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# Jazztopad Festival Fosters Curiosity, Creativity

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By Peter Margasak (<http://downbeat.com/site/author/peter-margasak>) | Dec. 1, 2019



With so many annual jazz festivals filling the music calendar across Europe, it takes savvy programming to make such events stand out from what are often predictable concentrations of touring acts coalescing during a given time period. Piotr Turkiewicz gamely accepted that challenge when he took the reins of Jazztopad Festival in

Wrocław, Poland, in 2008, developing a series of partnerships and curatorial concepts that have transformed the festival into one of the most unique and thoughtfully assembled occasions on the continent.

Taking advantage of the rich resources contained within the city's dazzling multi-space concert hall Witold Lutosławski National Forum of Music (NFM)—including a world-class orchestra and several chamber ensembles—Turkiewicz has engaged some of the jazz world's most creative figures to develop new work for the festival, providing a kind of hothouse environment for musicians to rehearse and forge new communities as they prepare for some of the fest's many world-premiere performances.

On the first weekend of the event's 16th edition, which took place Nov. 15–17, saxophonist Charles Lloyd kicked off the festivities with a monumental adaptation of the music featured on his 2015 Blue Note album, *Wild Man Dance*—which itself was premiered and recorded live at Jazztopad in 2013. (The Nov. 15 set included one piece that wasn't played at the 2013 concert.)

Lloyd's superb group included pianist Gerald Clayton, drummer Eric Harland and bassist Harish Raghavan, along with two additional musicians who have deftly incorporated traditional folk instruments into a jazz aesthetic: Sokratis Sinopoulos, a Greek master of the lyra (a bowed instrument), and Miklós Lukács, a Hungarian virtuoso of the cimbalom (a type of chordophone).

On the Blue Note recording, the communication of the players is sublime, as they navigated the leader's spiritually inclined writing. That rapport was obvious onstage for this return engagement, but it wasn't always audible. Using arrangements written by Mike Gibbs (a veteran British jazz composer), Radosław Labahua conducted the NFM Wrocław Philharmonic with clarity and no lack of energy, but at times the orchestrations smothered the subtleties of the sextet's refined interactions. In fact, Lloyd's searing tenor was often swallowed in waves of strings on the opening piece, "Flying Over The Odra Valley."

On several pieces, the orchestra limned the sextet on the opening and closing sections, letting the group's engaging sensibility take control for extended passages. But on a piece like "River," Gibbs deftly pulled out threads from the original version to construct ravishing new directions, transforming a simple melody line and dramatically expanding it through the orchestra; the original conception was there, but together they created something genuinely new and exciting.

The marriage of a jazz band and orchestra is nothing new, but it seems more common in Europe these days. Despite some fresh moments, the blend can't compare with the quicksilver intimacy Lloyd and his working band are able to produce, transcending the traditional saxophonist-with-strings quality that afflicted the performance at times.

A project called Melting Pot—a quintet assembled by a number of European festival directors, although the original conception belongs to Turkiewicz and was strictly Polish when it started—underlined the risks of such curator-driven projects, where musicians aren't always the ones making key choices.

However, saxophonists Mia Dyberg and Signe Emmeluth, drummer Patrick Wurzwallner, pianist Joanna Duda and singer/dancer Ine Claes overcame an initial tentative quality—where a collective politeness can trump any spontaneous artistic heat—and found a satisfying balance between timbral exploration, elliptical grooves and melodic fragments. Witnessing the musicians find their way as one made the early torpor all worth it in the end.

Many touring ensembles rarely get to spend more than a night in a given town during a festival, but Jazztopad fosters a different kind of intimacy that encourages a temporary community to emerge. The British reedist Shabaka Hutchings, for example, performed on Saturday night with his dance-rock-jazz fusion trio Comet is Coming. While he's a superb player, there's only so much he can do within the narrow harmonic confines and leaden grooves meted out by his bandmates, keyboardist Dan Leavers (aka Danalogue) and drummer Max Hallett (aka Betamax). The capacity crowd ate the music up, but this listener found it plodding and numbing with its straitjacketed dynamics.

Fortunately, Hutchings hung around Wrocław long enough to sit in for the powerful set played by Chicago drummer Makaya McCraven the following evening. The reedist and percussionist have worked together previously—notably on the latter's acclaimed album *Universal Beings* (International Anthem)—and his presence



raised the temperature onstage, adding a different texture while underlining a shared aesthetic, particularly on “Atlantic Black,” where a stuttering calypso feel meshed perfectly with the clipped funk groove.

Yet McCraven’s own limber band ultimately needed no help. Trumpeter Marquis Hill, tenor saxophonist Irvin Pierce, keyboardist Greg Spero and bassist Junius Paul transformed the template-like compositions McCraven had assembled in the studio from raw live improvisations into vibrant, lived-in vessels spilling over with soulful solos from the entire group. There was no missing the sense of fun and brotherhood onstage, and that enthusiasm bled beautifully into the audience. **DB**

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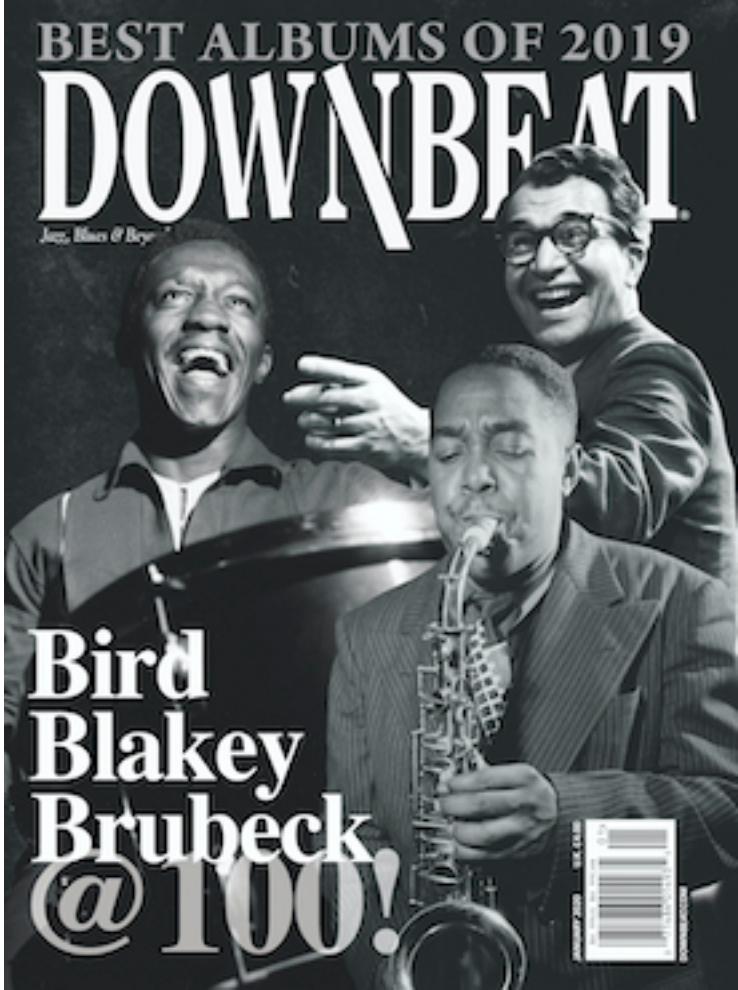


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