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## Nils Wogram & Root 70 – Fahrvergnügen

Nils Wogram: trombone, melodica • Hayden Chisholm: alto saxophone and bass clarinet  
Jochen Rückert: drums

• Matt Penman: bass •

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“If you listen to Bach’s work, a lot of it is similar. But it is still beautiful music. And beautiful music with a desire for depth is always preferable to me than feverishly inventing something new with every record.”

Nils Wogram

Nils Wogram not only has a comfortable hold on his position as the most important and most influential German trombonist since Albert Mangelsdorff, but his band, Root 70, is also among one of the few German jazz groups with an original, accessible, and extremely recognizable sound. The group—which consists of trombonist Wogram, alto saxophonist and bass clarinetist Hayden Chisholm, bass player Matt Penman, and drummer Jochen Rückert—has not actually been around since 1970, but since 2000. With their album *Getting Rooted* they squared the circle; they brought jazz to completely new shores without denying, or trying to outdo, the achievements of the past.

The band is stocked half-and-half with musicians from Germany and New Zealand, and its name initially sounds like a musical program with a 1970s orientation. The warm, forthcoming interweavings of the two wind players as well as of the wind and rhythm sections indeed prompts the suspicion that the sound of the 1970s or late 1960s would constitute a starting point. According to Wogram the music does not, however, draw its tension from the contradiction between tradition and avant-garde, but from the personal perspectives of the musicians. “We’re not concerned with a coming to terms with the past. The idea was to form a band with people who had already known each other for a long time. Musicians from New Zealand and Germany

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can have completely similar roots and working methods. Hayden, Jochen, and I have known each other since the beginning of the 1990s from Cologne. Matt and Hayden actually went to school together, and Jochen met Matt separately in New York. So there are a lot of cross connections in the band. We were all born in the 1970s. Hence the 'root.'"

It isn't hard for Root 70 to transform personal convictions into a homogenous band sound. Rarely has a band achieved a similar ease of tone given such collective intensity. The ensemble spirit of the quartet initially feeds on the great mutual respect the four musicians have for one another. It's true, the pieces are written exclusively by Wogram, but when played together they become the joint property of the group. "We try not to perform as four individual musicians," admits the trombonist, "but rather to create a sound where the individual voices can mix well. We have worked on that for years. We have learned to exhaust the various mixture ratios that exist within the band."

The magic formula is "a culture of sound." The band sound is more than the sum of the individual parts. The superior musical prowess of the four Root members can hardly be more unobtrusively presented than it is on *Fahrvergnügen*. Wogram and co. do not set performance goals that they have to reach but rather place their instruments solely in the service of the music. And suddenly they tease the listener into remembering: Ah, yes, jazz isn't an athletic discipline after all, where maximum performance is what matters, but rather music. Wogram is a trombonist out of conviction, but he never wanted "to give priority to the technical difficulties. I want to be able to play everything that I hear. We have all worked really hard on bringing in our interests in other music and other instruments. Hayden is a globetrotter who has traveled to eastern Europe, India, and Africa and studied the music of these places. Jochen programs electronic music, and Matt has not only taken a serious look at the work of other bass players but of other instrumentalists as well."

Thus it is not least in the handling of its solos that Root 70 reveals where its musical ambitions lie. Only a very few solos are perceived as solo efforts at all. They are rather individual shades of an

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entire network of constellations that are feasible in this band. The generosity with which Wogram hands over his material to his band members is reminiscent of the greatest moments in jazz. “In this regard Ellington, Mingus, and Miles act as major role models for me. They let the musicians play without explaining too much. Most of the time the result sounds better than what I originally came up with.”

There is no question that the four members of Root 70 are able to also pursue solo paths outside the band. From a purely business point of view a band arrangement in jazz is more of a hindrance, for when you’ve done all the festivals and clubs once, it is much harder as a band to be invited again than it would be under the names of individual musicians. But Wogram and Co. is much more interested in the reaction to long-term artistic challenges. “The advantage of a band consists in being so used to and so good at playing together that you can develop a sound that is completely your own over a long time. In short projects or sessions all those participating put on a big show, but often depth is lacking. With a band, the sports-like aspect no longer applies. You can try out far more unusual things. In Root 70 we are able, for example, to work a lot with uneven rhythms, like in eastern European music, or with Indian intonations. These things are brought in so subtly that they don’t really stand out at all. That’s only possible, of course, if you’ve worked together for many years.”

Root 70’s recipe for success consists not least in the fact that they refuse to fall into the traps and perils of short-term trends. The national origins of their members alone already helps them to avoid the increasing localization of jazz in Germany, of all places, something that is in no way conducive to the freedom of this music. But in all other respects as well, Root 70 rejoices in a refreshing resistance to trends. “The classic mistake of unsuccessful jazz musicians is that they take on a DJ in order to do Eurodance with an intellectual background. That usually doesn’t work. In our case hardly anyone notices how many elements from other cultures or musical directions have an influence. Our music is perceived as jazz without the listener feeling that he or she is being bombarded with drum and bass or Bulgarian music.”

Wogram goes in for continuity in music. Coming up with a new, fundamentally important statement for every record is not his thing. The fact that Root 70’s new CD resembles the last one in many respects is to be considered more of a strength on his part. The records are not the same

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but build upon one another. “Stylistically speaking we are relatively close to our last record, but I am convinced that you can also develop yourself within a band sound. You shouldn’t automatically reproduce the achievements of the last record, but in a band similar situations arise over and over again. I haven’t tried to artificially avoid similarities just for the sake of emphasizing a new sound. When the music is at stake, you won’t be too quick to repeat yourself.”

*Fahrvergnügen*, German for “driving pleasure,” is without reservation a listening pleasure. A record that appeals to the intellect only after it has reached the ear. Jazz that you don’t have to think about but can engage with and devote your attention to. Music full of character, strength, warmth, and a love of detail. Jazz with music and music with jazz.

