



ITALY AND DENMARK – SWINGING TOGETHER IN HARMONY



The Maniscalco/Bigoni/Solborg trio. Emanuele Maniscalco (piano),
Francesco Bigoni (reeds) and Mark Solborg (guitar)

Even before the country of Italy officially existed, music from the Italian kingdoms and territories was a major cultural export – think Vivaldi, Albinoni, Corelli, Rossini, Verdi etc. Nowadays, it is not only classical music that is exported; jazz plays a major part in continuing this rich tradition. By Stephen Gadd

From the 1930s onwards, jazz was widely appreciated in Denmark and especially during the 60s and 70s, Copenhagen was considered something of a jazz Mecca due to the number of American musicians living and working there regularly. The opportunity to hear and play with the likes of Dexter Gordon, Kenny Drew, Stan Getz, Ben Webster, Horace Parlan, Thad Jones and Duke Jordan helped to nurture and hone the home-grown talent, so Denmark soon had a group of jazz musicians who could hold their own in the fastest musical company.

FLYING VISITS AND FRUITFUL COLLABORATIONS

A number of Italian musicians have toured or played in Denmark over the years. The list includes, among others, pianists Enrico Pieranunzi, Stefano Bollani, Antonio Faro, Mauro Patricelli and Fabio Giachino, trumpeters Enrico Rava and Paolo Fresu, saxophonist Francesco Bigoni, pianist and bandoneon player Paolo Russo... and several of them have lived in the country for extended periods.

There have also been fruitful collaborations between Danish and Italian musicians. Enrico Pieranunzi has worked with bassist Jesper Lundgaard and drummer Alex Riel. Antonio Faro was a member of Jens Winther's 'European Quintet' and since his arrival here in 1996, Paolo Russo has worked with too many people to mention. Stefano Bollani's 'Danish Trio', sees the pianist accompanied by a Danish rhythm section of Morten Lund on drums and Jesper Bodilsen on bass, and there are the various bands featuring saxophonist Francesco Bigoni.

Pianist Stefano Bollani first came to Denmark in 2002. “I came with Enrico Rava, who won the Jazzpar Prize that year. I immediately ‘fell in love’ with Jesper Bodilsen and Morten Lund, which happened to be the rhythm section chosen by the Jazzpar director. We started touring as a trio and I had the chance to spend several days in Copenhagen. I had the feeling it was full of professional jazzmen, definitely more than what we had in Italy; and I immediately liked the vibe of the city. I found it extremely cool and gentle.”

When asked whether there is something special about Denmark that appeals to Italian jazz musicians – whether it be the jazz scene in general, or Danish musicians he might have worked with, Stefano replied: “I can only talk about Jesper and Morten and tell you I found two ideal partners. That’s mainly because we don’t need to talk so much about the music we’re gonna play and we love to improvise. We are never making a set list before a show ‘cause we like to go wherever we wanna go at the moment. We play in the present tense. And that’s something you can afford if you have musicians who are open-minded – and extremely skilled.”

In summing up, Stefano added: “Denmark has a great tradition in jazz music. Now what you need to achieve is (building up) the young audience.”

A DEEP HUMAN AND MUSICAL UNDERSTANDING

Francesco Bigoni is one of the more recent immigrants to Denmark. “I



Paolo Fresu

came to Denmark by chance, as I met my future wife in Copenhagen, and decided to move in with her in 2009. I played my first gig sitting in with a band at the Copenhagen Jazz Festival that same year. I started my first (collective) trio, Hopscotch, with two musicians I met on stage that night, Mark Solborg (guitar) and Kevin Brow (drums). I still play a lot with Mark and I consider our encounter one of the luckiest I’ve ever made in my musical life.”

“I felt very excited about the mood of the city during the Jazz Festival. Copenhagen can be sleepy at times, but I still feel the festival vibe in July as extraordinary after several years.”

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Stefano Bollani's 'Danish Trio'. Left to right: Morten Lund, Stefano Bollani, Jesper Bodilsen.

"I didn't know much about Danish musicians, apart from a few that were well known in Italy (John Tchicai, Marilyn Mazur...). I met (drummer) Kresten Osgood at a workshop back in 2001, though, and again a few years later while he was touring Italy with the band Blake Tartare (together with Michael Blake, Søren Kjærgaard and Jonas Westergaard). Kresten, Søren and Jonas were really kind to me when I moved, as they quickly introduced me to many younger amazing players in the city."

I also asked Francesco whether there is something special about Denmark that appeals to Italian jazz musicians – whether it be the jazz scene in general, or Danish musicians he might have worked with, and he replied: "It is hard to speak for Italian jazz musicians in general, but I can tell you what Copenhagen did to me: it gave me the chance to meet several players that I'm comfortable playing my music with in a fairly short time. This makes living here very attractive. I feel connected with Mark Solborg in a special way. At the moment we lead a couple of bands together (a quintet – On Dog – and a trio – Maniscalco/Bigoni/Solborg) and I believe we have built a deep, often unspoken human and musical understanding."

"I dig the scene in Copenhagen. It's not the place for a musician who seeks the high energy and pressure of a big city, but the cultural offer is very good and it's a very good starting-point for organizing, writing and playing music. I enjoy the way of living here, which is as important to me as having the opportunity to be part of a great music scene."

MUSICIANS HELD IN HIGH ESTEEM

Trumpeter and flugelhorn player Paolo Fresu has also been a frequent visitor to Denmark, where he's played with various musical constellations. He admitted that "I don't remember my first time in Copenhagen, but if I'm not wrong, I think it was 15 years ago at the Copenhagen Jazzhouse with the Swedish pianist Lars Jansson and Morten Lund on drums. Then I came back with Paolo Russo and Stefano Bollani...in the last few years I've also often played at the Jazzhus Montmartre. My last concert was for the birthday of Alex Riel. I've never been there with one of my projects, but I hope to do it as soon as possible."

"Personally I love Denmark and its people. Copenhagen is one of the capitals of the European

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jazz scene and I have many friends there, for example, the Sardinian writer Maria Giacobbe. I was also fascinated by the ethno-musicologist Andreas Fridolin Weis Bentzon, who studied launeddas (a woodwind instrument consisting of three pipes, Ed.), the most important and ancient musical instrument of my island, Sardinia. All these relationships let me love your country, and not only Danish jazz and musicians. And last but not least: I'm a big fan of Palle Mikkelborg, who is amongst the most interesting European trumpeters."

Paolo then went on to talk about a major new musical collaborative project: "This year, we started up an important and advantageous collaboration with the Italian Embassy and the Italian Cultural Institute in Copenhagen. With them and MIDJ (Italian Association of Jazz Musicians), we began an artistic residence with a young musician, (pianist) Fabio Giachino, chosen by a jury. It was a great experience for Fabio that has grown, and started creative relationships in Denmark. The great success of this made us think of extending the idea to the whole world, with a new project, AIR, where 20 Italian musicians coming from our 20 different regions will take up residences in 20 different countries of the world."

Paolo concluded by remarking that "In Denmark, the level of attention paid to the musicians is very high, and it's an example for us. We have often talked about that with Christian Brorsen (from the Jazzhus Montmartre)."

As seems abundantly clear from the extremely positive comments made by the musicians, the Italian-Danish axis is certainly alive – and with the help of the planned cultural exchanges which Paolo mentioned, could be kicking more than ever now! Long may this state of affairs continue. Music is a great unifier, and in these times of nationalism and fragmentation, anything that contributes to greater understanding and harmony between peoples is more than welcome. Jazz collaborations across borders can really play an important part in this process.