Peter Brötzmann at Abrons Arts Center, New York, June 8, 2011

Peter Brötzmann

PERPETUALLY SEEKING FREEDOM

By Josef Woodard ⋮ Photography by Peter Gannushkin

It was a late spring afternoon at the Cinema Laurier in Victoriaville, Quebec, and free-jazz icon Peter Brötzmann was doing what he does best, even at the crack of 1 p.m. In a commanding solo concert, the reedman, going strong at age 70, unleashed his characteristic volcanic, fire-breathing intensity on alto, soprano and tenor saxophones. But he also disarmed his audience with washes of tender musicality, including lovely renditions of "I Surrender Dear" and "Lonely Woman" to close.

So much for Brötzmann's reputation as just an expressionistic, stern, noise-machining blower.

Victoriaville's avant-leaning festival—officially called Festival de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville (FIMAV)—is one of the ripe spots the German periodically visits when he does make it over the Atlantic, although he remains underemployed in North America. For the 2011 edition of FIMAV, Brötzmann delivered both this solo performance and a riveting set by his power trio with Norwegian drummer Paal Nilssen-Love, an empathetic ally for the past dozen years, and electric bassist Massico Pupillo. With its rock-flavored spirit, this is another of Brötzmann's groups that is tailor-made for the younger recruits in his cross-generational camp of followers.

Last summer, another of Brötzmann's festival visits was in the river-centered town of Kongsberg, Norway, where the same trio rattled the architecture of That Little Extra, a small house-turned-cultural-center. I bumped into the saxophonist on the street after sound check that afternoon, saying I looked forward to hearing him that night. "I hope I can hear it," he grumbled, revealing a high level of sensitivity and serious concerns regarding the venue's acoustic conditions. But the close quarters ended up intensifying the performance: He recalled later, "We were quite satisfied with the results, at the end. It was working quite all right."

Also on that festival program, Brötzmann checked in with his own historic past by performing with an old free-jazz comrade, British saxophonist Evan Parker. This Kongsberg meeting resulted in an alternately thundering and probing saxophonic dialogue. (Immediately after that show, I headed over to Charles Lloyd's concert in the Kongsberg church, and Lloyd sounded as if he was playing under layers of gauze by comparison.)

When Brötzmann hits the stage, mighty sonic gusts pour forth, but with a distinctly human expressivity attached, in his vocal-like phrasings and injections of guttural sounds mixing in with his amped-up saxophone tone. There is a particular Brötzmann timbre that makes it seem as if he has created a new waveform all his own, a sonic parallel to those who create their own typographical fonts. The result may be cathartic for admirers or overbearingly noisy for detractors; either way, it's powerful in its severity. And the lyricism in the margins—echoes of his love for Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster—only helps to frame and accentuate the tough stuff.

It's a sound that has become Brötzmann's signature, going back to the '60s, when he was blazing trails with other European free-jazz pioneers. Born in Remscheid, Germany, in 1941, he took a winding path to music through art school. He experienced an epiphany upon catching a Sidney Bechet concert, and developed a conceptualist aesthetic partly honed by his encounters with the visual artists Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik. For decades, through a huge discography and regular live performances with countless groupings, Brötzmann has kept the pure improvisational faith and held the torch.

At the time of our interview late last summer, Brötzmann was preparing to make his second visit to China, exciting new turf for him. "I'm always learning," he says via telephone from Wuppertal, Germany. "It's always good to see what these guys are doing. Of course, they have a completely different meaning about what improvised music could be, because of the lack of information over a long period. They don't know too much about the blues, I would say. But that's OK. That might be coming. And they have their own way of doing improvised music.

"The good thing that I learned from my first visit, the young people are very open and very curious. They want to know."

One might say the same about the perpetually evolving Brötzmann.

I heard you both in Victoriaville and Kongsberg this year, a fair cross-section of settings. One common denominator was the potent trio with Massimo Puppilo and Paal Nilssen-Love. Perhaps partly because of the electric bass presence, this trio seems to tilt more in the direction of rock than other groups of yours.

Massimo comes originally from rock music, and Paal Nilssen-Love grew up as the son of quite a good bebop drummer, but in his early years, he played all kinds of stuff. He is a very, very energetic player.

I still like the double bass, of course. I'm always glad when I can play with Ken Kessler in the Chicago Tentet or, for example, a younger man I very much like, Eric Gravis. Of course, there is also William Parker, now a grand old man in the scene. But with the electric bass, especially if you find good players and they know what they are doing, it gives you a different kick. Even if you are an energetic player, as I'm used to being, you still get a kick in your ass and you have to do even a bit more.

In Kongsberg, you had a duet with your longtime ally Evan Parker. Do you interact with him much anymore?

We see each quite often, because Evan is one of the few Englishmen traveling around. We still have contact. I think the last thing we did together before this duo was a kind of double trio concert at Victoriaville maybe six years ago. And the duo concert was, indeed, the first and only one we have done so far. We've known each other now for 45 years.

How was the experience for you, given that you go back with him almost to the beginning of your musical adventure?

He was in my very early larger ensembles. On the other hand, he was organizing things for me and Peter Kowald over there in London and Scotland. But we always had different styles of playing. When I met him first, he was playing all the Coltrane licks, all the scales. Even with the sound, he tried to go that way. For me, I had no teacher. I had nothing. I didn't know anything, or not too much. I just liked to play the horn. He was surprised at what kinds of sounds I got out of the horn, and I was always very envious because he could do all the things I couldn't. [On that scene] there was a third very important man: Willem Breuker. We all three played the same horn, but from the very beginning, we each had something very different in mind, but it fit together very well.

Now, to see Evan and to try this, it was a good old friendship thing.

Your particular back story is fascinating, in that your trajectory into music went through art. That must have influenced your musical development.

I'm quite sure [that's true]. If I look at these two guys I just mentioned—Willem and Evan—they had the teachers, they studied. Willem Breuker did know everything about composition, counterpoint, harmonies. I was much more seriously busy with my studies for the arts.

In my town [Wuppertal], we had a very good gallery, and I was lucky to meet Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik, very important men for me. Music was always there, and I needed it, but it was a couple of years later that I more or less decided, "OK, I want to do that." So I came into the music from a completely different angle than my other comrades, here in Germany or England.

I didn't have to follow the rules because I made the rules myself, in terms of the way of playing the horn, the mouthpiece I was using, the reeds and everything. Of course, I learned by working with the other guys, with Globe Unity Orchestra, sometimes in the theater of classical music, from Mauricio Kagel or others. I

ON BRÖTZMANN'S SIDE

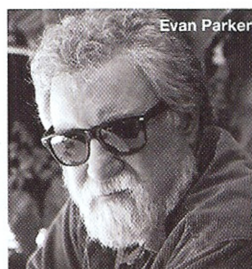
Peter Brötzmann has worked with countless collaborators over the decades, many of whom are still active among his ever-widening international circle of colleagues. Those who have found themselves working alongside the iconic free-jazz saxman usually have no trouble recalling insightful observations from the experience.

Looking back on their mid-July rendezvous in Norway, saxophonist Evan Parker commented, "To spend some time and play with Peter in Kongsberg was a great pleasure. We talked about his tenor saxophone, which is a beautiful hand-built special from Japan, we talked about the eternal struggle to find a good reed, the history of our [vintage Berg Larsen] mouthpieces and, of course, life, the universe and everything.

"I have to thank Peter for inviting me to play in Germany, first with the *Machine Gun* band and later with the various small groups that developed out of that. Playing with him and [Peter] Kowald soon introduced me to Alex [von Schlippenbach] and [Paul] Lovens, and that has been a very important part of my musical life ever since."

One of the strongest young protégés and now comrades of Brötzmann is Chicago-based saxophonist Ken Vandermark, who has played in various settings with the German reedist, including the formidable Chicago Tentet, the reed trio Sonore (alongside Swedish saxophonist Mats Gustafsson) and as a guest with the quartet Full Blast.

"Playing with Peter has been very intense from the beginning," Vandermark admits. "It's always challenging. Even though his musical statements


Evan Parker

CAROLINE FORBES

Ken Vandermark (left) with Paal Nilssen-Love

ZIGA KORITNIK

are always clear, they're so strong that it's hard to always feel confident that I can creatively add to the situation. No one has pushed me as hard to take risks so consistently. What has evolved has been this level of risk. The more I come to understand, the further he challenges me."

Reflecting on the question of Brötzmann's cultural legacy, Vandermark explains, "His significance as a musician would have been secure if all he had done was record *Machine Gun*, but Peter has done so much more than that: as an instigator, as an organizer, as an improviser, as a visual artist. Peter was one of the key figures who helped establish a truly European approach to jazz. His creative work has spanned more than four decades, and his playing is stronger now than it's ever been."

Norwegian drummer Paal Nilssen-Love has been hailed as one of the most talented and musical drummers to enter the public jazz stream in the past several years. He brings virtuosic power but also an uncommon nuance to the diverse contexts he plays in, including a fascinating solo drum setting (which was a highlight of last summer's Kongsberg Jazz Festival). And Nilssen-Love's fateful connection with Brötzmann has led to one of the more inspired saxist-drummer matchups. He first played with the saxman in 2000, and was involved in the Tentet starting in 2003. He notes, "Since then we've done more and more together—in trios, quartets, quintets with various lineups and, not least, duo, which has seen two CD releases."

Nilssen-Love recalls, "The first gig was, of course, mind-blowing: exhilarating, incredible and challenging on all levels, physically and mentally. Through the years, there have been more gigs, and then a gradual and mutual agreement of music, playing and life has developed; and a very strong friendship through music and touring. On stage—and off—he still surprises and pushes fellow musicians, and is also humble enough and keen to meet new ways of playing." —*Josef Woodard*

had to learn, and I wanted to learn. But I always kept the freedom to do it my way. It took maybe more time and more effort, but after all these years, I'm quite glad that it was that way.

If you go to the States and you start to work with American musicians—and black American musicians, which I did very early—you don't have to try to copy somebody. You have to come and you have to play your shit, and then, after a while, if you're a bit persistent and strong enough, you get respected. I met Milford Graves very early. I met Andrew Cyrille, Alan Silva, all these guys. After a while, they saw, "OK, here is a guy who does it his way." I think I got quite a bit respected because of that.

With those art-world figures you encountered early on, the general spirit was a radicalization and reinvention of what previously existed. Did that inform your attitude about music?

In this period, let's call it the after-war period here in Europe—and especially in Germany, because of the history of it—when you started to think about where you want to go, you didn't have to do whatever had been up until then. You had to invent your own thing. You couldn't trust anything anymore. Of course, it was a good thing on one hand. I think the first American guy I met and talked to was Steve Lacy. Then Don Cherry followed, and Carla Bley. Cecil [Taylor] I met in the middle '60s.

Brötzmann at Clemente Soto Vélez, New York, April 18, 2010

In the history of art, it's not uncommon that you first have to destroy what there is and build something new. That was our general feeling, especially here in Germany, because of our history, because of the Third Reich and six million Jews and so on. Of course, you learn very quickly that, even if you denied the old truths, as soon as you start to set up something for yourself, you build up new rules. If I look back nowadays at what we thought we had done in the '60s as a kind of big revolution in the music, it was just a little step. It was not such a big deal.

Your '60s albums —*For Adolph Saxe*, *Machine Gun* and *Nipples*—seem to have come out of the box fully assembled and with a strong viewpoint from the beginning. But you're saying that, in hindsight, you see how far you have come?

[*laughs*] That is, of course, difficult to say. I would say that what I'm doing now was already there, let's say, when I started to take music really serious, in the middle '60s. In 45 years, you learn a lot. You get a much wider range to look at what you are doing, to look at yourself.

I can handle the horn nowadays the way I want to handle it. In the early years, it was just not possible. I had to learn. I'm glad that I still have to learn more. But the essential things, I think, have been there from the very beginning.

Has it partly been a sonic mission, exploring sound and texture from the horn, maybe more than riffs, per se?

Yeah. Of course, that changed over the years, and it even changes with the different horns I am playing. The horn has to sound, somehow. It has to have a very personal voice. If you listen to even [Coleman] Hawkins' worst recordings, he sounds like Hawkins. That is what I want to reach for myself, and I think I have come quite far with it. When people hear my sound, they think, "Oh, that must be Brötzmann."

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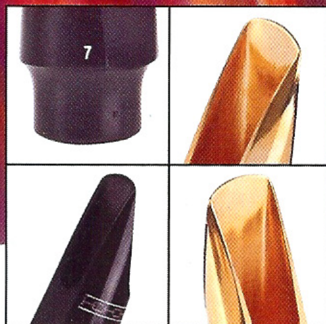

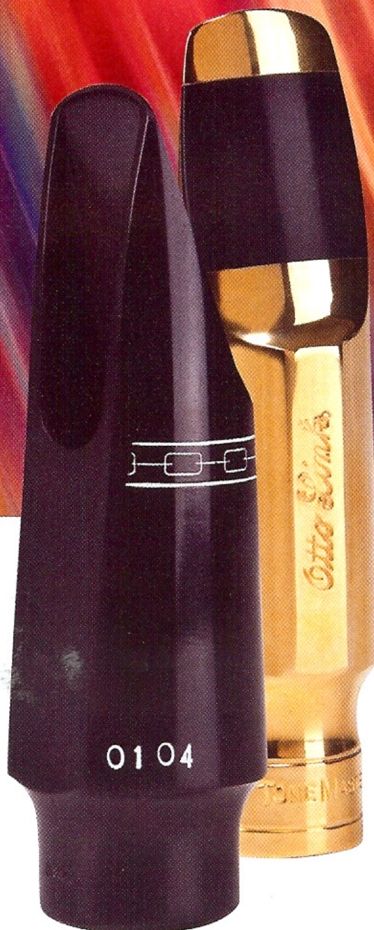

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That's the most fantastic thing with jazz music, and what we shouldn't forget. Jazz music is not so much a history of styles, but persons. Piano players like James P. Johnson or Ellington or Monk came out of the same sources. These persons made the music. The style was, at the end, quite unimportant. With all modesty, I hopefully have that.

In your case, the tenor offers a particular strength of identity. Does it hold a special place for you?

From alto to bass saxophone, I am still playing nearly all the horns. But the main thing I always come back to is the tenor. You can sing with it, much more than with the alto. The tenor, after a while, gets to be a part of your body. You hear these stories about Lester Young sleeping with his horns when Billie [Holiday] wasn't there [*laughs*]. It shows that there is a complex connection between the horn and the person.

There are arcs of phrasing and nuances in your playing, and a lyrical side. Does it frustrate you to be stereotyped as the "headbanger jazz guy," let's say?

It's very hard. If you go through this long period to always have had difficulties to get accepted, then it doesn't matter so much what other people think. My friends and the handful of good comrades in jazz say, "Brötzmann, it's all right what you are playing."

In my own country, people still don't want to recognize what I'm doing. This might be frustrating, from time to time. On the other hand, if I come to your country, or Poland and the Eastern Bloc, or to Lebanon, young people come up and tell me they are moved by what I am doing. That is fantastic.

What we can call the "lyrical side" of my playing was always there. It was there with the trio with [Fred] Van Hove and [Han] Bennink. But I have the image of a guy who is playing just as loud as possible and screaming, and making all this noisy music. That might have changed a bit in the last years. It's getting lighter as we are old folk, whether or not it's better.

Do you find you appreciate the moments you are in the midst of making music, given the tensions all around the musical life, apart from the music itself?

Yeah. For me, it's not a new situation. I had to fight for every gig, for everything myself, through all those years. But for the younger generation, it is really difficult. They are not used to it. They finish the music schools and conservatories and they think, "OK, now I can play and I want to play. What is happening? Where can I play?"

When we started, and I also mean the English guys—from Incus, Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley, Evan, Paul Rutherford and more—and the Dutch guys—Misha Mengelberg, Han Bennink, Willem Breuker—we all had a feeling of solidarity. We really did everything together for a longer period. We set up our own record labels. We developed a kind of network for distribution and playing.

It is really a sign of our times that everybody prefers to think of themselves, and doesn't realize that solidarity is the most important thing, in the music and in the field around the music. It's not enough if you communicate via the 'net and know everything. You have to play together, you have to work together.

It seems that you are going almost as strong as ever, musically. Do you have that feeling yourself?

I still believe that what I'm doing is necessary—not only for myself, but for others, too. That I am able to do it with the help of my friends is a fantastic thing.

In our communities, in our world, in our political systems, everything is so determined that you have to try to do something different. You decide what to do, not somebody else. *Freedom* is a big word, and we know that freedom is a very limited thing in our society. But in the work, we still can reach it. We can try to get as far as possible. That's what you learn, really, being on the road. That is so. **DB**

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