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BOŠKO PETROVIĆ – celebrating first 50 years

Our renowned jazz musician, vibraphonist, composer, bandleader, producer, arranger, founder of the B.P. Club, which he has been successfully running for last 12 years, celebrated on February 18th, his 65th birthday and 50 years of his career as an artist (he formed the first group in Skofja Loka, Slovenia, in 1950). Even an attempt to merely list all what Bosko Petrovic has achieved in this half-century period and all what Zagreb and the Croatian culture were indebted to him would use up all the space available on this occasion. Let us just say that he is our globally most highly regarded jazz musician (e.g. he played 15 times at the Monterey Jazz Festival, one of the world's most important jazz festivals, of which 13 times in the Festival's All Stars Band itself!).

Last year, it was the third time in succession that Petrovic was invited to appear in the prominent Scottish Cork Jazz Festival, where, on that occasion, he was leader of the international jazz ensemble The B.P. Club All Stars featuring, along with Petrovic, Mario Marvin on the bass guitar and Neven Franges on the piano, famous American trumpeter Lew Soloff, British saxophonist Richard Buckley, English drummer Martin Drew, and Slovenian guitarist Primož Grasić. Last year he frequently toured Slovenia, Austria and Italy with the newly formed Bosko Petrovic Trio, presenting the sound of the Croatian jazz.

A huge number of his own pieces, most of which never to become outdated, make him also a prominent national jazz composer. As Petrovic himself says, he has been drawing his inspiration from an endless love of the American jazz and the world's evergreens, as well as from the local musical heritage, aware that the latter is actually the very source of ideas

for developing his own style as a composer. The ZJK, The B.P. Convention and other bands he lead during his 50-year's career enabled him to articulate the entire musical identity, which these bands, achieving success in Europe, successfully presented to the world saturated with the American jazz. It is, thus, no wonder that Petrovic is a musician with the largest number of albums, many of which have been made by foreign companies in collaboration with the world's most prominent musicians. On top of this, he also owns a recording company, Jazzette Records, and organizes jazz festivals in his B.P. Club, such as The Zagreb Jazz Fair, The Springtime Jazz Fever, The Croatian Jazz Convention, as well as a jazz festival in the Istrian town of Novigrad. If it were not for those festivals, the Zagreb audience would have almost no contact with foreign jazz musicians. Given that, on average, 50-odd musicians participate in The Jazz Fair and The Springtime Jazz Fever and taking into account those who performed outside the festival programs, The B.P. Club must have hosted over a thousand artists, many of those being the giants of jazz, and Zagreb was - at least at that time - a part of Europe and the world.

The legendary Zagreb Jazz Quartet (ZJK), established in 1959 under the name The Bosko Petrovic Quartet, spread the name of Zagreb as a significant cultural center throughout the world. The performances of The ZJK were all compliments to our entire culture because The ZJK gave, during its eight-year's existence, some of the best music that could ever be heard in the Croatian jazz and is best presented by a small but selected body of heritage performances collected on four CDs set released in March of 2000 (Croatia Records 5325093).

Another Petrovic's essential contribution to the Croatian jazz scene in late 1960s and early 1970s is introduction and later on continuous support to an entire generation of young rock musicians: to establish themselves in the world of jazz: Brane Zivkovic, Vedran Bozic, Bert Krasnici, Pop Asanovic, Neven Franges, Sal Sadikovic, Mario Mavrin, Ratko Divjak..., of whom Mavrin is still member of The B.P. Club All Stars.

Petrovic has always been an 'authentic guy from Zagreb', in the best meaning of it. To illustrate this, I would like to tell you what Petrovic told us on one occasion: 'About 35 years ago the leading people of the Yugoslav Radio-television offered me to move to Belgrade and to form there a Belgrade jazz quartet. I only should've said how much I earned in Zagreb, and they guaranteed double earnings and a flat, and even offered to promote me throughout the world. There was no way I could ever explain to those people that I lived in Zagreb not only because of money, the flat and because Zagreb was sending me round the world but that I was in Zagreb because I love the city, because I belong to it, because I found some great colleagues there with whom I could try to make my youthful dream come true. I'm glad that, throughout my career, I managed to stay in Zagreb, with only two longer engagements abroad. Whenever I was away from Zagreb for a longer period, I felt, to quote Jack London, "the call of the wild", I couldn't survive without it, and I'm glad that I've found in it a sufficient number of colleagues who shared my enthusiasm, ideas and the support of the audience ... I'd also like to say that, because the name of the quartet was changed to the ZJK, we could neither increase our earnings nor find more engagements, especially at that time. We are not trying now

to present ourselves as kind of victims of politics, which is "in" nowadays, but it's definitely true that the adjective "Zagreb" in the name didn't do us much good then. For example, the former Yugoslav Radio-Television didn't send us much - under this name - on world tours. Very early they started to boycott us (and later me personally also) at the Belgrade Jazz Festival, and the JRT (local abbrev. of the Yugoslav Radio-Television) went so far that, when George Gruntz asked to send me from the then Yugoslavia as a vibraphonist for the EBU Orchestra in Geneva (he had even written a special arrangement for me), they sent piano player Vlado Vitas from Belgrade!

In late April of 2000, the CD "Ethnology" was also released, with numbers inspired by folk music. That he still possesses creative power, despite his 65 years of age, he has proven with another CD "St. Miles' Poorhouse" ("Uboznica svetog Mileša"), which Petrovic recorded teamed up with much younger colleagues, members of The Boilers Quartet. This album was a birthday present for himself and was promoted on his birthday party.

At the Springtime Jazz Fever, which took place at the B.P. Club from March 18 to April 2, and where Petrovic primarily played his own pieces, he successfully introduced his new trio, featuring Slovenian guitarist Primož Grasić and Mario Mavrin from Zagreb on bass guitar. The trio as a setting re-conceptualized Petrovic's approach to music and made it sound more chamber-like, softer and ceremonious. Apart from this, soloists are required to behave "differently" - there is more accompaniment to each solo and every member of the trio has his own solo

in each composition. All the three are superb musicians and they managed to solve brilliantly and with ease all the challenges put before them by the music, by interweaving the melodic passages and counterpoints and rendering brilliant interludes. Petrovic and Mavrin have confirmed their status as the best performers on the Croatian jazz scene on their respective instruments. Furthermore, a rapid development of Grasic was noted and is really impressive.

This was also demonstrated by new Petrovic's compositions like "We Love You ZJK" and "Zagreb by Night", which, even when rendered chamber-like, confirmed Petrovic as a musician who still has a say in jazz. This is why our interview was not about the past, although the compilation of four CDs, with a selection from the ZJK heritage, has just been released, but exclusively about the present and the future of Petrovic as a jazz artist.

I.Z.: How did the idea to play again in a trio come into being?

B.P.: Forming a trio came to us more or less spontaneously. Namely, Mario Mavrin has been playing with me for almost 30 years, and Primoz Grasic for nine years. At a certain point of time, changing the settings of The B. P. Convention - which allowed freedom to make changes - I was the leader of a similar trio with Mavrin and guitar player Damir Dicic. The idea of the trio grouping - vibraphone, guitar, double bass or bass guitar - has been attracting me ever since, many years ago, I heard for the first time The Red Norvo Trio with Tal Farlow on guitar and Charles Mingus, and later Steve Novosel on double bass. For me as a vibraphonist, such a trio was a

heaven on earth - no drums or any other loud and sharp instrument. This soft, chamber-like playing allowed many things to be expressed, which otherwise get lost with a powerful rhythm section, for example the one typical of hard-bop, which simply runs the vibraphonist over, forcing him to play differently, louder, with stronger strokes, automatically rendering different, heavier passages ... So, I'm good at such chamber-like playing and now I can enjoy it because all prerequisites have been met: luckily, Mario has developed into a bass guitar player in the very sense of these two words because he plays on his six-stringed Yamaha both the bass and the lead guitar, he can imitate kind of what I'd call a tenor or a baritone guitar, which he does very often when rendering harmonies and taking over the role of Primoz, the role of the guitar as a harmonic instrument.

We played in a trio on several occasions, and we liked it very much, so that we started to talk more and more frequently about how one should do something more serious with the sound we produced when the three of us played together. I even wrote several arrangements for a trio. Last autumn I was on several tours and other engagements where I could choose both the formation and the musicians, so I chose the trio, the trio with whom I had delivered 12 performances in Slovenia and Austria by the beginning of the Springtime Jazz Fever. When we played at the Vienna Jazzland, we had eight encores. I talked to the colleagues from Vienna who came to listen to me and also with the club owner Axel Menart and they all found the idea about the trio fantastic, they all said 'that's the real thing'. It's interesting because fashion always repeats itself. The success with the audience and the fellow-musicians, the joy with which they experienced

this sound, and most of all the joy with which the three of us were playing were crucial for our decision to keep playing as a trio for a while, but for how long, I really don't know. This November we are planning a two-week tour in Austria, Germany, Italy and Slovenia, and until then, when we manage to find the time, actually when the three of us get together - the problem is that Primoz lives in Kranj, where he is very busy, which is logical considering his abilities as a musician, arranger, producer and recording engineer - to record a CD, because we really need to have one. Its working title is Zagreb By Night, after a composition I wrote a year ago, which will also be included. There's also some new material, some of it old rearranged. For example, on the Austrian tour, which I've mentioned, we had a day off, so I suggested to meet with the instruments, which were waiting in the club ready for the next day's performance, and I brought with me the music sheet of the Macedonian folk song With Pain I Was Born. We talked about and discussed in detail the secret of its success the previous evening, since I mentioned how it had been included in the ZJK compilation. The fact is that this composition has - with the ZJK, The Nonconvertible All Stars, with The B.P. Convention, The B.P. Convention Big Band and in the duet with Franges - spontaneously and, so to say, instantly won the audience. It's simply such kind of a song, such a rhythm, an original, different, in a word, well-structured composition, so I thought, why shouldn't I bring it back in the repertoire for the trio. Now I'm even thinking about writing new arrangements for two similar compositions - Keka kolo and Green Mood - and making for the autumn program a small three-movement collage, which will, I'm convinced, find its own new

audience and new reviewers. Most of them will hear the collage for the first time, and those who have already heard it, will receive it well again. When, at The Springtime Jazz Fever, we played With Pain I Was Born, about 50-odd people asked me in the following few days if we had already recorded it or if we were planning to do it. All of them were happy that I put it back on the repertoire.

Based on my theory and experience, a formation is a real band and has a chance of surviving only if it manages to combine two hours on the stage and 22 hours at a hotel, restaurant, in a passenger van or on board plane, that is, if the "private" part of a tour runs nicely, friendly, with joy, pleasant tension, pleasant anticipation of this evening's concert, hardly waiting for it to begin. That's exactly what's happening with the trio. We have excellent time together and I think that the trio has musical prospects, many things to say, and the crucial thing is, let me repeat it once again, that interpersonal relations in the trio are good - I'm proud to say that I feel at least five years younger.

I.Z.: Hasn't the chamber-like quality rendered by the trio formation actually always been a foundation of Your approach to jazz, of Your personal style? Isn't the entire heritage of the ZJK actually chamber jazz, music one could build on the cooperation with the strings, The Zagreb Soloists or The Zagreb String Quartet? Couldn't we say that Your approach to the music to be played by the trio does not offer many novelties but rather only a new form?

B.P.: When we talk about my fondness of the chamber-like sound, you

should know that it's predetermined by my own fate as a musician. I started as a violinist, which means that I didn't play a "shouting" instrument; I played neither a trumpet nor drums. It's true that I continued my career partly playing drums and the piano but I developed it mostly as a vibraphonist, playing an instrument of a very subtle tone, which requires atmosphere rather than an attack, percussion. Vibraphone is a percussion instrument, but only when the memory of Lionel Hampton comes to my mind, I use it as drums, but then again only when playing joyful music. When a serious concert is in question, I prefer the lyric mood, the atmosphere and content rather than "advertising", strong sound or joyful dancing rhythms. So, the trio I'm currently leading truly suits my sensibility as a musician, composer and arranger. Even the style of most of my compositions resembles the one from the Medimurje region...

I.Z.: In a minor key, melancholy, tuneful... Isn't exactly this musical identity of yours the reasons why you find such an excellent collaborator in Dacic, whose sensibility is very much like Yours?

B.P.: If we compare Dacic and Grasic, we could say that both of them are brilliant guitar players and co-workers, whereby Grasic's advantage is in being the player, being more exposed, with quick passages, especially when accompanied by his vocalizing. He's very effective, without this being to the detriment of music. Dacic is an introverted musician who can hear his guitar more through the melody and atmosphere, and Dacic the composer is also similar to me. I often used to say to him: "I'm not sure if this piece was written by me or you!" Thanks to this, Dacic and I had a

fantastic communication, which our results also show. I'm very fond of the recordings from the record "Green Mood" made by The B.P. Convention but they already presage, anticipate the present trio because the sound of today's trio was in the air even back then. Although a quartet, The B.P. Convention is, by concept, program, sound, type of arrangements almost identical to the present trio. Unfortunately, very few recordings of the trio consisting of me, Mavrin and Dacic have been preserved because we never actually decided to record anything, so that the few things preserved can be found only in festival libraries. Had we recorded anything, I'm convinced that this would have been exciting even today. Anyway, your observation is correct.

Grasic is much to my gain because he puts challenges before me - being a young musician, he forces me to practice and to be on a par with him! This situation is opposite to the one we had in The ZJK, where Davor Kajfes was "Petrovic", and Petrovic was "Grasic". In The ZJK I played more passionately, I played many more notes, longer passages, less meditatively, and Kajfes played as John Lewis in The Modern Jazz Quartet, which was often the topic in many reviews, not only here but also abroad. I was then more similar to Milt Jackson, a genuine individualist, soloists, who managed to fit into the arranged parts of The MJQ only with discipline, and when it was his turn to play the solo choruses, he would fly away like a bird. Kajfez was more like Lewis, who would be reserved even rendering a solo, who was a man of few words and who would say only what was essential. After that, in the bands with Dacic, I was again the one who had to do more "running", while Dacic was keeping harmony, the form

of the trio or of the quartet, the architecture, and when it was his turn to play his own solo choruses, he would usually, like Jim Hall, insist on key places, the beauty of the sound, the atmosphere, and less on parading and virtuosity.

Now I am finally in the position to have Grasic, an exceptional guitar player who enjoys being exposed, who is never tired of choruses in a rapid tempo, thus I'm able to concentrate more on condensing, summarizing the entire story. (This has, of course, come with age and is a relief for me). Of course, I can still play fast, which I prove by playing with a "frantic" team, such as with Lew Soloff, James Newton or Alvin Queen who "give me a pull" but it is exactly the trio which enables me to summarize and condense, on one hand because Mavrin plays accompaniment, but is also an equal as a soloist, and he too can have a solo in every composition. Very often he would play, an entire composition completely alone! Four or five years ago a brilliant trick came to my mind: after the fourth encore, when we finally want to leave the stage, we usually play Body and Soul. All the three of us start and play up to the middle, then I leave the stage, Grasic plays the middle part and then he also leaves the stage, and Mavrin stays alone on the stage and finishes the number all alone, strikes the last chord and then he leaves the stage, and this is really the end of our performance. Another great thing about the trio is that we all can do everything: I can take the third and the fourth beater and harmonize if necessary; Grasic can play the bass sections, and Mavrin solo.

Another evidence showing the attraction and success of the trio, even before a wide audience, is the performance we had at the jazz festival in

Bombay, India, where we played on a large cricket stadium before six thousand visitors. Flautist Herbie Mann with a pile of percussion instruments played before us, and after us Shakti, with a very strong electronic sound. In the "sandwich" between the two bands, we eased, with the vibraphone, the bass guitar and the guitar like three butterflies, as Dacic put it figuratively, the entire arena and achieved a fantastic success, and it was exactly this counterpoint in the "sandwich" which was nice. Even under such condition we have shown that the concept of the trio, where music, poetry and whispering are in the foreground, can be a success.

I.Z.: It's moving how Grasic has been making such a rapid progress. How did you discover him?

B.P.: His progress is not moving but "terrifying"! Terrific! Everybody asks me the question you've posed. When we recently played with Nigel Hitckock and Alan Skidmore, they asked me at our first rehearsal: 'Where did you find him'. As far as I can recall, I met him ten years ago in a concert I held with Joe Passo and Damir Dacic in Klagenfurt, to which "Keks" Kleinschuster brought him. At that time, he was studying the guitar at the Jazz Department in Klagenfurt. After that we met at kind of a jam session in Ljubljana or Graz. When I first heard him playing on the stage, I, being a good hunter, raised my head immediately and, as a good scout, pricked up my ears. I listened to him later and tested him during some other informal sessions, especially as during that particular period I was frequently visiting Kranj, where a nice jazz club used to be once and

where I also met his parents, very nice people. I also know his uncle, who was playing the trumpet for many years in Adamic's and later in Privsek's Big Band. There are two most musical families of Kranj: the Grasics and the Kranjcans, where everybody is a musician, either a professional or an amateur, and, just like in the Bach's family, there are also ladies who, when they are cooking at home, they play the piano as well, and they do it excellently.

I found Grasic pleasing both as a person and as a musician. At that time, the duo I lead with Neven Franges was entering its third, last year of existence. I already grew tired of the, let me put it this way, to sterile sound of the duo and I felt the need of the rhythm section more and more. Although I find the period of co-operation with Franges valuable for my career, I was looking for a new challenge. Grasic could present himself excellently because I had then a brilliant rhythm section: Franges on piano, Mavrin on bass and Alvin Queen or Martin Drew on drums, and occasionally N. H. O. Pedersen would play double bass instead of Mavrin. Thanks to playing with such musicians, Grasic started to develop into a world-class guitarist. I told him already four years ago that - although I'd be the one to lose most - I'd help him, if he agreed, with my connections and acquaintances to find his way around in America at once, to gain instant "access", to do recordings. I repeatedly told him that it would be a great pity if his talent were to remain in Kranj, and to be heard elsewhere only occasionally. But he replied how he enjoyed living in Kranj, with his family, to which the fourth child has to be born soon, working in his own studio (he is also a computer engineer!), being a producer, being close to

his parents, his playmates, and without America and all those nice things I was telling him about, that with me he had been playing quite enough with the great musicians of the world. 'This is really enough for me', said he and finished me off with his counter question: "Why haven't you stayed abroad?", which completely disarmed me.

I.Z.: What are the prospects of Your international group The B.P. Club All Stars, with which you performed at the festival in Corc last year?

B.P.: I played three times at the jazz festival in Corc. The first time I was invited as a soloist and played accompanied by the quartet of Len McCarty, the Irish saxophonist, the second time I was with a quartet (Petrovic, Mavrin, Grasic and drew), with Richard Buckley as guest performer, and last year, together with Franges and American trumpeter Lew Soloff, we turned into a septet.

Whenever writing about the Croatian jazz, none of you journalists ever wrote about this group as a real band. True, The B.P. Club All Stars is kind of *licencia poetica* group, an open form, that is assembled for a certain occasions with musicians that are invited to join under its banner, but given the importance of The B.P. Club in our jazz, and I think that is really very important, this international band should be taken and treated as a band, regardless of the fact that it is not permanent and regardless of its changing style according to the profiles of the musicians playing in it on that particular occasion. The B.P. Club All Stars will from now on continue as a trio, and I will occasionally expand it with a drummer, the saxophone section, the clarinet, a singer or someone else.