



**Max Nagl
Otto Lechner
Bradley Jones
Flamingos**

Flamingos

Amongst the most striking things about Max Nagl's music, from its very start in the late 80's, is its innate sense of elegance. In spite of a silhouette of apparent nonchalance, its inner landscape is one of great intensity. One senses the breath that precipitates each phrase and connects each note, much in the same way one feels the profound complicity between Nagl and his musicians.

Nagl has a relationship with time that marks its passage without laboring the point. He manages to dilate time, ever so gently. And as he does, there is a feeling of being present and distant at once.

When naming his groups, Nagl chose "Melange a trois" to refer to his quartet of the time. Much in the same spirit, his "Super 8" refers to a duo instead — while he calls his all-acoustic group, "Café Electric". It is with this seemingly ironic sense that Nagl somehow sidesteps the expected.

His viewpoint is not particularly 'ahead' (so much for the avant-garde) or retro (nostalgia is decidedly not his cup of tea). Nagl prefers the non-linear. His music gravitates towards the edges of things and resides there, along the margins. There, and only there, does the heart and soul of jazz thrive. There, this music feeds on what will become the remnants of a future only dreamed-of while marked with the traces of the past. There, this

music lives, rebelling against its very nature to leave room for silence instead. It's a music that listens for a premonition — of the note yet sung.

It is in this "fringe" territory, inhabited by elves and ghosts, where Max Nagl spends the time it takes to let his inspiration unfold. One sees this in his contemplation of a photograph by Robert Frank (*Flamingo*), or when meditating on the imagery of a song by Captain Beefheart (*Bat Chain*) or while he reflects upon the portrait of Mingus sitting in front of his pillbox (*Pills*) ...

The character of Charles Mingus is central to the "Flamingos" project. At Werner X. Uehlinger's suggestion, Max Nagl dove deep into two of the great master's albums, each markedly feverish in nature: "Live at Café Bohemia" and "Pre-Bird". In addition, he focused on the sublime music of John Cassavetes' "Shadows", which was also composed by Mingus.

Max Nagl soaked up the shimmering kaleidoscope of Mingus' musical colour, along with his audacity and momentum. However, instead of merely recreating Mingus' music, Nagl had his own vision. A vision more expressionistic than impressionistic. Nagl stays true to the very spirit of Mingus; that brazen spirit that blithely spun to and fro between the roots of jazz, (gospel, blues, the group improv of New Orleans) and the modern-day transgressions of each of these forms (the bebop rebellion, the innovative structures of the West Coast, the wild beauty of free jazz).

So what Max Nagl offers here is "post-Mingus". Nagl insists upon a determinedly assertive sound whose signature is all his own; one that Mingus could never have imagined. He creates a trio of textures (sax, accordion, double bass) that defies all attempts to be pinpointed in time and space.

For example, you might think you're in Europe hearing the accordion, but Otto Lechner's touch transports

while the sax's treatment of the melody rather evokes the echo of a folksong.

We seem to be under the spell of a sort of deadly charm (lost inside clever distortions, breathtaking pauses and unexpected turns) when suddenly, it's rather the most accessible of melodies that seizes us with the overwhelming desire to sing out at the top of our lungs. So it goes when it comes to the mechanics of the Max Nagl trio: a collective of contradicting allusions, masked suggestion and veiled truths. His trio plays a game wherein the rules are constantly changing. A game played by three ... of bold dexterity ... an interlacing, with devilish glee...

Nagl's *Bowling* is also like this; a piece of perpetually shifting film editing — a travelling shot that never actually settles between the foreground and the background. If you listen closely enough, you can hear a muffled fluttering, as if from the beating of wings ... perhaps from departed angel, Eric Dolphy.

Pills attempts to resolve contradictions: leaping intervals against legato phrases, persistent rhythms pocked with breaks, and brief riffs followed by long, languid phrases. All of this is indicative of Nagl's highly personal interpretation of the art of the break, as cultivated by Mingus.

The opening and closing notes of *Cigar* rise like wispy trails off its tip — but this delicate impression turns out to be misleading. It's not long before the listener feels the weight, density and breath of the man who smokes the cigar instead. And when the voice of the alto sax rises up, we not only hear the grain and timbre of this man's voice ... we hear the vulnerability of a man's life itself.

Essig takes a trick turn. In fact, it's a play on words. In German, Essig means vinegar, connoting anger. But don't be fooled. Essig's melody begins with an E flat on the alto sax, or "Es" in German. The composition revisits this note with such frequency that in German, one would call it "essig", meaning "essy" (or "E-flat-y" in English). All three musicians clamor about this note as if seducing an elusive woman; one, who in this case, got away. However, they persist, ever hopeful.

Weird Nightmare is one of the rare vocal works composed by Charles Mingus. It's featured on "Pre-Bird" and showcases singer Lorraine Cusson and tenor saxophonist Yusef Lateef. With Otto Lechner on piano (he's abandoned the accordion for the occasion) and Brad Jones on double bass, Max Nagl, instead of musically referring to the piece recorded in 1960, chooses to take the title quite literally, imagining a weird nightmare indeed: A polychromatic masterpiece of anxious murmurs.

During the recording of the CD in Baden Baden, the musicians stayed in a hotel called *Bad Hotel* (Bath Hotel). Clearly that was enough to stir Nagl's imagination. (Think refined, utopian spa town, proper tea dances and all ... until infiltrated by Nagl's trio of intense sensuality ... Probably a stimulating therapy, if one could stand it!)

As far as Frolic goes, don't trust appearances: although this appears to be a duet between Nagl and Jones it is, in essence, a trio. It's like a three-way conversation during which one of the characters (Otto Lechner) has been sent off-stage. In spite of his absence, we still have the sensation of a trio. Lechner is still there, in between the notes. Like reading between the lines, however unarticulated, his presence is undeniable.

To evoke *Flamingo*, the photo of Robert Frank, Max Nagl takes up his baritone sax while Otto Lechner's fingers fly across his accordion's higher register and Brad Jones takes long strides with his *walking bass*. They're de-

liberate about emphasizing contrasts, opposing melody lines and varying dynamics to represent sound in a truly graphic way. At end, they manage to win the wager of rendering the invisible, audible instead.

The *Work Song* and *Haitian Fight Song* are about origin and struggle, sweat and rage, earth and the word and acts as a portrait of Mingus, with his insatiable humanity, brute force and hypersensitive lyricism. The accordion sighs throughout, a lingering trace of the French culture that once enslaved these very voices. Haiti is the only country in the world where some 18th century "contredanses" still survive today, virtually intact, in spite of the fact that they didn't survive the guillotine in their own country of origin.

Bat Chain possesses a theme that reoccurs, like a mirror within a mirror within a mirror. Out of this, a melody is born that rises up, surges forward, and carries the three musicians with it – into nothing less than a state of trance. The momentum eventually releases an ultimate, liberating silence, much like a dancer, sweeping downstage in a great flurry, before finally allowing herself the luxury of a deep, still bow. The curtain falls.

When music is so perfume-soaked, marked with such imagery, haunted by history, and pierced through and through with trembling and chills, it lays bare its own humility. In doing so, enchants us. This is none other than a reflection of our own humanity. A reflection that, at the hand of these gifted musicians, becomes a little more desperate, and at the same time, a little more beautiful too.

(translation Susan V. Dutilh)

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Alex Dutilh, chief editor of "Jazzman"

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Max Nagl *alto, baritone & soprano saxophone*

Otto Lechner *accordion, piano & voice*

Bradley Jones *double bass*

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|----|--|------|
| 1 | Bowling | 5:36 |
| 2 | Pills | 5:04 |
| 3 | Cigar | 4:30 |
| 4 | Essig | 3:57 |
| 5 | Weird Nightmare | 4:13 |
| | <i>by Charles Mingus</i> | |
| 6 | Bad Hotel | 4:27 |
| 7 | Frolic | 3:49 |
| 8 | Flamingo | 4:55 |
| 9 | Work Song/
Haitian Fight Song | 5:07 |
| | <i>by Charles Mingus</i> | |
| 10 | Bat Chain | 6:20 |

Total Time DDD ²⁴Bit 47:59

*All compositions (except otherwise indicated)
by Max Nagl, Tuhtah Publishing, Suisa.*

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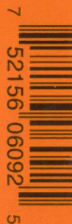
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