

A Band Manifesto

by Nils Wogram

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I am very pleased that four of my bands have received an invitation to the Jazzfest Berlin this year. I am convinced that bands are the best thing that can happen in music.

Working out a specific band sound is a long-term process. At the beginning we bring together our distinctive qualities, preferences and strengths as musicians. In my bands we don't simply agree to the lowest common denominator and play it again and again, but rather we listen to the other, get to know him or her as intensively as possible, and adapt ourselves to his or her style to a certain degree – as if we took up the phrases, rhythms or even the gestures of a person we are talking to. Within the individual pieces, we then join together by interpreting the initial material and intersecting the musical language that each of us speaks individually. We play “ourselves,” find our place in a band structure and develop a common vision. We deal with each other in a relaxed way. We respect each other. We give and take time for each other. The result: a unique band sound.

The history of music has shown that, above all, ensembles that remain together for a long period of time and whose bandleaders have selected their musicians with respect to a basic musical idea play music with high artistic and spiritual merit, with depth. Not only can the listener recognize the individual musicians in these bands, but also knows – within seconds – which band is playing. The most prominent examples from jazz are the Miles Davis Quintet, the John Coltrane Quartet and the Duke Ellington Big Band. Above all Miles Davis was a master of this band ideal. He almost always made the right decision of finding the appropriate musicians for his band. The combination of musicians was exciting and special, the band sound homogenous and unmistakable, although he virtually never prescribed to his musicians how they had to play. All of this happened, for the most part, purely intuitively and without needing explanation.

This is the ideal I strive for. Unfortunately, it is not easy for band leaders to keep their bands together for a long period of time. Again and again, organizers and the music industry want them to begin new projects, ideally with a constantly changing cast of musicians or illustrious guests. Many of those responsible want to influence the instrumentation so that they can present the public something special. A normal band, the argument goes, simply won't attract enough listeners, and a jazz musician can improvise well and, thus, play in any formation at all. If we view success solely in commercial terms, these organizers are right, perhaps. A motley group of all-star musicians kindle a hype that attracts a large audience under certain conditions – the musicians on board are adept, experienced and excellent soloists; they can cope with this task – to entertain – without any difficulties. Perhaps the spontaneous music originating from this experiment is even good and the audience satisfied at the end of the concert.

What is missing in the above case is the common vision, the depth and the lasting impression. I have experienced the kind of situations I describe above, that one compromises down to the smallest common denominator and each musician shines almost only through his or her own individual skills. A real musical-artistic idea, however, does not come about at such encounters, let alone a common vision or something spiritual. In a few years, no one will be interested in this combination, be it on the stage or in the studio. And although the musicians often know this, they play along anyway. For mostly these projects pay the best, and those responsible use money to entice the musicians to implement their idea (a commercial, not artistic one).

According to my understanding of a musician, however, I think he or she alone should decide with whom he or she would like to play. Organizers and producers can help to put such an idea into practice and to create the optimal conditions for its success. This is how a good relationship between artist and organizer, or producer, should look. Think about it – is there a single recording of the Beatles with musical guests? If yes, then no one knows about it anymore and rightly so.

Back to the work with my band. Some bandleaders tend to prescribe to their musicians how they have to sound and to which role models they should orient themselves. I am convinced this is a big mistake. Did John Coltrane ask Elvin Jones to play like Tony Williams? Of course not. The result of such input would be that the musicians neither develop their own strengths nor come anywhere close to the ideal I strive to attain. In the best case, a good imitation emerges; the worst case is a bad copy of the role model. But when I ask the musicians in my bands to play themselves, I am positively astounded, again and again, since I discover new facets and talents in them, ones I did not anticipate, and this after all the years we have been playing together.

My idea to have several bands at the same time over a long period of time is based on a simple observation: when I learn a new language and then go out, full of life, into a new cultural setting, I feel enriched as a human and am made complete ever more. With four of my bands I have a great opportunity this year at the Jazzfest Berlin to depict an almost complete image of my musical visions.

The work with my bands has always inspired me, not only as a musician but also as a human being. I am looking forward to facing new compositional and conceptual challenges as a band leader with them, to learning from and with them and to developing myself, to writing new pieces for the band and continuing to tweak the band sound and keep it alive. With this in mind, I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank Bert Noglik, for he decided to invite four of my “working bands” to the Jazzfest Berlin. He has given us the opportunity to present our current repertoire on two evenings and to prove that a working band is able to present attractive, artistic and inspiring music at such a prestigious event.

Jazzfest Berlin Concerts: Nils Wogram with Nostalgia, Root 70, Nils Wogram Septet and a Duo with Simon Nabatov

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