

12 Points!

Dublin

A wittily conceived repost to the vapid excesses of the Eurovision Song Contest the 12 Points! Festival returned to Dublin this spring to present another compelling showcase of high level creativity from an impressive array of emerging European jazz talents. Strong early performances included Paris-based vibes-led trio MeTaL-O-PHoNe and UK-based Danish/British/Swedish trio Phronesis yet there were stranger things lurking in the northern hemispheres. Not least the startling minimalism and conceptual ambition of Gothenberg's Isabel Sörling sextet, the band's eponymous vocalist leader producing a series of beautiful/scary Sidesel Endresen-esque voice mutations that bordered on the theatrical but were all the more compelling for it. Their quirky set began with an a cappella chorus featuring the whole band, before melting then into folkly themes with third stream classical flourishes, free jazz and tightly wound improv. Offering a further blast of anti-introspection were PELbO co-led by the pneumatic lungs of Kristoffer Lo on sub-bass booming tuba and the gorgeous vocals of Ine Kristine Hoem with death metal-ish drum kid Trond Bersu grooving hard behind. As likely to set festival stages alight as they are to impress musos with their clever use of looping, dramatic songs and sheer exuberance PELbO were a blast of fresh air. Likewise the closing Saturday night bill was full of contrasts with local quartet RedivdeR showing Dublin has its own crew of mightily creative jazzers, and Finnish voice/sax/drums trio Elifantree closing things in style. Yet it was the utterly stunning piano-led Slovenian Kaja Drakliser Acropolis Quintet that were the surprise package here. Featuring the spellbinding vocals of Sanem Kalifa set against a rich blend of glistening Eastern modalities, kicking grooves and George Dumitriu's Downtown-ish guitar this is a band with a huge future. Producing a standout performance Drakliser's band are the epitome of the best of modern music making, bridging past influences with present ones, to create a sound that feels fresh, alive and relevant. *Mike Flynn*

Omara Portuondo and Chucho Valdes

Radio France, Paris

All of France was listening, mesmerised, last month as two of Cuba's greatest living musicians broadcast from Studio 105, deep inside the Paris bunker of the national radio station RFI. Or at least, that's how it felt: after sitting through an 8 o'clock news read in upright French an audience of 200 guests and lucky ticket winners applauded the arrival of the vertiginous Valdes, who took his seat at a baby grand piano as double bassist Lazaro Rivero Alarcón, percussionist Andrés Coayo Batista and kit drummer Julio Barreto settled into position. An opening instrumental swiftly established the musicians' formidable jazz chops, with 70-year-old Valdes diving straight into the sort of impressive keyboard flourishes – think jabbing chords, sinewy trills and left-handed runs – that have netted

him seven Grammys and several honorary doctorates. Then, with an elegant hand on Valdes' shoulder, appeared the stately Portuondo, 81, black curls piled high and cut-glass cheekbones glinting. The press release for the current acclaimed *Omara and Chucho* (World Village) tells of a young Cuban lad giving a pretty chorus girl a bunch of roses and kick-starting a lasting friendship; media construct or not, the telepathy between the two is obvious and effortless. The Buena Vista diva's voice might be a little creakier than when she was acclaimed throughout Cuba as the 'Fiancée of Filin' some decades ago, but the emotion and range (well, once she'd warmed up) range remain the same. Songs including 'Huesito', 'Si Ti Contara' and 'Esta Tarde Vi Llover' (sans album guest Wynton Marsalis) were delivered with notes held and eyes moist; a dedication to the late Ibrahim Ferrer was both poignant and heartfelt. Upbeat moments abounded: a photographer's cheek was tweaked. The mic was proffered for singalongs. And at the end, a congaline that cha-cha-cha-ed behind a beaming Portuondo, as Valdes and Co. sizzled and the rest of Studio 105 erupted into dance. *Jane Cornwell*

Robert Glasper Experiment

Ronnie Scott's London

It was a bravura moment sometime last November while hanging by the bar at Ronnie Scott's during the London Jazz Festival, that Robert Glasper and the club's MD Simon Cooke joshed about how many nights the star pianist thought he could sell out in a week. Four, was the answer, yet by the end of a triumphant, and sold out, opening show Glasper was already ratcheting that up to six for next year. Such ambition and confidence was once again fulfilled on a similarly powerful second night showing at the club, as Glasper and his mighty Experiment band ripped stylistic holes between bouncy post-bop piano, filthy psychedelic funk and grimy hip hop to create their own futuristic fusion. Coming on like a hip hop version of Weather Report the Experiment band – featuring Glasper on piano and Fender Rhodes, drummer Chris Dave, alto and soprano saxophonist/keyboardist Casey Benjamin and bassist Derrick Hodge – play with empathetic ease rarely seen in today's top jazz ensembles.

There was a daring to their interplay underpinned by a rabid sense of humour, spiked with deadly wit and killer timing. This manifested itself through a powerful rhythmic crossfire between the often explosive drum work of Dave, capable of unleashing a battery of rhythmic ideas with vicious intensity, and Glasper's continually foraging melodic sortees, with bassist Hodge finding his own pungent middle ground thanks to his probing bass lines and his sub octave bass effects. Yet the dreamy, sometimes trippy, top lines came from Benjamin – whether playing scalding sax or providing sumptuous vocodered vocals (sometimes manipulated via other keyboard effects) – that gave this electrified Glasper

band it's psychotropic edge. Mashing together twisted takes on Herbie Hancock's 'Butterfly', through to hip hop cuts like Little Dragon's 'Twice', to a wildly reharmonised synth funk take on Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', the music retained a bubble-like fluidity, floating any which way the band pleased to push it. Inevitably the set closed with a garrulous version of 'All Matter', the Grammy nominated Bilal-penned cut from Glasper's superb *Double Booked* album, the band once again flying to stratospheric creative heights. On this evidence Glasper will surely be pencilling those six nights into next year's diary now. *Mike Flynn*

Comicooperando – the music of Robert Wyatt

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

For his work as drummer and vocalist with Soft Machine and Matching Mole in the late-1960s and early-1970s; for solo material including 1974's "classic albums" perennial *Rock Bottom*; for the Falklands-era single 'Shipbuilding'; for collaborations with everyone from Björk and Brian Eno to Evan Parker and Gilad Atzmon; perhaps most of all for sticking solidly to his guns in terms of both aesthetics and (hard-left) politics, Robert Wyatt is deeply loved. Yet he has performed live a mere handful of times since 1973, having developed acute stage fright at around the same time as an infamous drunken plunge rendered him paraplegic. *Comicooperando* is one of various projects by musicians from Wyatt's extended family that give his music a rare live outing. It's early days for *Comicooperando*, and confidence dented by the half-empty hall, the band at times lets its greenness show. Former Henry Cow vocalist Dagmar Krause has the hardest job – that of trying to deliver material we are used to hearing from one of the most unique singers in popular music. Though her voice may be technically superior to Wyatt's, she doesn't have quite his lived-in quality or the throwaway delivery that hides what is in fact meticulously precise. Numbers sung by the wonderful, offbeat Karen Mantler – daughter of two important figures in Wyatt's life, Michael Mantler and Carla Bley – work better, although for the most part she is restricted to keyboards. It's a shame not to hear more from the ever-compelling Annie "trombone" Whitehead, who looks nervous during the sometimes uncertain beginnings and endings. But a slick tribute to this most scuffed and humble and human of musicians would, perhaps, be no tribute at all. In any case, audience and musicians alike are here, ultimately, as Wyatt fans – and on that basis, *Comicooperando* cannot go wrong. *Marcus O'Dair*

Partikel/Benet McLean Quartet

Pizza Express Jazz Club, London

There can be little doubt that the pianist/singer Benet McLean, who opened this evening's double bill presented by Bolygo Music, is a unique talent. He's an ex-virtuoso classical violinist who has become a

pianist of striking flexibility, drawing from his concert background but also a delicious Art Tatum-like stride, an affecting take on Bill Evans melancholy-voiced harmony and a contemporary streetwise sass, adding a vocal referencing anything from scat to rap, neo-soul through to pop song. The question though is can he make something out of these diverse materials that could fulfil the potential he might have to become the UK's answer to a Jason Moran or Robert Glasper? Accompanied by his trio formed in 2003, that includes vibrant young drummer Saleem Raman, bassist Ben Hazleton and guest saxophonist/leader Duncan Eagles, leader of the night's headliners Partikel, McLean sings Michael Jackson's 'You Push Me Away' with neo-soul-inflections that could sound on the slushy side if it wasn't for an earthy passion and the way he tries to do something different with the song every time he sings it. His time on stage might have been too brief this time to really show what he's made of, but the set as a whole did lack focus. No such problems for the young, London-based sax-bass-drums trio of Partikel who launched their eponymous debut album adding a sense of composure beyond their years to some high spirited playing. *Selwyn Harris*

Burghausen International Jazz Festival

Germany

Though Burghausen is a tiny ancient Bavarian city of a mere 20,000 inhabitants, jazz has become a major part of its fabric. That's not only in cultural terms, but quite literally too. Situated right on the border of Germany and Austria, the magical elegance of the old town includes its very own 'street of fame' – overlooking it is the longest castle in all Europe – on to which bronze plaques have been cemented to honour its big name jazz guests. This year's plaque setting commemorated Chick Corea, a festival regular who opened this 42nd edition in duo with vibraphone trailblazer Gary Burton. But this could give the wrong impression. This isn't a festival only about the big names. Opening for Chick was a young big band from Scotland, Beats and Pieces, worthy winners of the festival's third annual European Young Artist's Jazz Award held the night before. The concentration on new blood highlighted the last day of the festival too with 'Next Generation' day, a showcase for new German bands. In between there was also star quality in the shape of vocalist Kurt Elling who showcased his excellent new album *The Gate* at the 1000+ seater Wackerhalle. Those who like their singers humble and down-to-earth might not buy into the dandy-ish Elling's irony-free between-song audience massaging and old showbiz values. But he's no Vegas crooner either. With his experimental fervour, assured swing and supple baritone alongside such sidemen as long-serving, effervescent pianist Laurence Hobgood and succinct bluesy guest guitarist John McLean, Elling had a packed theatre eating out of the palm of his hand. *Selwyn Harris*