

THE GERMAN BOOGIE KING

AXEL ZWINGENBERGER INTERVIEW PART TWO BY MICHAEL HORTIG

In part two of Michael Hortig's interview with Axel Zwingenberger, they discuss Axel's work with Lionel Hampton, Jay McShann, Champion Jack Dupree and Sippie Wallace



Axel with Lionel Hampton after a recording session at Farm Sound Studio, Doorwerth, Netherlands, 3rd May, 1982. Photo: Hans Maitner. From the Axel Zwingenberger collection.

When you recorded with Lionel Hampton he still was a star doing regular tours all over the world. How did you get in touch with him, and what was your impression doing the first record with a swing band?

I met Lionel Hampton in 1978 at a Jazz festival in Westerland, the main town on the Sylt island, at the German North Sea coast. I had started the opening concert, followed by Oscar Peterson and the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. After that afternoon open air concert, I had a gig in a jazz bar in Westerland as a soloist. While playing, I spotted Lionel Hampton coming in with the festival promoters. When I took a break, Hamp called me to his table. After introducing me, he asked me if I could play 'Mr. Freddie Blues'. I was quite surprised he knew the boogie woogie number which had been composed by J. H. 'Freddie' Shayne. He explained that he grew up as a teenager with his uncle Richard Morgan, a whiskey bootlegger in Chicago who lived together with Bessie Smith (Morgan was the one who drove the car when they had an accident which cost Bessie's life in 1938).

So Hamp literally grew up with Bessie Smith, and he experienced many jazz parties which were thrown by his uncle. Many musicians came for free drinks (it was prohibition then), and Lionel particularly mentioned pianist Jimmy Blythe (who popularised 'Mr. Freddie Blues' even more) and the latter's drummer, Jimmy Bertrand, who also served as a role model for Hampton - Bertrand also played xylophone which obviously inspired Hamp to play vibraphone. Hamp told me that every pianist in Chicago in the 1920s had to be able to play 'Mr. Freddie Blues' to be accepted. So I obliged with my version of it, and before long Lionel sat next to me at the piano, playing his famous Two-Fingers-Piano-style on the treble end of the keyboard over my boogie piano. The following year, I met him again at the Nice Jazz Festival and another one in Eutin, North Germany. On that occasion he invited me to participate in his next European tour in the spring of 1980 as a featured special attraction. On that tour, Hampton and myself played a piano-drums boogie duet in the second set, followed by 'Hamp's Boogie Woogie' with the whole orchestra, and I stayed on

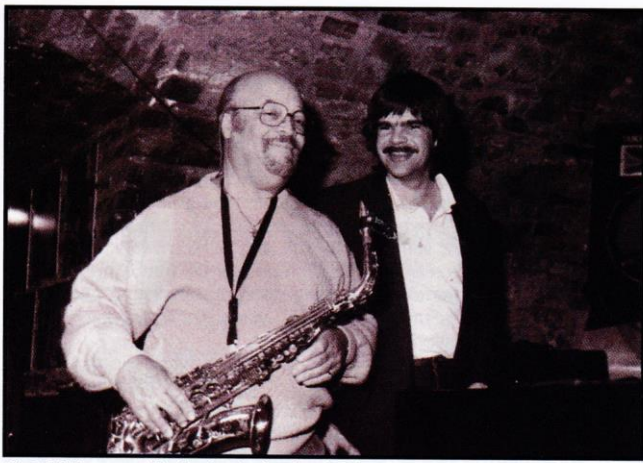
for numbers like 'Flyin' Home' and 'Amen' to the end which was always marked by 'When The Saints Go Marchin' In' with most of the orchestra (except for the rhythm section) marching through the audience. To me, it was absolutely overwhelming to sit in the middle of such an exciting formation.

You cannot learn more about drive and dynamics than in such a setting. Hamp himself was pure ecstasy, putting himself into a trance in every performance.

On the last day of that tour in spring of 1980, Hampton asked me to do an album with him. This was recorded in January and May of 1982 in New York City and the Netherlands. It was called 'The Boogie Woogie Album: Lionel Hampton introduces Axel Zwingenberger' and issued by Telefunken. My goal was to do a complete blues and boogie woogie album with him, with a number of quartets (with Arvell Shaw on double bass and Panama Francis on drums), octets (featuring Illinois Jacquet and George Kelly on tenor saxes in one session, Arnett Cobb and Ricky Ford, also tenor saxes, in the other), completed by two tracks with the whole big band. Hampton played vibraphone and piano with me, and he also sang on two numbers. The whole session was a bit reminiscent of Hamp's recordings with Albert Ammons from 1949, which were also among the first boogie records I had ever listened to. I enjoyed the intense swing of all the musicians I was playing with in these sessions, some of whom had been active already when swing music was born. Since swing is a very important ingredient of the 'classic' boogie woogie groove and the time of its biggest popularity was in the swing period, it was another big chance for me to inhale the spirit of the 'real thing'.

Red Holloway had been a R&B legend all over the years. Why did it take so long until you recorded together?

In the 1980s, Red Holloway was active in mainstream jazz outfits, at least in Europe. He played with Clark Terry, Sonny Stitt and others of that calibre and was mainly known as a very versatile and powerful sideman in such



Red Holloway with Axel, at Jazzland, Vienna, March 1992. Photo: Peter Brunner.



Axel with James Crutchfield at James' home, Soulard, St. Louis, July 1999. Photo: Eva Hemmings.

formations. It was lesser known that he was also playing with rock stars such as Johnny Winter. In the boogie woogie context, he was a new face. I met him at a 'Hot Jazz Festival On Sea' in 1989 aboard a cruise ship on the Mediterranean Sea.

I realised that he listened to my performances there whenever possible and asked him about his interest in boogie woogie. He told me his mother had been a schoolmate of Roosevelt Sykes and that he originally had started out on piano, playing boogie woogie. He still could play piano in a style close to Memphis Slim. He told me that he switched to saxophone after he had met Albert Ammons' son, tenor sax genius Gene Ammons, and that he had been introduced to Albert by Roosevelt Sykes. Even his first professional tour as a saxophonist had been with Sykes. With that background, he was attracted by my boogie rhythms.

Early in 1992, I was invited by Axel Melhardt, the promoter of Vienna's 'Jazzland' club to play for the 20th anniversary of the club. When we looked through the calendar for possible available dates, I saw that Red was in town to play with a jazz group at Jazzland in March, 1992. I suggested to Axel Melhardt to stage a few days with Red and myself, combined with Vienna's great Mojo Blues Band, following Red's jazz band engagement. This turned out to be an extremely exciting combination, with lots of interplay amongst the musicians on a very friendly basis. We decided to repeat that in July, 1992, and this time to do a recording of it. Recording equipment was installed at the Jazzland. So Red, the Mojos and myself for a few days recorded in the afternoon without audience, and also recorded the public performances at night. From that, two albums resulted: a studio set, 'Heat It Up!' and a live set, 'Red Hot Boogie Woogie Party', Vol. 8 and 9 of 'The Friends Of Boogie Woogie'.

James Crutchfield was one of those unknown barrelhouse piano players. He recorded twice, in 1956 and in the early 1980s, dropping into obscurity each time afterwards. What made up your mind travelling to St. Louis to find him?

In 1999, I was invited by Ron Harwood, Sippie Wallace's former manager, to do some filmed interviews with blues and boogie woogie piano exponents in the U.S.A. for the American Music Research Foundation (AMRF) which had been founded by Harwood. I took several trips for that project in the States, to Detroit, Cincinnati, Louisville and St. Louis. I interviewed pianists such as Big Joe Duskin, Charlie Booty, Charlie Castner, Phil Kiely and others. St. Louis was particularly interesting due to its heritage as one of the capitals of piano blues, and I met and interviewed Johnnie Johnson, Henry Townsend and James Crutchfield there.

I knew James' recordings from the 1950s through two compilation LPs of 'Barrelhouse Blues And Stomps' on Euphonic, which I had already bought in the early 1970s. James Crutchfield's piano playing was particularly interesting by its rough attitude, still with a swing which pointed to his Louisiana and Texas backgrounds. I had been fascinated for decades by his 'Levee Blues' and 'How Long Blues' renditions. But it was not easy to find him. My friend Charlie Booty drove to St. Louis and located him at a bikers' club called the 'Venice Café', where he regularly performed with a small band every Wednesday. At his age - 87 - James was not able to play a lot of piano any more, but sang and was full of stories, dating back to the early pioneer days of blues and boogie playing in lumber camps and railroad workers' camps in the South. While I interviewed him at the 'Blueberry Hill' club with Johnnie Johnson listening to his stories, I started to play a few chords reminiscent of his style, which triggered a vocal outburst from that little man. There was an almost ecstatic quality in his vocals, which had not been present in his earlier recordings when he was still fully able to play piano. I was convinced right away that a similar intensity like in the recordings with Mama Yancey was in the air, so I set up some studio time to record with James. In 2000, I returned to St. Louis for a few more recordings with him. I particularly like his raw, uninhibited delivery of his songs which he based upon traditional numbers, many of them rooted in the Louisiana tradition of the 1920s. These recordings haven't been issued yet, but we plan to release them in a not too distant future.

A recording date with a musician from the US may not be a problem, but how did you plan a tour together with a second pianist like Jay McShann?

The main thing is, of course, that the music fits and you get along well with each other. That was no problem with Jay McShann, who was always upbeat and cheerful and a wonderful musician - a true giant.

My first tour with him was in 1988 with 'Stars Of Boogie Woogie' in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, together with Vince Weber and A. C. Reed. In that programme, each of us had a solo part and then we played a session at the end. When I started my duet programs with Jay, it was mainly about playing on two grand pianos together. The first such programme was held in March, 1990 at the Jazzland in Vienna, with Dani Gugolz on bass and Michael Strasser on drums (both members of the Mojo Blues Band).

The small Jazzland stage was absolutely jammed with the two Boesendorfer grands plus the double bass and the drum kit. Some people actually sat underneath the piano, that's how packed the place was! Under these conditions we honed our music, and Jay was quite astonished that the audience really wanted to listen to blues and boogie woogie the entire evening! In general, he would have performed a number of jazz standards as well as some of his blues and boogies.

A good rhythm section with a firm blues base, such as Dani and Michael, would provide the right groove for Jay and myself to improvise together. Jay McShann in these duets didn't play a constant boogie left hand (this was mainly my part) but introduced a second melody line in the lower registers, augmenting his treble figurations. Like this, for me it was almost like playing with two other pianists, but it worked very well.

The proof of that were the recordings we made of these 'duets with rhythm accompaniment'. So we were confident in our musical programme, which is absolutely necessary for good performances. Jay McShann was not so well known in Germany and Austria back then, the main countries of my touring activities. So I had to use my long established contacts to set up a tour. This tour included a smaller theatre in Munich (the 'Drehleier') as well as bigger concert halls such as the 'Liederhalle' in Stuttgart and the big Hamburg theatre, the 'Schauspielhaus'. You have to organise a transcontinental flight for your star artist, work out travel plans (we travelled by car and Jay sometimes took a train) and hotel accommodation. But that's routine for decades. On that tour, we travelled with my two medium-sized Boesendorfer concert grands which we took with us in specially constructed



Axel administers first aid to Jay McShann, Jazzland, Vienna, March 1990. Photo: Eva Hemmings.



Sippie Wallace and Jack Dupree backstage at the Konzerthaus, Vienna, following the January 1984 'Stars of Boogie Woogie' concert. Photo: Hans Maitner.

flight cases in a separate truck. By that, we were independent from the pianos which otherwise would have been provided by the promoter – not all of them necessarily top instruments!

What do you remember about touring with Sippie Wallace?

Sippie Wallace had a fantastic charisma, with her long gowns in 1920s' style. The people just loved her. Her voice had deepened from age, but was still strong. Since she had suffered a stroke in the late 1960s, she needed to take her time to get her lyrics out correctly. That was a very good training for my accompaniments. You had to keep a beat going while allowing her enough time to complete her words, even if she was a bit slow at certain moments. For our first album, we had concentrated on her pure blues repertoire, some of which she hadn't re-recorded since the 1920s or never before. In her live performances, she preferred to sing her more popular repertoire which included some better known blues and jazz standards from the 1920s and 1930s.

I rather preferred her pure blues, but we compromised: everyday I learned a new song from her better known song stock (such as 'Women Be Wise', 'You Got To Know How' and Bessie Smith's 'You've Been A Good Old Wagon') which made her happy and always provided an extra kick to the audience. Sippie was everything of an old pro, always ready to give her best on stage and very patient about hours of travelling.

The most work you did was with Champion Jack Dupree. What had been the fascination to work with him?

Champion Jack Dupree was an old friend of mine. From the mid-1970s on, he lived in Hannover, about 100 miles away from my home. He worked for the same booking agency as I did then, and before long we were booked as a piano duet. His New Orleans barrelhouse piano style has always fascinated me, and his vocals were among the most expressive I've heard live. Of course, his music came from a very different background than the Chicago - and Kansas City type of boogie rhythms which had turned me

into a boogie woogie pianist. He didn't care to stick to the normal 12-bar formula of blues. Instead, he adjusted the chord progressions to his lyrics or his gimmicks such as interrupting the tune to tell a joke or for a drink. I had to be quite alert to follow this. Of course, it was not much of an option to attempt to make Jack follow another musician!

Jack kept telling me that we should do a recording together, but I wasn't sure if that could work out ok. Then, by coincidence, we found the right formula. Both of us were hired to play a company gig at the Hannover industrial fair in 1987. We had one grand piano, and at a certain moment, Jack asked me to play piano for him while he would just wander around with his mike and sing to the crowd. I realised that such a combination opened new ground for us. Jack Dupree was a very versatile blues singer, who emulated the singing styles of Leroy Carr, Peetie Wheatstraw, Roosevelt Sykes, Big Bill Broonzy and the New Orleans traditions amongst others.

This aspect was always overshadowed by his piano style which was very basic New Orleans barrelhouse music, probably with some gospel roots. With my piano accompaniments, we could work out these different styles more clearly, which provided a new aspect to his recorded oeuvre. This turned out to be so successful, that we did three albums together: one with acoustic 1930s' style blues accompaniment by the Mojo Blues Band, one live with my brother Torsten on drums, and one concentrating on blues classics with his old friend from Denmark, Basse Seidelin with whom he had recorded already back in the early 1960s for Storyville, plus ex-Mojo Michael Strasser. Jack and myself stayed friends until his death.

He was a wonderful person with great charisma. It never took him longer than 15 seconds to have the complete attention of everybody in every room he would enter. And he was full of jokes he loved to tell on stage as well as in his private life. Jack Dupree was certainly a huge influence on the European blues scene.

Memphis Slim and Eddie Boyd also had been European residents. Did you ever get in contact with them for your project

I met and played with Memphis Slim a number of times, but I wasn't too attracted by his style. It's just a matter of personal taste. Therefore, I only met Eddie Boyd once and didn't have much contact with him. I liked his recordings, but didn't get a particular inspiration for a recording project by his work.

You are well known and have performed all over Europe, but not in the U.S.A. Why is that?

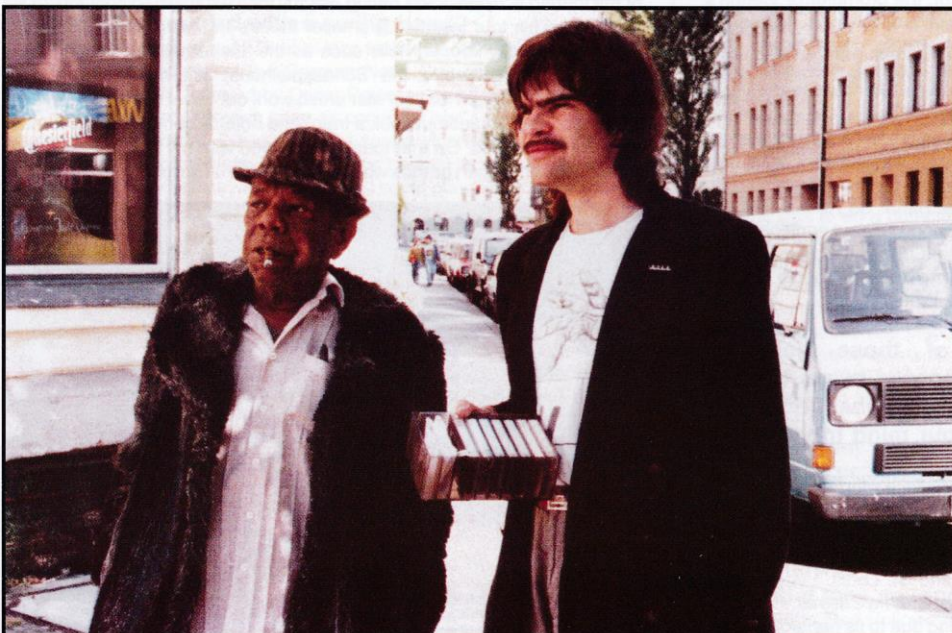
I guess, we have a different tradition in Europe. In our part of the world, the idea of a cultural heritage is very common, and it's including folk traditions. In the United States, there seems to be a tendency to cast away anything that has gone out of style. In my opinion, that's depriving us from countless variations of expression. No music will have the same emotional impact than another.

When I hear boogie woogie and blues piano, I don't get the same feeling from other styles. Its drive and expression, its sounds and grooves are unique, and it's highly accomplished piano music. When I heard it for the first time, I didn't know you could play piano like that. I've coined the tag 'The hottest music which ever was invented for piano' for it, and that's my real opinion. When we started playing it over 40 years ago, we did

it as a hobby, purely for fun. We weren't interested in commercial success, that allowed us to develop freely as artists. By performing this hobby to young crowds of our age, we got more and more requests from people who were as surprised as ourselves when we first heard boogie woogie.

When I perform in countries like Japan or Brazil, where boogie woogie has been virtually unknown to the general audience, I feel the same amazement from the audience. We actually created a new musical niche by performing boogie woogie and blues piano exclusively. Initially, it was born from a misunderstanding: we thought, the pioneers such as Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson and Meade 'Lux' Lewis had performed boogie and blues exclusively.

For the future, I think there's hope. More and more younger pianists show up in the U.S., as you can see in the web, e.g. on youtube. It's in their hands to take the torch and keep the tradition of this great music, which was given to the world by American artists. It's a great heritage.



Axel with Champion Jack Dupree, outside the Drehleir Theatre, Germany after a recording session, September, 1990. Photo: Eva Hennings.