

RETO ANDRIOLI / COURTESY OF INTAKT RECORDS



ANDREAS SCHAERER

BY ALEX HENDERSON

From musicians to record companies to clubs and festivals, Europe has been an important contributor to avant garde jazz. Instrumentalists continue to dominate yet Europe has its risk-taking avant garde vocalists as well. One of them is 38-year-old Andreas Schaerer, who has been attracting attention with both his lyrics and his wordless scat-singing. The Swiss improviser has favored an inside/outside approach, incorporating influences ranging from Bobby McFerrin and Frank Zappa to experimental classical music. Hearing how natural and comfortable Schaerer sounds performing avant garde jazz, one might assume that he was raised on a steady diet of Jeanne Lee, Linda Sharrock, Ornette Coleman and Anthony Braxton. But Schaerer, who grew up in the Valais region of the Swiss Alps and now lives in Bern, Switzerland, comes from a rock background and didn't discover jazz until early adulthood.

"I grew up, like a lot of other kids in Switzerland, with a record collection that was mainly rock music: The Beatles, Bob Dylan, Neil Young, psychedelic rock, Pink Floyd," explains Schaerer, who hopes to perform in New York City in the near future. "I did not hear any jazz when I was a kid. My parents were not into jazz, nor into classical music. My parents were into rock. And as a teenager, I had one leg into Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin and the other leg into electronic music—which was pretty strong in Europe in the '90s. I didn't play any jazz until I was about 21 or 22."

Schaerer began to make a name for himself when, as a teenager, he played guitar in the punk band Hektor Lebt. But the more he listened to jazz as a young adult, the more attracted he was to improvisation. "In the '90s, electronic music was starting to be influenced by jazz," Schaerer recalls. "My first experience with jazz was when I discovered Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and The Headhunters. In my early 20s, I realized that with the way I wanted to use my voice, jazz had possibilities for me. I had the freedom to use my voice the way I wanted to use it. I wanted the freedom to improvise and jazz gave me that freedom."

As comfortable as Schaerer obviously is with avant garde improvisation, many of the vocalists he admires are outside the avant garde realm—including McFerrin. "The biggest influence for me was Bobby McFerrin, for sure," Schaerer asserts. "Bobby was my hero for many years. Bobby was really important for me. Of course, I have listened to all the great jazz singers. I still am very touched by Billie Holiday. I really like Shirley Horn and Cassandra Wilson. And a few years ago, I discovered Gretchen Parlato. I really love Gretchen's phrasing."

Schaerer has, in fact, performed with McFerrin several times in Europe; in 2009, McFerrin invited him to participate in his wordless opera *Bobble*. And, in addition to making his mark with his live performances, Schaerer has been building a catalogue that includes an abundance of albums for the Bern-based Unit Records. This has included some albums by his sextet

Hildegard Lernt Fliegen—which means "Hildegard Learns to Fly" in German and features trombone/tuba; baritone and alto saxophone and bass clarinet; alto and soprano saxophone; upright bass; drums, percussion and marimba alongside Schaerer's vocals—including a self-titled album in 2007, *Vom Fernen Kern der Sache* in 2009 and *Cinéma Hildegard* in 2010, as well as 2008's *Schibboleth* with bassist Bänz Oester. Schaerer has also co-led the trio Rom/Schaerer/Eberle with guitarist Peter Rom and trumpeter Martin Eberle on 2009's *Please Don't Feed the Model* and 2013's *At the Age of Six I Wanted to Be a Cook* (both released by Unit).

Although most of Schaerer's releases have been on Unit, some Schaerer recordings were released on other European labels in 2014, including *The Fundamental Rhythm Of Unpolished Brains* (a Hildegard Lernt Fliegen date for Enja/Yellowbird), *Arcanum* (a vocals/drums outing with Swiss drummer Lucas Niggli on Intakt) and *Perpetual Delirium* (a collaboration with the ARTE Quartett, a German/Swiss saxophone quartet, and Swiss bassist Wolfgang Zwiauer for Hungary's BMC Records).

One of Schaerer's strongest supporters has been Unit Records' Harald Haerter, himself a skillful jazz guitarist. "Andreas is an absolutely unique artist," Haerter comments. "He is very flexible and hugely original and I think that every project he has done is special. Andreas reminds me a little bit of [saxophonist] Michael Brecker, who I had the privilege of working with. He has a similar personality. Andreas is very uninhibited."

Awareness of Schaerer's work has been growing stateside and one of his goals for the near future is to organize a North American tour that will include performances in New York City and elsewhere. Schaerer points out that many of the artists he has admired over the years—from Holiday and Davis to Dylan—worked and recorded in NYC and he believes that some NYC performances are long overdue.

"I have never played in the United States," Schaerer notes. "I have played all over Europe. I have played in South Africa and South America. I have played in Asia. I have played in China and Japan, but I haven't made a tour of the States yet. Many musicians have told me that it's very difficult to get permission to perform there, but now, people are starting to observe my work—which makes me really happy and gives me a lot of inspiration to make a U.S. tour. I have started to think I really need to make an effort to find the time and tour the United States. At the moment, things are going so well in Europe. I have so many invitations to perform in Europe that I cannot accept all of them."

Schaerer continues: "There is a huge respect for the American jazz language in Europe. And when you get positive feedback from people who understand what you are doing, it fills your vacuum with energy to be productive." ❖

For more information, visit andreasschaerer.com

Recommended Listening:

- Andreas Schaerer & Bänz Oester – *Schibboleth* (Unit, 2008)
- Hildegard Lernt Fliegen – *Cinéma Hildegard* (Unit, 2010)
- Peter Rom, Andreas Schaerer, Martin Eberle – *At the Age of Six I Wanted to Be a Cook* (Unit/Jazzwerkstatt Wien, 2013)
- Andreas Schaerer & Lucas Niggli – *Arcanum* (Intakt, 2013)
- Hildegard Lernt Fliegen – *The Fundamental Rhythm Of Unpolished Brains* (Enja/Yellowbird, 2014)
- Andreas Schaerer meets ARTE Quartett & Wolfgang Zwiauer – *Perpetual Delirium* (BMC Records, 2014)

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