

JAN GARBAREK

The story has acquired, through repetition, an almost legendary cast: how Jan Garbarek, at the age of 14, heard John Coltrane on the radio and experienced a kind of epiphany. He knew then what he had to do. He immediately bought himself a saxophone instruction book and learned fingering positions - even before he had a horn. "When I got the saxophone I was really prepared for it. I was very, very eager."

Coltrane was a fortuitous choice of role model. Tracking that giant's progress opened new paths. Knowledge of Coltrane's interest in Ravi Shankar, for example, brought Garbarek to an awareness of Indian music (and thus of non-Western possibilities) as early as 1963. From the Coltrane Quartet, the young Norwegian learned about the dynamics of the *band*, and the internal relationship of the instruments. Coltrane's endorsement of the freest spirits of the New Thing fired Garbarek's appreciation of Pharoah Sanders, Archie Shepp and, especially, Albert Ayler. But there were other influences at work ...

Scandinavia, in this period, was a haven for American musicians. Garbarek grasped opportunities to hear (and learn from) Dexter Gordon, Ben Webster, Johnny Griffin. In 1964, he had a chance to play with Don Cherry, whose embracing of world folk traditions in his unique variety of free jazz was another significant influence. Most important in this formative period, however, was the association with the American composer/pianist George Russell. Russell sat in with Garbarek's group at the Molde Festival in 1965, then invited the 18-year-old saxophonist to join his band. "He taught me such a lot of things. I knew nothing about music and still he had faith in me." Garbarek immersed himself in Russell's *Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* and played on a row of the composer's recordings, some of which have only recently been released.

In 1969, Manfred Eicher, in the process of establishing ECM Records, invited Garbarek to record for the fledgling label. *Afric Pepperbird* was taped in Oslo in 1970 and effectively put the saxophonist on the international map, along with his fellow band members; in Norway, critics still refer to Jan Garbarek, Terje Rypdal, Arild Andersen and Jon Christensen as "the Big Four", the players who defined what Norwegian improvisation might mean. By 1970, Garbarek had transcended the Coltrane influence and new ideas came into play. The use of echoplex and electronic devices with the guitar, for example, brought some of rock's colours into the synthesis, and the group was also alert to the new sounds of the AACM and the German free players. "It was a very natural music. It came out of what was in the air at the time."

Of the early ECM recordings, Garbarek regarded *Triptykon* (recorded 1972) as a turning point of sorts. The trio with Arild Andersen and Edward Vesala sounded at times like a European updating of the Ayler trio of the 60s, and its mastery of the free ballad, harnessing lyricism to free dissolved time, was a new development in creative music. Furthermore, the record contained the first instance in Garbarek's discography of an adaptation of Norwegian folk music, an important inspirational source in the years to come.

In 1974, the fruitful association with Keith Jarrett began. *Belonging* and *Luminessence* were recorded in one week in April. The former, a buoyant, songful album introduced Jarrett's "Scandinavian Quartet", a band which was to have a second lease of life at the decade's end (documented on *My Song*, *Nude Ants*, and *Personal Mountains*). *Luminessence* was an intriguing departure for both parties: Garbarek was let loose to improvise solos within dark, severe soundscapes created by Jarrett's writing for strings. The following year, Jarrett presented a sunnier music on *Arbour Zena*, where the pianist performed with Garbarek, Charlie Haden and a string orchestra. The work received its concert premiere at New York's Carnegie Hall.

Alongside the Jarrett projects, the saxophonist co-lead the Jan Garbarek-Bobo Stenson Quartet which recorded two albums, *Witchi-Tai-To* and *Dansere*, and, with its outgoing music (more easily placed within the "jazz" tradition than most of Garbarek's work since) rapidly established itself as one of Europe's most popular touring bands. Garbarek, however, was hearing another sound. He retired from the road to prepare one of his most intimate projects, the album *Dis*. In time, Garbarek would come to view this 1976 recording as the first volume in a long-distance "trilogy" including *Eventyr* (1980) and *Legend Of The Seven Dreams* (1988). All of these are in different ways reflections on aspects of Norway, its light and its landscape, its folk music traditions. In the mid 70s, *Dis*, a duet with Ralph Towner (augmented by the lonely plaint of the windharp) seemed shocking in its nakedness and its brooding, tensile qualities. There was a striking poetic compression in Garbarek's unadorned saxophone solos, persuasive proof of his contention that one sound, properly weighted, can have more emotional impact than the slickest note-crammed solo.

Part of the shared pleasure of ECM's first decade was the musicians' discovery of each other's capabilities. Through the 70s and early 80s, Manfred Eicher continued to bring together players of diverse backgrounds in special "production projects". Over the years, Garbarek has proved the player best able to deal with the challenge of reconciling his own conception with the widest range of musics, consistently finding something fresh to say. The exploratory work has continued in the 90s, with the saxophonist's partners ranging from Tunisian oud virtuoso Anouar Brahem to England's foremost vocal group, the Hilliard Ensemble.

A not infrequent outcome of such production projects has been the formation of touring units. *Solstice* (1974), ostensibly a Ralph Towner record, brought Garbarek together with Eberhard Weber and marked the beginning of a collaboration that continues today. The Solstice band performed live to considerable acclaim as did the trio of Garbarek, Egberto Gismonti and Charlie Haden (their work together may be heard on *Magico* and *Folk Songs*, both recorded in 1979). However, the 1994 *Officium* collaboration with the Hilliard singers was to prove the most overwhelmingly popular of all the projects first hatched in the studio.

The overlapping of cultures in production productions has frequently been extended in Garbarek's own groups. Until singers Agnes Buen Garnås and Mari Boine were brought in to augment the ensemble for selected performances and recordings, sightings of Norwegians in Garbarek bands were infrequent. The line-up has been multi-national since the late 1970s. American guitarists Bill Connors, Bill Frisell and David Torn contributed usefully to the development of Garbarek's group music in the years 1978 to 1986. In the 80s drummers were also usually American, including Michael DiPasqua and (on tour only) Billy Hart. The decision to replace the drum kit with Nana Vasconcelos's Brazilian percussion (*Legend Of The Seven Dreams*) was perceived as a further, radical departure from jazz per se. And when the kit was reintroduced on *I Took Up The Runes*, the drummer chosen, Paris-born Manu Katché, was a player closer to rock than bebop. Interestingly, however, Katché had listened closely to the recordings of Garbarek, Weber and other ECM artists in his formative years. The line-up featured on *Twelve Moons* partners Katché with Danish-American percussionist Marilyn Mazur, alongside the long-serving German contingent of Eberhard Weber and Rainer Brüninghaus. Garbarek: "I like to have strong players around me, musicians of contrasting temperaments but whose personalities are complementary. When I put a group together, I'm not looking for three of me. We're all very different."

Writing music to incorporate Garbarek's saxophones, Greek composer Eleni Karaindrou (see *Music For Films*) felt she heard a strong Balkan quality in Jan's playing ("It brings the 'Greekness' from my soul"). Indian violinist Shankar (*Vision, Song For Everyone*) was astounded by the ease with which the saxophonist approached Karnatic modes. Czech bassist Miroslav Vitous wrote specifically "Slavic" tunes for the duo album *Atmos* and attributes Garbarek's affinity with them to Jan's Polish

ancestry. Garbarek: "You might say I live in a spiritual neighbourhood which is scattered geographically around the world." However, his adaptability derives partly from the commonality, the "common tongue", of the world's folk musics, which he has unearthed via his researches into Norwegian tradition. These are most specifically stressed on *Rosensfole*, the album Jan made with traditional singer Agnes Buen Garnås: "The ornaments she is using in her music sound Middle Eastern - Turkish or Arabic - in a way. This really fascinates me, the connection between Norwegian music and that of India via the Balkans and Asia Minor...I found the most 'exotic' music right in my own backyard, so to speak."

Norway being on the periphery of Europe and its rural valleys being narrow and closed, folk music has survived there almost unchanged through the centuries, with very little influence from the world outside: "You can still find extremely old melodies and extremely archaic ways of singing."

This investigation of his "roots" was prompted, back in the 70s, by a feeling that jazz's experimental wing was drifting ever further from the cry-from-the-heart that had distinguished the music from Armstrong to Ayler. "It was like one abstraction was being piled upon another: contact was being lost to where the music came from. It was very important for me to listen to folk music from all over the world but especially from Norway. There are strong similarities, of course, in all folk musics. Well, instead of searching for roots in Mississippi, I was looking in the Norwegian valleys. What I found was purely Norwegian yet, for that matter, it does share some common ground with Mississippi."

The absorption of so-called ethnic musics has been a long process and by no means the saxophonist's sole preoccupation. And while Garbarek has gone back, in his musicological researches, to the medieval era and beyond, he has also kept pace with technological developments in modern sound production. Outside of his work for ECM he has provided music for Norwegian films, TV and radio plays, and numerous theatre productions. Many of these projects have been realized alone, using synthesizers for orchestration purposes. The 1986 solo recording *All Those Born With Wings* grew out of one such project. The title track of *Twelve Moons* was originally created by Garbarek for the film *Around The Year In Børfjord*, and he plays the synthesizers on the piece. His music for theatre and film perhaps draws more consciously on non-jazz influences, including the classical and contemporary music traditions - in interview he has spoken of his affection for composers as different as Haydn, Chopin, Mahler, Sibelius, Lutoslawski and Takemitsu - yet such influences may also be found in his group work. *Twelve Moons*, after all, contains an adaptation of Grieg.

Garbarek's wide-ranging listening habits and his willingness to confront new challenges in ECM production projects give notice that his music has retained its exploratory edge. He has done more than any other saxophonist to establish values for improvisation in which sensitivity to tone and space are of crucial importance, and views the shaping of his sound as a winnowing process. "Well, I started with Coltrane's 'Countdown', in which there are a lot of notes. I copied that and then had to 'weed my garden', you know? To take out what was superficial in my own playing. Finally you get to a very naked place and there, hopefully, you can cultivate something new." That "something" has found a response with a great many listeners and the Garbarek Group has built a substantial and loyal audience. Currently, the saxophonist's touring activities are split primarily between his work with the Garbarek Group and with the *Officium* project.

Officium, conceived by producer Manfred Eicher, provocatively placed Garbarek's improvisations within the context of Cristóbal de Morales' *Officium defunctorum* and other "early music" pieces, the saxophone moving freely as a "fifth voice" with the Hilliard Ensemble. As Garbarek told *Gramophone*: "Listeners not so preoccupied with early music or jazz might be able to see that these two things put together create something quite different. Quite a lot of my work involves performers from different cultures and I consider this new collaboration comes from a different culture - if not geographically

then certainly in the sense of time. In our best moments I think that we managed to give something new, something unheard of before; something came into existence that was not there before." Elsewhere, Garbarek spoke of the immediate affinity he felt with both the Hilliard Ensemble and the material during the recording session: "Starting phrases together, meeting in different places, it was as if the music had been 'written' for us. It was a meeting in the most natural way, and one of the most challenging and complete recordings I have been involved with."

Officium figured in numerous albums-of-the-year listings and lodged itself securely in classical, jazz, "independent" and even pop charts around the world, proving to be a rare instance of music both unclassifiable and universal in its appeal. That appeal, moreover, shows no signs of diminishing. Currently, Garbarek's touring schedule divides itself into performances in the churches of the world with the Hilliard Ensemble and extensive concert activity with the Jan Garbarek Group. Group members Rainer Brüninghaus, Eberhard Weber, and Marilyn Mazur also appear on Garbarek's *Visible World* and *Rites*, though neither is a "band album" in the conventional sense, the recording methodology having more in common with *All Those Born With Wings*: in both instances Garbarek plays a majority of instrumental parts himself.

Rites, the first double-album to be issued under Jan Garbarek's name, is a major work, and well-titled. "Rites" suggests initiations, rituals, the archaic, the magical, but also "rites of passage" and, in his choice of material, the saxophonist reflects upon pivotal episodes and influences in his own life and those of his associates. There is a tribute to Don Cherry, for instance, the musician who first inspired him to explore the potential of folk music for improvisational purposes. The folk traditions of the North, specifically, are mined on "It's high time" and "Her wild ways", but influences are drawn from all over the globe and the album begins with sounds taped by Jan in an Indian village. Guest musicians on *Rites* include Georgian conductor-singer Jansug Kakhidze, who performs his "The moon over Mtatsminda" with the Tbilisi Symphony Orchestra. On "We are the stars", a setting of a Native American poem, Jan's saxophone encircles the voices of singers from the choir Sølvguttene. He also revisits his own past, with new arrangements of "It's OK to listen to the gray voice" and "So mild the wind, so meek the water."

Prior to the release of *Officium*, Manfred Eicher had sent a session tape to Georgian composer Giya Kancheli, who was "stunned" by what he heard. Eicher asked Kancheli to revise his string quartet composition *Night Prayers* for chamber orchestra and saxophone, to feature Jan as soloist. Initially reluctant to write parts for a player he recognised as one "who creates something of his own and does it very exactly and very subtly," Kancheli eventually arrived at a detailed score for soprano saxophone that incorporates a "window" in which Garbarek can improvise. *Night Prayers*, one of the highlights of Kancheli's *Caris Mere* album, thus stands as a departure for both composer and player. Garbarek, whose role on *Officium* had been improvisational, is confronted with notated contemporary music while Kancheli permits the soloist considerably more leeway than is the norm in his pieces. Press reviews hailed the collaboration as inspired.

Five years after the experiment that was *Officium*, the Hilliard Ensemble and Jan Garbarek returned to the monastery of St Gerold to renew, in the words of John Potter, their encounter with the unknown. For *Mnemosyne*, the long-awaited second recording by the Norwegian saxophonist and the English vocalists, the musicians strove to avoid formulaic repetition. Where *Officium* was broadly based on early music principles, this time the improvisational quotient was boosted and the span of music embraced far broader. The repertoire for the album - and for the world tours in its wake - now covered 22 centuries from the ancient "Delphic Paean" of Athenaeus to Veljo Tormis's contemporary "Estonian Lullaby", via folk song fragments from North and South America and Spain, freely developed, as well as pieces by Tallis, Dufay, Brumel, Hildegard von Bingen, a Russian psalm, a Scottish ballad of the 16th century and much more. The potential of this musical combination is, it seems, inexhaustible.

In 2001, ECM approached a number of its recording artists to compile anthologies of favourite moments in their discographies for a new series called *rarum*. Garbarek's discography, by this point, was so vast that his history with the label could be approximately indicated only by means of a two CD set. Jan devoted one of his "Selected Recordings" to his own projects, the second to some of his inspired collaborations with other artists, emphasising particularly the work with Keith Jarrett.

Further inspired collaborations were in the wings. A decade after *Atmos*, bassist Miroslav Vitous came knocking again. Together with producer Manfred Eicher, Vitous had hatched a plan to follow through directions posited on his influential debut *Infinite Search*, bringing its basic improvisational premises into a contemporary context. On *Universal Syncopations*, Jan Garbarek was chosen to head a stellar cast that included Chick Corea, Jack DeJohnette, John McLaughlin and Vitous himself. The album won diverse prizes and appeared on numerous Best-of-the Year lists, including those of the New York Times and the Guardian. Many critics agreed that it was a great pleasure to hear Garbarek once more digging into material that could be unambiguously be called jazz, even playing the blues with great authority.

Another important association has been with Armenian-American violist Kim Kashkashian, one of the key musicians of ECM's New Series. For years Garbarek and Kashkashian had been crossing each other's paths, playing separately, for instance with Eleni Karaindrou and with Giya Kancheli. Then a Norwegian new music festival brought them together to celebrate the music of Tigran Mansurian, Armenia's most important contemporary composer. This led, in turn, to Garbarek's presence on Mansurian's *Monodia*, where he duetted with Kim Kashkashian on *Lachrymae* a piece specifically written by the composer for these players. Mansurian had quickly grasped that the "vocal" inflections of Kashkashian's viola can find a most appropriate correspondence in the "cry" in Garbarek's saxophone.

This idea is also central to Jan Garbarek's newest recording, *In Praise of Dreams* released September 2004, which brings to the fore a trio whose line-up is unprecedented yet also logical enough in the context of the saxophonist's musical odyssey. There is something undeniably "dreamlike" about the sound of Jan Garbarek engaging in intensely melodic call-and-response exchanges with Kim Kashkashian, their joyful dialogues underpinned by the loping, deep tribal drum grooves of Manu Katché - which suggest a confluence of rock, jazz and African beats - as well as electronically generated rhythm pulses. The nature of the instrumentation may preclude performances outside the dream circuit, but such a a 'band' could only have come together at ECM.