

Interview with Thomas Borgmann: I actually always play from the gut

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Jazz interview with jazz saxophonist Thomas Borgmann. An interview by email in writing.

JazzBluesNews.com: – First let's start with where you grew up, and what got you interested in music?

Thomas Borgmann: – I grew up in a small town near Münster and at the age of 9 I had to learn the piano, which I didn't really feel like doing. At 11 I came to a boarding school and that was also the piano lessons over.

That was also the time when I liked to listen to Fats Domino, which was also the first record I bought. That was also my introduction to soul music. Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin, James Brown... More in the direction of Atlantic and less Tamla-Motown... With that came the desire for the saxophone. I really wanted to play saxophone in the horn sections of these soul bands. When I was 14, I had my first alto saxophone, but at boarding school there was only one old music teacher who wanted to teach me classical saxophone.

More and more I loved to listen to all the rhythm & blues brass groups and bigger jazz rock groups: Blood Sweat & Tears, Chicago, that sort of thing.

Then finally I had a saxophone teacher who played in a well-known local jazz group himself. Bebop was the order of the day and learning scales. That bored me...and I started improvising with the horn.

I heard Gunther Hampel's Galaxie Dream Band...and then Brötzmann on the radio. That was the ultimate kick for me and totally turned me around...and never let me go.

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

TB: – At the age of 21 (1976) I bought an old Conn-C soprano saxophone (of shortened design), and was fascinated by its sound. A difficult horn, but I found a suitable narrow mouthpiece for it from Santy Ranyon that was just right, with which I soon found my "own" tone. I started working with a lot of air...also with harder reeds. That suited me...

In 1981 I bought the Tenor, a Buffet-Crampon S1, which immediately convinced me in combination with Otto-Link metal mouthpieces. At about the same time I also bought a Yanagisawa Sopranino with a Selmer rubber mouthpiece.

The main instrument remained the C-Soprano for many years, but more and more often alternated with the Sopranino.

I wanted an airy, breathing tone with lots of coloration. Steve Lacy's and John Tchicai's tone I admired at the beginning, less, for example, Evan Parker's. Later also Lester Young, Ben Webster, simply their broad warmth.

A simple melody must sound...quite unique, each note already a story.

The typical nasal tone of a soprano was a horror to me...until today, by the way.

If I don't hear my tone sounding on stage, I have a problem. I have to hear it so that it can move me forward.

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

TB: – That has changed a lot over the years. Nowadays, I actually only do stubborn strength training to keep the muscles in order. Pure scale training, for which I still use scales that John Tchicai once gave me once. I love them. But (!!) just not too many of them. There is a danger that they get stuck in the finger ring, and I don't want that in any case.

Often, I also use small melody scraps that I have run across at concerts and have settled in the head. Long tones and such, sure. Sometimes rhythmic exercises, usually on the soprano.

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

TB: – You can never prevent that. The more music you've heard and stored in your memory, the more often it happens that you play turns that immediately remind you of Mingus, Lacy or whatever. Sometimes you let them happen briefly, enjoy them, play around them, and then move on. I'm a pure improvising musician, I go on stage without any agreements or notes, then I work out a few notes in my head and then I go with my gut.

However, there is also the danger that you remain too narrowly trapped in your own cosmos.

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

TB: – Best not at all, except to stay rested and relaxed. Soundchecks are often dangerous, because sometimes you play too much as a group, still develop wonderful ideas, which you then take up again in the subsequent concert worse. Best soundchecks only briefly to warm up, otherwise energy is lost.

There were great concerts where we had to go directly on stage without rest and preparation. I'm thinking of a concert in Groningen, where we were late because the driver of the festival there couldn't find the place where we were going to play (it really happened!). In addition, it was thunder storming and the concert venue was so full of people that they did not all fit into the hall and stood in front of it in the rain.

We had to make our way through crowds of people to the stage and quickly set up, together with the audience...and then play. The atmosphere was great, plus it kept thundering outside, and we played a wonderful set. A concert that we will not forget. A concert without the usual

preparations.

JBN: – Ism is culled from a variety of lives dates with various performers over the course of a few years. Did your sound evolve during that time? And how did you select the musicians who play on the album?

TB: – (hope I understood the question the right way!?)

But yes, of course! I played with Peter Brötzmann for a long time, both in the quartet “Ruf der Heimat” and in the trio with Borah Bergman. Brötzmann is a figure next to you, a rock that you have to counter with something. And that has a lot to do with powerful playing, that changes your approach also in terms of tone.

Then when Wilber Morris formed the trio with me and Denis Charles, it immediately changed abruptly. Here the moment was on an organic, spiritual improvisation. The swinging, jazzy component came to the fore, as did the anthem. This was audible and as a result of reviewers always emphasized. Until then, they had generally only noticed me as the young wild one next to Brötzmann.

The time with Wilber Morris in the trio was already quite influential for me...and I try to carry on much of it. I think that also influenced my choice of bass players in the subsequent trios.

JBN: – What’s the balance in music between intellect and soul?

TB: – Honestly, I don’t give it much thought. I actually always play from the gut and love to balance with small simple melodies, to play in the best sense. Many of them come mostly spontaneously, often I forget them again, some I keep as an earworm. The head comes into play when it comes to the bow in long pieces, so rather with questions of form. But it doesn’t really mean anything, because it’s so experienced that you don’t leave the basis of improvisation, of what’s just emerging. There’s a magic that comes into play, that’s soul... and you don’t think about it any further, but leave it as it is.

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

TB: – The audience is very, very important. I don’t like sessions in rehearsal rooms at all. There is no spirit. I never like to play somewhere where the music is not the central moment, so I don’t like to play at a party or for a birthday or something like that. The stage with an audience is sacred to me. Only there can music be created in my world. That’s why I don’t really like studio recordings...and if I do, guests always have to be there.

If the audience doesn’t go along, I start sweating. For example, it’s much more difficult to inspire 20 people in the audience than 200. If the concert is well attended, the audience feels comfortable and in the right place. But a concert with 20 people is initially exhausting on both sides.

But if it then crackles...you have achieved everything with your music and it is good as it should be.

There is a double LP, also released on CD by NotTwo Records, in trio with Wilber Morris and Denis Charles: Live in Poland. This was a concert in Szczecin with 400 young students. They were so excited and enthusiastic that the concert was often completely controlled by them.... You can follow some of this on the recording.... Such concerts are always something special.

I also remember a concert with Wilber Morris and Reggie Nicholson in trio, where the mood was such that Wilber at one point echoed the once bowed note on the bass with his hand in the air and let it become a pause of over 3 minutes, with the audience, motionless and not daring to make a sound, pausing. And the room was full! This is possible only with mutual magic.

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

TB: – Oh...there are many stories.

But perhaps fitting to the question before: There was once a concert in Frankfurt in a trio with Heinz Sauer & Wilber Morris. It was a great concert in a wonderful room with an even more wonderful audience. Heinz was completely happy. “One of those concerts you only have once in 20 years” he enthused over and over.

The next day we played in Regensburg. A good concert and good audience, it just didn’t quite have the magic of the concert the day before. This time Heinz was incredibly disappointed that he didn’t have the same atmosphere again from the day before.

But I also want to tell you about my dog, who gets along so wonderfully with the music I do, that by now he’s on stage at every concert where he can travel with me. And he loves being there. When I pack up the instrument cases at home, he is incredibly happy, far more than when it’s just going for a walk or just outside.

When I play recordings of concerts he has been to on the stereo at home, he immediately wakes up and comments on what he has heard in his own way. He only does that with these recordings, so he can differentiate within the music.

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

TB: – We don’t play standards...but we play jazz, free jazz. The swing is always there. And we play improvised music that everyone can understand. It’s crashing, then pastoral, then soulful, then a beat...and always melodies that are improvised with, spontaneously. This is the kind of music that I can play in my normal bar on the corner without the guests screaming that it’s too exhausting.

When young people come to the concerts, they stay. And they are mostly very satisfied with what they have heard, even if they have never come into contact with this music before.

It’s more a problem for the organizers to get the young people into the concerts first and to bring them into contact with “our” music. I experience this again and again. There is too much other jazz, bigoted, which only puts them off...or in improvised music too much top-heavy as well....

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

TB: – You can’t define that. The spirit is there when you no longer know where you got what you are playing. The spirit is there, where you lose yourself in the music, where you only play out of yourself or where an audience won’t let you go, because they are completely with you...The next evening nothing can be. And you play only controlled, trivial.

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

TB: – Maybe a lot smaller concerts instead of these mass concerts, which I can't really associate with music, which tend to scare me.

I would also like to see more courage to play music other than the popular ones in public spaces.

JBN: – Who do you find yourself listening to these days?

TB: – In the last few days, I've been listening to a recording of JD Allen (Toys Die Dreaming) and Tani Tabbals Trio (Now Then). Both very much their own stories, especially JD Allen.

Then discovered a wonderful Steve Lacy recording that I hadn't heard before: Mal Waldron-Steve Lacy (Journey Without End). Great music.

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

TB: – Listen to me, I will tell you about something.

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

TB: – I think I'm exactly where I should be at the moment. If anything, I would have liked to have had more time in the trio with Wilber Morris and Denis Charles. Both died too soon. There would have been a lot more possible.

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

TB: – Oh.... that is just simple...There is just a German music-journalist who wants to write a portrait about me. And I can give him my answers here. Could be helpful for him.

Interview by Simon Sargsyan



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