



GRIENER - MAHALL - RODER - THEWES SQUAKK

Michael Griener: drums
Rudi Mahall: bass clarinet, clarinet, baritone saxophone
Jan Roder: double bass
Christof Thewes: trombone

Recorded and mixed by Jean-Boris Szymczak & Andreas Stoffels at Studio P4, Berlin, on Nov. 27, 2012. "Nova Swing" (1), "Draw" (3), "Schlimmer geht nimmer/Schlimmer geht immer" (7) recorded by Martin Pearson at Jazzfestival Willisau on Sept. 1, 2013, for SRF 2 Kultur, recording producer for SRF 2 Kultur: Peter Bürlü; mixed by Christian Weber. Liner notes by Peter Margasak. Photo: Madeleine Boschan. Cover art and graphic design: Jonas Schoder. Produced and published by Intakt Records, Patrik Landolt

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Liner notes by Peter Margasak

Drummer Michael Griener hesitates to call Squakk his own band. "I don't think of myself as the band leader, but more of a CEO," he says. "I represent the band, but I won't tell anyone what to play. But since this is the kind of music I really like to play I thought this would make a good first outing as a 'band leader.' We've known each other for so long that if I started to act like a boss, the others would simply laugh at me." The "kind of music" he refers to above is a wonderfully loose, improv-heavy strain of freebop that liberally draws upon much of jazz history without ever getting mired in pastiche, irony, or revivalism. Griener, after all, is a musician who's worked with bop-era greats like Herb Ellis and Benny Bailey as well as free improv icons like Günter Christmann and Ulrich Gumpert.

Squakk formed as a trio in 2008, with trombonist Christof Thewes and bassist Jan Roder – that configuration released a superb debut recording that same year on Jazzwerkstatt – but it wasn't until the fall of 2011 that the present quartet came together, with the addition of reedist Rudi Mahall. All four members of the group, however, have extensive histories together. Griener and Mahall started playing together as teenagers and moved to Berlin together in 1994 – their partnership in Squakk ends a long draught of collaboration.

Griener and Roder have been working together for two decades, while Roder and Mahall are members of the great quartet Die Enttäuschung. Thewes and Griener came together in 2006 with pianist Owe Oberg in the Steve Lacy repertoire band Lacy Pool, while Mahall and Thewes work together in Alexander von Schlippenbach's Globe Unity Orchestra. The associations form a tangled web, but the players' familiarity with one another yields serious dividends in Squakk, where a collective sense of intuition and risk drives the music.

With the exception of Thewes, who lives in a small German village near the French border, all of the musicians live in Berlin where they regularly navigate the city's diverse, overlapping musical communities. In fact, the stylistic diversity of Berlin was a key attraction for Nuremberg native Griener. "It was the first town that made me feel like it was okay to like these different kinds of music," he explains. "When I played an improv gig with the Canadian bass player Joe Williamson and found out afterward that he knew and could play almost every AC/DC song and that he also had the Stravinsky Conducts Stravinsky box set I didn't feel like a freak anymore."

Still, it all began with swing for Griener. "I started playing drums because I was fascinated by the old swing drummers – Jo Jones, Big Sid Catlett, and Gene Krupa," he says. "The first thing I ever played when I got my own set of drums was the Papa Jo hi-hat thing, instead of bashing the hell out of it, and I didn't stop until it sounded somewhat similar to what I had in mind." His ears opened quickly and as a teenager free improvisation gained his attention, and once his family relocated to Hannover when he was 15 he became a regular at concert series organized by Christmann, starting with a solo concert by Evan Parker. "As much as I love swing I had to experience first hand that it is not possible to play the old stuff verbatim with the same kind of excitement as they could back in the old days. You have to find your own music in order to generate that."

By the time he turned 18 Griener had dropped out of school, preferring oldschool mentorship to the academy, although he was eventually invited to join the faculty at the Hochschule für Musik "Carl Maria von Weber" in Dresden by Günter Baby Sommer. He's worked there for a decade now. Yet despite being a part of the education system he shunned as a young man, he still recognizes the value of being an autodidact. "Among my first students was Christian Lillinger, whom I told to quit school and move to Berlin. I told him to call some phone numbers I gave him and start playing. That's what he did."



Christof Thewes
Rudi Mahall
Michael Griener
Jan Roder

The music on Squakk's first album as a quartet was recorded at a 2012 studio session just months after Mahall had joined the band, as well as at a live performance at the Willisau Jazz Festival in September of 2013. Everyone but Mahall contributed compositions – in fact, it wasn't until forming Squakk that Griener began to regularly compose for one of his ensembles – but what's most striking and satisfying about the album is the remarkable level of interaction between the musicians. The tunes are durable but spare, and exist largely to foster inspired improvisation. There are some obscure references – Griener cites the opening track from the 1960 George Russell album *Jazz in the Space Age*, where pianists Bill Evans and Paul Bley both play over an indelible groove carved out by Don Lamond and Milt Hinton, as an inspiration for his piece "Draw," while his self-deprecatingly titled, Latin-flavored "Mostly Harmless" fondly upends the past.

Thewes' episodic "Nova Swing," titled after the M. John Harrison sci-fi novel, illustrates the quartet's modus operandi as well as anything, where hard swinging sections endlessly slide and collide. Thewes and Mahall reveal a stunning rapport, uncorking endlessly inventive lines alongside one another, pushing the contrapuntal cool school in the present day with garrulous chatter and full-bodied melody. The album also includes a pair of bracing free improvisations, yet both "A Dune, Perhaps," one of several tracks featuring Mahall on the baritone saxophone rather than his trademark bass clarinet, and "Lark's Wail," proceed with the same sort of compositional logic and propulsion as the composed works — this quartet has a deeply ingrained identity and sound, one that stands out in Berlin. "Our approach isn't very common because most of the current jazz players don't have that strong relationship to both free playing and the older jazz tradition at the same time," says Griener. "With the players in this band I'm as close as I possibly can to be making my own kind of music."

PETER MARGASAK, CHICAGO, FEBRUARY 2014



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