

Kathrine Windfeld – unrestrained composer and structured bandleader

Text: Olga Witte

—I'm really excited about my big band – about having such a great orchestra playing my stuff
– Kathrine Windfeld commences.

And she has every reason to be happy. She gets to tour Europe, both with her own orchestra and as a guest composer. She recently recorded the album DETERMINATION with the Swedish Bohuslän Big Band, and she has rehearsed her music with The Frankfurt Radio Big Band.

Last year, she and her big band music won the prestigious English Rising Stars' Jazz Award and an accompanying European tour. However, it was too expensive to fly around with a complete big band.

—I brought my sextet, and that band also makes me super-happy.

The two ensembles let Kathrine live out her visions as a composer, arranger, and pianist.

Control the music manuscript

Kathrine can now compositionally express exactly what she wants. In particular, the title tracks on her last two releases, *Determination* and *Orca*, she believes are “good architecture”.

—I can sleep soundly at night. It is hugely satisfying to know that my works exist in this windswept jazz world. I can always open the score and say, “See how fine the music looks.” No matter what happens, I'm so happy with those numbers.

Sports pianist

Kathrine does not always sleep soundly, however. She ravages the Copenhagen jazz scene, among other things, at jam sessions and she tells with great enthusiasm:

—I'm a sports musician. I like things to be cool and go fast – like riding on a rollercoaster.

—From jam sessions you achieve a good technique, and when you play a ballad, you also have a nice sound. Things are connected but can have slightly different moods. I like when the music is beautiful and sensitive but sometimes, I also like when it's like a football game.

The piano is important to Kathrine.

—I have made the choice that I do not want to be just a composer or a conductor. I really want to play.

After Kathrine has had more time to practice and to "show people that she wants to play " she is frequently asked if she wants to be a pianist in other musicians' projects. However, her experience as a big band leader cannot be ignored.

—I am so used to leading and figuring out what is difficult, that I get impatient if it doesn't kick ass. But I love being a *sideman*.

The facilitating band leader

Kathrine has a strong sense of where she wants the music to go, and she must make decisions that not everyone appreciates.

—When you lead a band, you cannot make everyone happy all the time.

Being enterprising and energetic, it is natural for her to take on the role of boss.

—But it's not the executive role itself that is attractive to me. It's the music that's at issue. The cool thing is to facilitate something where everyone feels they are seen as much as possible. In reality, the role of the conductor is to make everyone feel welcome, not to stage oneself. One should rather be the smallest piece of all.

In focus

The solitary work as leader of an orchestra can be hard, but is also satisfying:

—You get all the star-sprinkle – we don't have the entire big band on Skype right now, she laughs.

—I've learned to take a star position. When I practice, I'm wildly self-critical but I don't apologize on stage. There I smile and radiate joy. I've accepted the premise of getting my music further out: A well-practiced band, delicious visuals, and the good staging of the music. We hit the roof when we're on stage and we have the imaginative world behind the staging.

Inspiration from Debussy and Schoenberg

The road to jazz was not dead straight for Kathrine. She first studied Musicology at the University of Copenhagen.

—I may have cursed the fact that I wasn't a hardcore jazz-musician from the start and that I haven't played bebop since I was 15. But it just wasn't my interest back then. And I brought tools from Musicology that are absolutely invaluable.

Her compositional language, she says, bears the hallmarks of insights from musicology.

—On a harmonious level, there is infinitely much to be gained from Debussy and Schoenberg. And in learning about movements, for instance an understanding of the Sudoku-like principle of writing music, that it must operate both horizontally and vertically.

Yet Kathrine chose to quit Musicology because she wanted to focus on jazz, and musicology couldn't give her that core competence.

The grammar of jazz

A mix between “The Bad Plus, something completely free and something a bit Balkan-inspired”. That is how Kathrine describes the music she played in her early 20s. The compositions were complex, but it all sounded a bit the same way.

—In order to develop my musical language, I had to give in to jazz and the whole grammatical part of playing jazz.

She applied for but was not admitted to the Music Conservatory in Copenhagen. She had to learn the jazz craft.

—I went to Fridhem [Folkhögskola] in Sweden, where, for two years, I practiced like an insane. Then I applied to the Conservatory in Malmö.

Crusty music

While studying in Malmö, Kathrine was asked if she wanted to conduct a youth band, but since she writes “pretty crusty things” she had to have musicians on a high level.

—So, I thought instead: I’m making my own. It was completely stupid. I had done maybe two or three arrangements; Kathrine reflects and continues:

—Once I had assembled a band, I was obligated. Then I composed some more. And then it went really fast.

In the spring of 2014, she established a Copenhagen version of the big band. During the first year, they released a record and got a weekly commitment to The Standard [a venue that no longer exists, in Copenhagen’s old Customs Building in Havnegade].

—I had to produce an insane amount of music. It was really a kick start.

—Since then, I have released four big band records and what not. So it suddenly became my way of life somehow.

Dystopia and mad driving

The entrance to rhythmic music for Kathrine was “world music, odd meters, free-form passages and ferocity”.

—At LATENCY there is a track called *Double Fleisch*. It’s a funny tune because it goes really fast and changes meter; hearing that tune is like driving insanely. I love writing things like that.

Trump’s rise to power was a game changer for Kathrine, and while she doesn’t have a political agenda with her music, something dystopian has come over it.

—At the same time, many of my recent tracks have a heroic character.

The music stretches

Kathrine stretches her musical effects from “feeling the trembling, crying voice” to “bursting with laughter.”

—The world is so insane and my own mind so mysterious, so my music must sound colorful, wild, and contrasting.

—At ORCA there is a gloomy number: *Dark Navy*. It really has some deep sounds and some great close *voicings* [the relative position of notes to each other] where the trombones come right down to scrape the bottom. Especially in the last half minute there is a downward line that becomes increasingly dark and condensed. I make it close up on you like a night sky. And then there's the number *Fish*, which becomes more and more bright and rises higher and higher. I work a lot with ascending harmony. There is a rising bass walk, and you really get the sun in your eyes at the end because you can create so much brightness in the music.

The contrasts bring success

When I ask Kathrine what the recipe for her success is, she returns to the contrasts again.

—I have a rational side and a wild and silly side, and I do not think you can do without any of them.

Maintaining structure in the music and the practical paraphernalia works well for her.

—But when I need to be creative, I do not feel there are any limits to how silly and crazy things can be.

Communication is also important, both within and outside the music.

—Being authentic and natural, practiced and skilled are fine, but if you are going to reach an audience, what sells you is a good press photo, a sharp text and a band that has rehearsed well and don't do too much small-talking on the stage.

And when she is in Frankfurt and by herself handles 17 professional German musicians whom she does not know:

—You really must be good at making decisions that are not always about the composition.

Ready for the rest of the world

This interview with Kathrine leaves no doubt that she is dedicated, labor-focused and purposeful. The work has paid off and the results exceed what she expected.

She will continue to work on touring Europe, both with her orchestras and as a guest composer.

—And then, of course, I am ready for the rest of the world.

A South African blog has approached her, and a Japanese big band has bought some of her music, so maybe the rest of the world is ready for her too.

Background

This article has come about in the context of a collaboration between several European jazz magazines, where female musicians are widely exposed under the headings WOMEN TO THE FORE and INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY.

Translation from Danish to English by Cim Meyer (editor of Jazz Special).