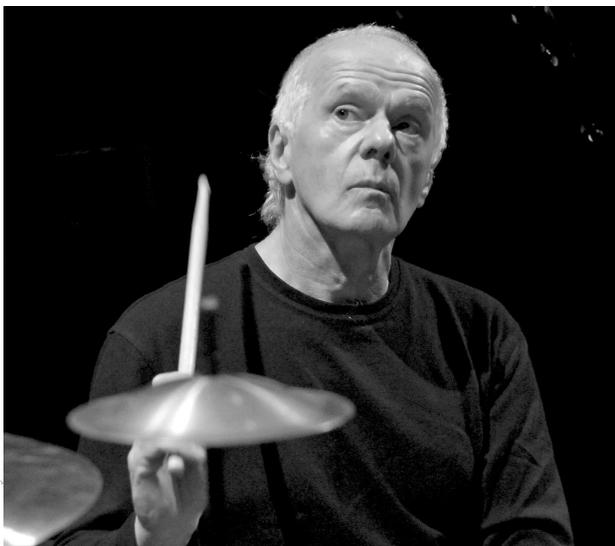


Pierre Favre

by Ken Waxman

Photo by Andreas Zihler



During a career of more than 55 years, drummer Pierre Favre, who turns 75 in June, has been a constantly innovating musician. One of the first Swiss players to embrace free music in the late '60s, since then he's explored a variety of musical concepts: from giving solo percussion concerts to composing notated works and collaborating with folkloric-influenced improvisers. He makes a rare New York appearance this month, playing in different configurations during Intakt Records' two-week curation of *The Stone*.

The New York City Jazz Record: You're a self-taught drummer. Why were you attracted to the drums?

Pierre Favre: The first drummer I heard was Max Roach on the *Jazz at Massey Hall* LP. It was rare at the time, but a friend of mine had the record and he played it over and over for me. Immediately I fell in love with the drums and spent all my time playing everything I heard and also listening to radio and records. Fortunately I had a good memory and could memorize almost anything very easily.

I only had two LPs, both with Big Sid Catlett, who was my biggest influence. He was like a sorcerer. He was precise and fluent when he played time and when he played the melody his unexpected rim shots shaped it and made it swing. ...I was talking to Tony Williams and he told me: "Big Sid Catlett was my biggest influence too." Later on I liked Kenny Clarke and Philly Joe Jones and of course Elvin Jones, Pete La Roca, Billy Higgins... Besides I was always trying things out. I could play simple rhythms for hours, just trying to swing.

By then I was living in Neuchâtel with my parents and I regularly jumped out of the window to go to the bars and try to sit in with dance bands coming through town. Finally, in 1955, one bandleader came to talk to my parents and they let me go to work full time in his dance band. At 17 I wasn't allowed to play in bars yet, but that bandleader told my parents he'd watch out for me. In 1957 I auditioned for the radio orchestra in Basel. I couldn't read a note but they liked me. I got the job, but I had to promise to learn how to read music.

In 1960 I left the orchestra and went to Paris for one year and then to Rome where I worked with the American Jazz Ensemble led by clarinetist Bill Smith and pianist Johnny Eaton. In 1961 I went back to Switzerland to work with my own trio. In 1962 I went to Munich playing in the TV orchestra, freelancing in the studios and appearing frequently with people like Benny Bailey, Don Menza and Booker Ervin.

In 1966 I came back to the Paiste & Sohn factory in Nottwil, Switzerland as adviser to the Paiste brothers Robert and Toomas. My job was testing of cymbals and organizing drum clinics all around the world. It was a hard but very rewarding job and I could finally devote myself to playing the way I wanted to. I stayed there until 1971 when I moved to Zurich, where I still live.

TNYCJR: Wasn't pianist Irène Schweizer employed at

Paiste & Sohn, as your secretary?

PF: I met Irène Schweizer in Zurich during a concert. She told me she was looking for a job, and I asked her to work for me as I needed a secretary. At first we would play together occasionally after work and after some time we were playing together every day.

TNYCJR: You were also one of the first European drummers to turn from American-influenced modern jazz to European-centered free jazz. What change in musical thinking did that involve?

PF: This is a quite complex story. Since I began to play I was following the path of American jazz. This was OK, but I guess that I had enough of the idea people had, which was "you're a pretty good drummer and musician, but any American showing up will be able to play you off the wall" - and it's still that way for many people in Europe. But the '60s was a period of change and we young people needed a deep breath. For me the free jazz idea allowed me to let everything out, who I am, where I come from, etc. It opened new horizons, my musical breathing. I lived silence, which I had not noticed before, dynamics, phrasing and a different sense of time. And all this could be experienced in front of an audience that gave you the chance to feel what is musically true and what isn't.

TNYCJR: You and Schweizer recorded *Santana*, one of the early European free jazz discs, with German bassist Peter Kowald. How did you get involved with him and later other experimental players?

PF: Irène and I were playing a lot throughout Europe and so we met other musicians looking for the same type of sounds. At first our bass player was Jiri [George] Mraz. Jiri wanted to immigrate to the US, so Peter took his place. *Santana* was our own production. We had only one and a half hours in the studio so we had to get it out. Through Kowald's influence we became more loud and busy. I played mostly loud and very busy. But I enjoyed it; it felt like a young dog that you take out to let it run.

TNYCJR: Since then you've recorded solo percussion discs and ones with all-percussion ensembles. How do percussion performances differ from those in which you work with other instrumentalists?

PF: I actually started to play solo concerts during the time with Irène and Peter. I was including more cymbals and sounds in my drum set, but the day I brought a gong I figured that it was better for me to just play my drums. Then, boom, I thought: OK, I'll try all that stuff alone. A few years later [1984] came *Singing Drums* for ECM [with Fredy Studer, Paul Motian and Nana Vasconcelos playing a variety of percussion instruments]. It was a challenge to compose

a whole program for such great musicians. In a solo concert you carry the whole evening on your shoulders, the space belongs to you. When you play with more musicians you share that space; in a way you take a step back, you just play what has to be played. As a drummer you're there to give pulse, dynamics, fire and color to the band.

TNYCJR: You also at one time played a very extensive kit. Do you still use that set-up?

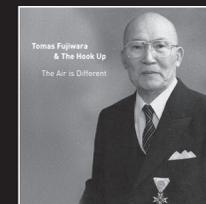
PF: Yes, there were times where I tried to play full melodies on the drums and I came on stage with all

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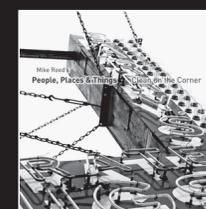
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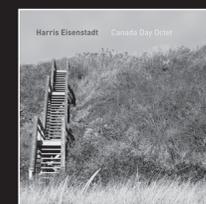
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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

kinds of instruments, chromatic tuned gongs, a set of two octaves of tuned small drums...so many things. Just a few days ago I was remixing my first solo albums and I was surprised how many sounds I could produce then. Since then my set has become simplified. It's more concentrated, enough for what I have to say.

TNYCJR: Over the years you've been involved with musicians in other areas besides what we call jazz.

PF: I've been so lucky that musicians have asked me to play with them at all times. Being curious to learn, I could hardly refuse. This is especially true for the classical music side. I was asked to play John Cage, Maurizio Kagel, Ernst Krenek, Arvo Pärt and others and I never turned down any of these propositions.

It's the same with the folkloric players. I met pipa player Yang Jing in Beijing. She wanted to learn how to improvise, so she came to Switzerland and we improvised. I also played many concerts with the great mridangam player from Madras, T.V. Gopalakrishnan. I met bandoneonist Dino Saluzzi through the ECM record *Once Upon A Time-Far Away In The South* [1985], with [bassist] Charlie Haden and [trumpeter] Palle Mikkelborg. Dino and I also gave a magic concert in duo at the 2001 Willisau Jazz Festival. French vocalist Tamia and I spent many years together playing, writing, rehearsing.

With [Czech violinist/vocalist] Iva Bittova it was only a week but beautiful. I've always loved the voice, probably because it's so near to the drums and also because I have a melodic nature. I always try to find some music where it's hidden. But during all these years I also played jazz, worked with Albert Mangelsdorff and toured with Jimmy Giuffre, John Surman, John Tchicai and many more. I must add something very important. After having flown over all these different musical countries since 1966 I come back to jazz as what it is, great music, and with great respect and admiration for giants like Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Mingus, the great drummers and so many others. You see, the jazz water tastes completely different to me now.

TNYCJR: Your most recent Intakt CD, *Le Voyage*, involves a 10-piece ensemble, whereas most of your other work is with duos or trios. Are larger bands organized because of specific music you want to play or hear? Do you prefer to play in smaller groups?

PF: Some years ago I wrote the music for the group Window Steps, with bassist Steve Swallow, cellist David Darling, trumpeter Kenny Wheeler and soprano saxophonist Roberto Ottaviano for ECM and later *Fleuve* also for ECM with saxophonist/clarinetist Frank Kroll, tubaist Michel Godard, harpist Hélène Breschand, guitarist Philipp Schauffelberger, bassist Baenz Oester and electric bassist Wolfgang Zwiauer. These groups allowed me to hear music I hear but can't play on the drums. Playing in duo is, of course, very interesting because it's a dialogue; you listen and answer to one single voice. It's perfect if you want to know somebody better. And don't forget that bigger groups need much more work and more money.

TNYCJR: Today it appears that you mostly work with younger Swiss musicians. Is this strategy planned? How do you feel about younger generations of Swiss improvisers?

PF: Yes, in general it's a planned strategy. I like to rehearse or, of course, improvise and it's difficult to get musicians to come to Switzerland to rehearse for a few days; they usually come just for the job. But Switzerland is a small country and Swiss musicians can come to my house regularly.

Younger players are very enthusiastic. In general they're hard workers and are very skilled. We improvise, I write the music and they love to rehearse. I show them how to phrase dynamics, how to build a solo. I don't ignore suggestions coming from any of them, but I work out with them how to make something out of their ideas. Of course talents are talents, the younger players are themselves; they're not more or not less than the older musicians. The other point is that many of my older friends don't play anymore - some have gone away. ❖

For more information, visit pierrefavre.ch. Favre is at The Stone Mar. 8th in duo with Mark Feldman, 10th in duo with Irène Schweizer and 13th with Samuel Blaser and Philipp Schauffelberger. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Irène Schweizer/Peter Kowald/Pierre Favre - *Santana* (PIP-FMP, 1968)
- Eje Thelin/Jouck Minor/Pierre Favre - *Candles of Vision* (Calig, 1972)
- Michel Portal - *Arrivederci le Chouartse* (hatHUT-hatOLOGY, 1980)
- Irène Schweizer/Pierre Favre - *Eponymous* (Intakt, 1990)
- Pierre Favre/Michel Godard - *Duex* (Altrisuoni, 2001)
- Pierre Favre Ensemble - *Le Voyage* (Intakt, 2010)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

Of course, ugEXPLODE - despite (or maybe because of) its outlier position - has garnered the respect of musicians who grace Walter's ensembles and catalogue. Longtime confrere, bassist Damon Smith, who also runs his own Balance Point Acoustics imprint, says this: "First of all, Weasel keeps track of books and all the funds for his label, which means not only do you get paid, but projects seem to move quicker. While the modernist aesthetic of my label is very clear, the ugEX design is something Weasel takes care of and puts a lot of effort into, so I really don't mind if he wants to put a flaming skull on the cover of an album! Weasel's aesthetic is also modernist but it's filtered through no wave and metal. The new disc with guitarist Sandy Ewen is designed almost exactly as I envisioned it, but he did it all on his own. So you could say we complement each other."

Percussionist-composer and No More Musik/TLASILA2 collaborator Nondor Nevai has a more essentialist take on the importance of ugEXPLODE and its aesthetic: "Weasel's imprint is storied and loyal and is the sort of outsider hardcore REAL jazz cultural aegis that deserves its day in court. ugEX is a salient node in the bigger picture of this northern Midwest no-wave and hardest-core free jazz current which seems irrepressible... XEROBOT, Kent Kessler, Azita Youseffi, COUCH, even ROMEO VOID are all germane. These people and their performances and recordings prove that PUNK JAZZ, whether the punk is the canvas as in No-Wave or, with the punk as a qualifier, as in hardcore/aktionist free jazz, is an actual, vital, distinct idiom."

Whether it's Weasel Walter's music or bands for whom he has the utmost respect, the ugEXPLODE ethos is not about desire and instead all about what's required. ❖

For more information, visit nowave.pair.com/ugexplode. Artists performing this month include Marc Edwards/Weasel Walter Group at ABC No-Rio Mar. 11th and Mary Halvorson at Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center Mar. 5th, The Stone Mar. 7th and Cornelia Street Café Mar. 9th, both with Ingrid Laubrock, The Stone Mar. 10th with Tom Rainey, Cornelia Street Café Mar. 11th with Thumbscrew and The Kitchen Mar. 24th. See Calendar.