

All That (Nordic) Jazz

Welcome to the land of Legos, *The Little Mermaid*, and jazz fiddle impresario Svend Asmussen

Dear Readers,

When I say I come from Denmark, people often smile and nod politely—most don't know where that is or what that means, exactly. And I have to say that I can understand. Denmark is a bit obscure, and, well, tiny. It is the smallest of the Scandinavian countries—on the map it looks more like a northern extension of Germany than an independent nation.

But Denmark has a long and illustrious history extending back several millennia.

In addition to our Viking roots, Danes proudly call great fairy-tale writer Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*, and Lego toy blocks our own.

But what I find more interesting is Denmark's music.

You may be surprised to learn that Denmark is primarily influenced by music from the American swing and bebop era—and such American jazz greats as Dexter Gordon, Stan Getz, and Thad Jones all stayed in Denmark for a number of years in the 1960s and '70s.

This mutual love between Danes and jazz musicians is evident when walking around downtown Copenhagen. You pass one jazz club after the other—from blues bars to R&B joints. These places go on all night, and when I say that, I mean it! They often don't close down until 6 AM. It's amazing to see so many people out late on a weeknight listening to jazz.

In addition to the many jazz clubs, the city also hosts one of the biggest jazz festivals in Europe, the Copenhagen Jazz Festival. Each summer people of all ages, from all around the world, come out to listen. The streets are filled with locals and visitors all wanting to see and hear what's going on—and most of the concerts are played at outdoor venues, plazas, cafes, and even train stations. Groups from all over the world

perform here and love the open-minded atmosphere.

The music goes on all day and all night.

But why do the Danes take to jazz as they have? My theory is that with Sweden's and Norway's very strong folk-music tradition, and Germany's historic role as the center of classical music in Europe, Danes had no choice but to throw themselves into a completely different kind of music—jazz. Much of jazz' development in Denmark can be attributed

to an early master of this style, who in the 1940s miraculously played jazz lines as hip as Charlie Parker's, but on the violin.

Meet Svend Asmussen.

I first saw Asmussen play at a concert when I was about 14 years old. At the time, I was purely classically trained—but what I heard changed my concept of creating music. The sweet sounds that Asmussen made on his fiddle swung so hard and so gracefully—the joy was truly spellbinding.

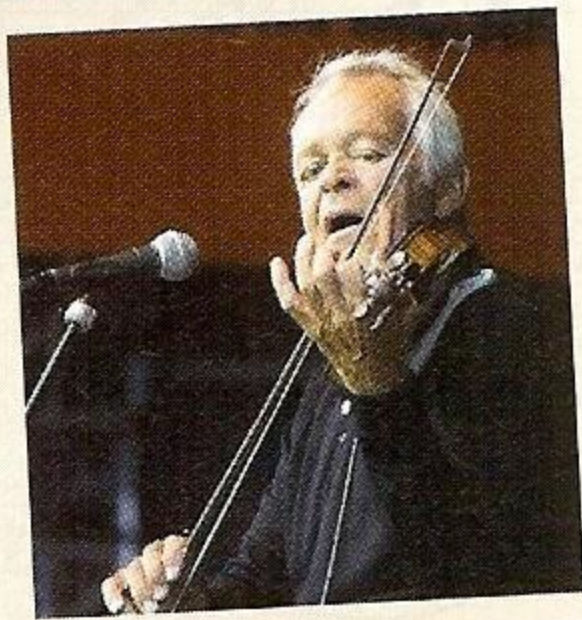
After that concert, I couldn't stop hearing jazz in my head. So three years later, although I was quite nervous, I called Asmussen for advice. (Asmussen is my father's favorite musician and a big part of the reason I play jazz today.) During that first phone call, I asked him what I should do to become a better jazz player and improviser. Many musicians in that situation would have said, "Just buy my records." But Asmussen's humble answer was, "Listen to American jazz-great Stuff Smith, my favorite musician."

Sometimes you need somebody or something to push you a little out of your comfort zone.

Today Asmussen is 88 years old and the jazz icon in Denmark. One of Asmussen's mottos is "Let's keep swingin'," and even today he continues to live up to his own words.

You can still see Asmussen's continued influence on Danes' appetite for jazz. For many Danes the words "jazz violin" are synonymous with great music. Names such as Finn Ziegler, Kristian Jorgensen, and Bjarke Falgren are commonly known, and there are always up-and-coming jazz violinists emerging.

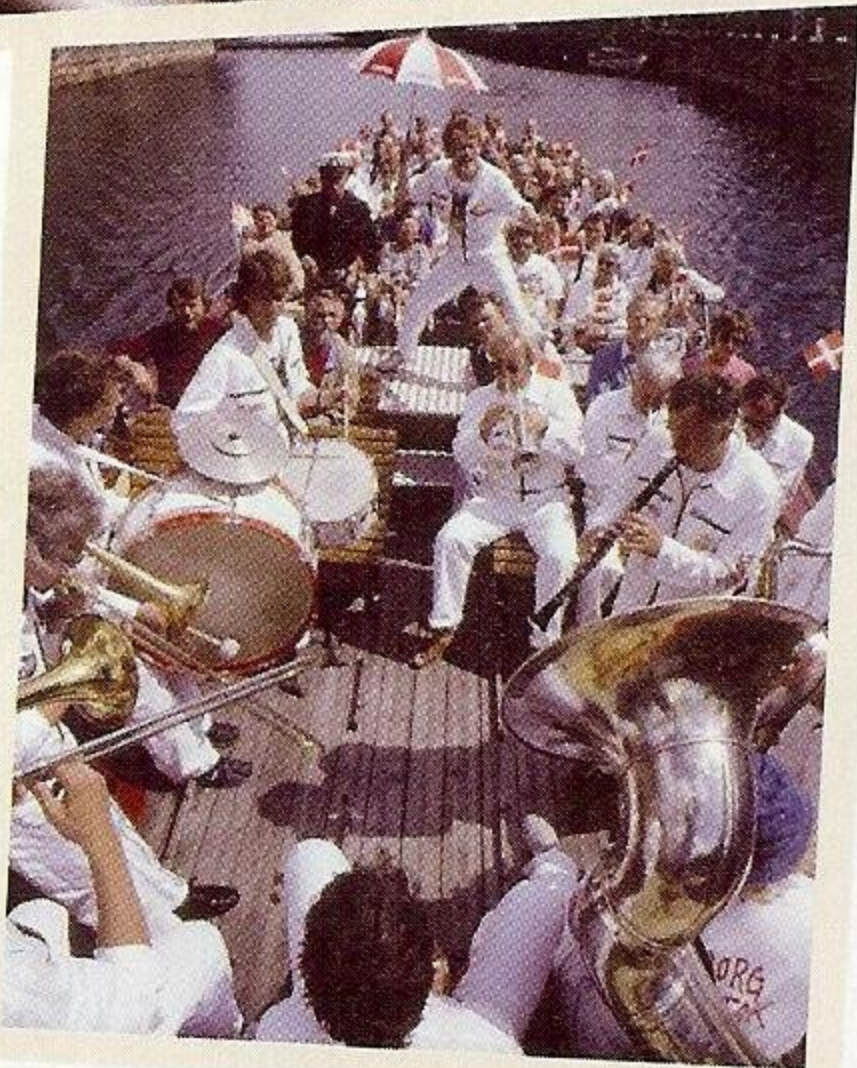
While growing up in Denmark, I had tons of Miles Davis and John Coltrane records. When I started getting serious about jazz, I wanted to study it in the country where it was born—the United States. In the spring of 2000 I auditioned and was accepted to the Rytmiske Konservatorium in Copenhagen, Scandinavia's most respected rhythmic conservatory. If you are accepted, the State pays for your education. And by the end their last year, most students are already playing several gigs around town (the conservatory works with



LOVE SUPREME: Fiddler Svend Asmussen and late-night clubs feed Danes' hunger for jazz.



MOBILE MUSIC: The Copenhagen Jazz Festival takes to the water.



Now Asmussen is once again happy, and part of the reason is he's found a new woman and love in his life. When I am in Denmark again, I am sure we will meet—especially since my parent's house and his house are just five miles from one another! Asmussen likes Denmark and enjoys playing with young musicians there. And he has been very helpful to me personally in

so many ways—including writing me a recommendation letter and, of course, through the music he donated to us.

I am very grateful for my musical education and experiences with Asmussen; they've propelled me to play with the Turtle Island String Quartet as well as with jazz bassist Stanley Clarke—and all while I find myself so far away from home. What makes the distance OK is that I can still speak on both sides of the Atlantic through the language of jazz.

Yours sincerely,

Mads Tolling

them to help balance this unique professional and academic life).

But at the same time I auditioned for the Konservatorium, I also auditioned for Berklee College of Music in Boston and received a nice scholarship to go there, too. This offered me an opportunity to fulfill my wish. I entered Berklee in fall of that same year.

I didn't think I would stay in the United States for more than a year. I just wanted to try it and then go have my career in Denmark. However, sometimes what you need in order to keep moving is somebody or something from outside to push you a little out of your comfort zone. I found plenty of that when I moved to Boston. Seeing things from a new perspective was healthy for me, and after living in Denmark for 20 years, it was good to try something different.

Three years ago, I visited Asmussen just after he had lost his wife. We shared tea and cookies together, and talked about his experiences playing with Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, and Stéphane Grappelli. At the end of our meeting, he gave me and my jazz-violin friend Bjarke Falgren most of his sheet music, études, and pieces he had arranged over the years. He wanted to pass his knowledge and ideas on to the younger generation. It was an amazing gesture.