert - A Tribute to Jan Johansson" in 2016. Lundgren has also been involved in centenary tributes in major European concert halls to the great musical polymath Leonard Bernstein.

To some extent, the project which defines the quintessence of Lundgren's activity is the "Mare Nostrum" trio. One critic has called it "Europe's first supergroup" and there is quite some truth in that. Lundgren's way of making music is to be stylistically versatile and adaptable, to create space for things to happen, and always to be melodic. In this approach, he ideally complements the Mediterranean sound worlds of the Sardinian trumpeter Paolo Fresu and the French accordionist Richard Galliano. The debut album of this collective of equals, released in 2007, has sold more than 50,000 copies, making it a huge success in the context of jazz. Since that first release there have been two more releases by the trio, each one recorded in a different home country of one of the three musicians. The most recent, "Mare Nostrum 3" appeared in January 2019. The three albums constitute a brilliant trilogy from these great poets of music. Together they have redefined where European jazz is. It is a project through which Jan Lundgren has reinforced his profile and his significance: he is in effect one of the co-founders of a "Great European Songbook".

Jan Lundgren on ACT:

"Kristallen" (Duo with Nils Landgren, ACT 9628-2)

"Mare Nostrum III" (ACT 9877-2)

"Potsdamer Platz" (ACT 9831-2)

"The Ystad Concert - A Tribute to Jan Johansson" (ACT 9814-2)

"Mare Nostrum II" (ACT 9812-2)

"European Standards" (ACT 9482-2)

"Swedish Standards" (ACT 9022-2)

"Magnum Mysterium" (ACT 9457-2)

"Mare Nostrum" (ACT 9466-2)