



MARTIN MUNCH

Mark Solborg



Laura Toxvaerd



Nils Davidsen

## INDIE LIFE

### ILK MUSIC

# ARTISTS IN CHARGE

By Josef Woodard

Artist-run labels, long part of the jazz legacy, have experienced a dramatic upsurge in the digital music era, a time of easier access to “indie” business models. But while taking charge of your own creative work can be liberating, it is also a fragile and fleeting business. One continuing success story and possible paradigm in the artist-run label universe comes out of Copenhagen, Denmark, in the form of ILK Music, which was founded in 2003.

The number of artists involved in ILK—aka “the ILKs”—has swelled to more than 20. They include some of the better-known players of the Danish jazz scene, including Kresten Osgood, Lotte Anker, Mark Solborg, Laura Toxvaerd, Nils Davidsen and Ibrahim Electric. Stylistically, the ILK roster is a varied one that often leans toward the avant-garde, experimental and eclectic. The common bond has less to do with idiomatic dogma than a will to thrive and survive in a way powered by the ideal of self-determination, and a desire to collaborate both within and beyond the Danish jazz landscape. Global jazz names involved with the label include Craig Taborn, Fred Frith, Han Bennink, Andrew Cyrille, Dr. Lonnie Smith, Axel Dörner and Gerald Cleaver.

Guitarist Solborg has been interwoven into the ILK story from its inception. “With time, ILK has achieved much more than we had ever hoped for when Jacob Anderskov, Stefan Pasborg, Jeppe Skovbakke and myself initially formed ILK and invited a selection of our Copenhagen-based friends and colleagues to join in,” he said. “We have global distribution—physical and digital—and our releases receive much attention and are praised all over.

“The rare thing about ILK is that we, as a collective entity, continue to inspire and ignite each other. We have succeeded in holding on to the [idea] that each of us represents the entire collective and has an obligation to maintain a high level of integrity and artistic quality.”

Solborg said he especially appreciates “the prejudice-less approach to our musical heritage. It’s all music. Let’s not be genre-judgmental.”

Reed player Toxvaerd, whose fourth album will be out this spring, is an adventurous, gifted conceptualist who has definitely found a good home at ILK. Her affinities go back to the label’s earliest rumblings.

Concerning the diverse group of ILKs and other colleagues, Toxvaerd noted: “I see a good amount of musicians in Copenhagen who are very concerned about developing their own expression and not necessarily following a certain tradition. Also, there are a number of musicians putting a great deal of work in underground venues and inviting international colleagues to participate in concerts. It is important to cherish a personal voice, and to believe that even in a relatively small community like Copenhagen, people can build something strong.”

Toxvaerd’s debut, *Laura Toxvaerd No. 1*, was an imaginative concept project in which every sound was produced, acoustically or with electronic manipulation, on her alto saxophone. Released in 2007, the album generated international critical respect while emboldening her continuing sense of adventure. “I discovered that ILK was very fruitful when it came to communicating the album to the world,” she said. “That was a wonderful experience that inspired me to continue my artistic work with the release of the Charlie Parker-punk rock tribute *Do Drugs* in 2010 and the graphic score-based *Phone Book* in 2012.” Her unique graphic scores, inspired by British left-end jazz luminary Barry Guy, have also been published.

“I am very proud that ILK artists cooperate, despite our diversity,” Toxvaerd added. “And I use that attitude more and more in my musical voice. I collaborate with musicians [who have] different aesthetics than my own. It creates a beautiful ambiguity in the artistic expression. An example could be my upcoming release *Pladeshop*, with Simon Toldam and Marilyn Mazur.”

Guitarist-composer Solborg is one of many artists on the label who could pursue the conventional path of seeking deals with existing labels, but the ILK creed and commitment runs deep.

As he pointed out, “I have rarely found that other labels could do things better than ILK, especially if you want independence, complete artistic freedom and to maintain royalty ownership. With ILK, the artists have taken charge. The ILKs take part in all major decisions and have a label manager and an artist-based executive committee to execute things professionally, on a daily basis. All ILKs have complete artistic freedom—and the responsibility that comes with it.”

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