

## Liner notes / Putte Wickman - Jan Lundgren

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I have sometimes wondered why the clarinet has become jazz' obvious stepchild among the instruments. In New Orleans and Chicago it had its natural place, being rather indispensable, and back in the late thirties it was just about the hippest thing, with Artie Shaw and Benny Goodman being *the* trendsetters. But from the bebop years and on, it more or less fell out of fashion and for half a century it has been a rare thing (to put it mildly) to come across a jazzman at top level, whose only tool was the clarinet. Still is, unfortunately. Of course, most any (big band) saxophone player worth his salt can double on clarinet, maybe even feature it for a song or two, but for counting jazz' *real* clarinetists today you don't need a calculator. Let's see (and I know, a few of them are not with us any more): Woody Herman, Buddy DeFranco, Don Byron, Eddie Daniels.....Jimmy Giuffre ? Well, the clarinet certainly was his main thing, but....Paquito D'Rivera ? Art Pepper ? Tony Coe ? Eric Dolphy ? Wonderful musicians, but whatever way you turn it, these men are (were) saxophone players first and foremost. Arne Domnerus ? Well, here we got a sort of borderline case. Though jokingly referring to himself as a "clarinet owner" he is much more than that, even if, by and large, his alto work takes first priority. And Ove Lind ? A great musician, undeniably, but, with all due respect, hardly at Wickman's level. And then there was Åke 'Stan' Hasselgaard (1922-48), a very gifted artist, who, after moving to the States, was on his way to stardom when a car accident put an end to his career just as it was seriously taking off. Enter Putte Wickman. A rare bird, not only for his instrument, which he's been playing for more than sixty years, but for his unique creativity, which – unbelievable as it may seem – is still undiminished at an age when most so-called ordinary people have long retired. Yes, I know: Benny Carter played until he was past ninety, same with Doc Cheatham, Benny Waters, Milt Hinton and Eubie Blake.

For those who are not familiar with his career, it could be sketched out like this:

**"Wickman, Putte (Hans Olof W.),** Swedish clarinetist, born September 10, 1924 in Falun. Played piano as a kid (classical music), taking up clarinet at 16, self-taught on both instruments. Considered himself a bit of an introvert and was not interested in jazz until his mid-teens, when he started hanging out with friends who got him hooked on it. Became a professional musician in 1944 as a member of Arthur Österwall's quintet at the Nalen club. Later played with the bands of Simon Brehm and Hasse Kahn and was a member of the the so-called Paris Orchestra, together with Arne Domnerus, Gösta Törner, Alice Babs a.o., representing Swedish jazz at the 1949 Paris Jazz Festival ("Parisorkestern", Dragon Records): *"Nisse Hellström was the man behind the band. He tried to persuade Charles Delaunay to have a Swedish band at his festival, but we didn't get any money. Nisse fixed it so that we had a couple of gigs in Gothenburg and Malmö, which made it possible for us to pay for the chartered airplane from Malmö to Paris."* Played for two nights with Charlie Parker in Stockholm in 1950: *"We did not rehearse with him, as we were familiar with several of his tunes, Anthropology and all those, and we played standards also. It was unequalled. He was in great shape, and a nice guy besides"*. Led own bands from the early fifties, most often a sextet (often including the blind pianist / arranger Reinhold Svensson) which toured frequently in the Swedish Folk Parks and made numerous recordings, both on his own and as a sideman. Played in New York for a few weeks in the late fifties and got in touch with the agent Willard Alexander: *"He said that now we'll be doing this and that, it's time for a new clarinet player, we'll build up up.... but I never liked their suggestions, I was happy with what I had going on back home. Never regretted that for one second. Actually I think you're better off as a jazz musician in Sweden than in the USA"*. Led own big band during part of the sixties (and had his own club for a while), but also left music for some time, working with the family-owned coffee-store. Later on playing primarily as a soloist with a rhythm section or with other soloists at his own artistic level, e.g. John Lewis (*Stockholm '81*, Gazell; *Slukefter Blues*, Gazell, 1984), Svend Asmussen, Roger Kellaway (*Some O'This and Some O'That*, Dragon, 1989) and Red Mitchell (*The Very Thought Of You*, Dragon, 1987). Occasionally he's been participating in projects together with musicians who are

also among the cream of Swedish jazz players, e.g. Arne Domnerus (*Happy Together*, Gazell, 1995) and furthermore, in between all his jazz gigs and recordings, has been active on the outskirts of jazz and playing concerts of symphonic and chamber music: *"It gives you a kick to stand in front of a symphony orchestra, playing music that you have to be really sharp to execute.... But the important thing is that I can play what I want to play"*. Wickman is one of the very few prominent clarinetists who does not play any type of saxophone. His basis is mainstream jazz, but his stylistic conception is anything but narrow or restricted and he is a marvellous improviser. Besides, his sound is appreciated for its very distinct clarity, though not lacking in warmth, going from an acid bite to the most tender sweetness.

Selected recordings: *Young, Searching and Swinging* (Phontastic, 1945-55); *Sound of Surprise* (Dragon, 1969); *Bewitched* (Bluebell, 1980-82); *Interchange* (with Claes Crona, Phontastic, 1984); *Wickman in Wonderland* (EMI, 1987); *Simple Isn't Easy* (Proprius, 1993-94); *In Silhouette* (Phontastic, 1994); *Back to the Future* (RCA, 1996-97); *Django D'Or* (Gazell, 1998)."

The above is an extended version of his entry in Politikens Jazzleksikon (of which I was the co-editor), but as is the case with most dictionary entries, this one – though hopefully not inaccurate – is missing something. It does not tell anything about Wickman's lack of prejudice or about his openmindedness (some years back, I was watching a Swedish TV entertainment show – open air, on a beautiful summer night – and who should walk in but Wickman, joining a band that was playing a sort of country-dance music, obviously enjoying himself).

Neither it tells that you simply can't mistake him for anybody else, no matter what he plays: obligatos behind a vocalist (indicating that he's got ears like a vacuum cleaner), songs from The Great American Songbook (where he seems to be able to come up with endless variations), more or less 'free' improvisations (not that he does this very often, but anyway), chamber music (as with Svend Asmussen and Ivan Renliden). And though his tone contains an entire universe of shadings and his phrasing can go from the disarmingly casual to the strict on-the-beat pinpointing, it's all for the sake of music. As with Stan Getz: Tenderness and drama being sides to the very same coin, so to say. Deeply serious, but never with any dash of pompousnes, whatsoever. Rather, a little fun or (self)irony sometimes creeps in to great effect.

**Lundgren, Jan:** Swedish pianist, born March 22, 1966 in Olofström. Played piano from age 5 (classical)...*"I had a classical training at the community music school early on. Whatever technical skill I possess, I owe to that discipline, I guess...."*. Moved to Ronneby and got interested in jazz through his membership of a local youth big band. Played for several years at Ronneby Jazz Festival, accompanying Benny Bailey, Bernt Rosengren, Nisse Sandström, Arne Domnerus (who 'discovered' him) and many others. Did five years of studying at Musikhögskolan in Malmö from 1986, also joining Jörgen Nilsson's Monday Night Big Band (including performances at the Village Vanguard in New York). From the beginning inspired by Oscar Peterson (*"The first jazz record I bought was Oscar Peterson's 'Night Train'"*), Erroll Garner, Bill Evans, Red Garland and McCoy Tyner: *"What's all-important is the communication, between the players, mutually, and between the players and those who are listening..."*. Own cd's from 1994 and has since then played and recorded regularly, with Herb Geller (*Stockholm Get-together*, Fresh Sound, 1994), Conte Candoli, Lars Erstrand, Jesper Thilo (*Flying Home*, Music Mecca, 1999), Vincent Nilsson, Arne Domnerus (*Face to Face*, Dragon, 1999), Stacey Kent, and others. *"I think it's important to know your history. Whenever I want to learn something, I want to do it from scratch."*

Selected recordings: *Conclusion* Four Leaf Clover, 1994); *New York Calling* (Alfa Jazz, 1995); *Cooking at The Jazz Bakery* (Fresh Sound, 1996); *Swedish Standards* (Sittel, 1997) awarded the Gyllene Skivan as best Swedish jazz record of that year; *Plays The Music of Victor Young* (Sittel, 2000); *Presents Miriam Aida & Fredrik Kronkvist* (Sittel, 2001); *Svenska Landskap* (Sittel, 2003).

As for the music here, Wickman has – as is often the case when he's in a recording studio – selected a number of tunes that have not been done to death. Actually, aside from Gillespie's 'Con

Alma', Tom Harrell's 'Sail Away' (on its way to becoming a minor classic, and deservedly so), and Tommy Wolfe's heartbreakingly beautiful 1955-ballad 'Spring can really hang you up the most' (of which Stan Getz', Radka Toneff's and Marian McPartland's interpretations are particularly convincing), I would presume the remaining songs to be less than well-known to most listeners. Come to think of it: Wickman actually recorded Johnny Mandel's 'Just a child' in a strings-and-brass version back in the early 70's – I wonder if he got the idea from Stan Getz, who made two versions of it in 1960 (one in Copenhagen with Jan Johansson on piano, the other in a Stockholm radio studio six months later) and played it at a Stockholm concert in 1972. David Shire's little known, moody main theme from the movie 'Farewell, My Lovely' perfectly reflects the lonely lifestyle of Raymond Chandler's main character, private eye Philip Marlowe. Not much improvisation here, but then much isn't needed. Wickman plays the 16-bar tune twice and once again after Lundgren's interlude, but what a mood he conveys. And here, as so often all the way through, this entirely personal sound: a woodwind sound, if ever there was one. Same goes for composer/arranger (and ex-trombonist) Don Sebesky's tribute to Bill Evans, expressed within a not-too-common 40-bar frame. Lundgren's contribution is a bright samba that (among other things) serves to show us how well Lundgaard and Riel go together. And no wonder they do, as they have been sharing stages and recording studios *here, there and everywhere* for a quarter of a century. In fact, on no less than five of Lundgren's cd's, he got Lundgaard and Riel on bass and drums, so they are entirely familiar with each other.

Wickman is no stranger to Danish musicians, either. Jesper Lundgaard has backed him on several occasions prior to this, bassists Mads Vinding and Klavs Hovman and drummers Bjarne Rostvold and Aage Tanggaard have supported him, both on records and at concerts, and at his many visits to Copenhagen he's been in the company of other talented Danes.

Both co-leaders have recorded extensively. At 38, Lundgren has released almost 20 cd's, several of them for Japanese labels. Needless to say, at 80, Wickman has done a good deal more, and I can't honestly claim to have heard it all. But equally honest I can say that (so far) I haven't heard a record or a live performance of Putte Wickman's that didn't capture me.

My good friend and former colleague, Boris Rabinowitsch, put it like this in a review a few years ago: "Maybe my praises of Swedish clarinet player Putte Wickman might seem to be monotonous. However, that won't keep me from going on."

I really like that one. All the more, because I absolutely agree.

#### References:

Svensk Jazzhistoria, vol.6 (Swedish Jazz 1947-1951): Cream of the Crop (Caprice).

Interview with Putte Wickman by Lars Westin and Jan Bruér; OJ, 1999.

Interviews with Jan Lundgren by Christer Borg; OJ, 2000, and by Anna Claesson on Lundgren's webpage.

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