

The hot spot moves on

European jazz musicians once worshipped at the feet of the American greats. Now Europe's players seem to be carrying the torch for really adventurous jazz, says Chris Parker

There is now no serious dispute about the fact that jazz is basically an American art form. Everyone knows that the numerous ingredients which produced it – musical (African traditions colliding with European harmony) and social (the aftermath of slavery and the American Civil War) – were unique to a smallish area and short period in American history. And there is no getting away from the fact that all the truly pivotal figures in the music – Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman – were/are American. In addition, the great majority of today's leading practitioners are US citizens.

In the Nineties, however, when national rhythms and musical styles cross time-zones with the practised ease of international business travellers, cross-fertilisation is the norm. At first Europe viewed jazz very much as an imported, alien commodity, however deeply valued and thoroughly understood it was (most famously by the French). But today's European jazz musicians and listeners regard it as a universal language which they have grown up speaking, and with which they are now completely familiar.

It should therefore come as no surprise that two branches of jazz are at the moment in better health in Europe than in America: freely improvised music, and jazz rooted in indigenous folk forms. Again, it is wise to begin with a caveat, neatly expressed by one of Britain's most perceptive jazz writers, Graham Lock: 'Even now, when jazz is supposedly an international language and folksy derivatives are springing up all over Europe, you won't find a player of repute who doesn't acknowledge an enormous debt to the music of black America.



John Coltrane: the enduring fount of inspiration for the current generation of European jazz players

Players as different as Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek and UK improviser Evan Parker still cite John Coltrane as their chief source of inspiration.'

Take free improvisation first. For a complex web of reasons, partly connected with the more monolithic nature of capitalism in the US which encourages standardisation and mass production even in the arts, minority jazz interests (including emulation of John Coltrane's later experiments with free form) are more readily indulged in Europe. The Herculean labours of the German label FMP to document this satisfying but financially unrewarding music began in the mid-Sixties with the work of Peter Brötzmann and others, and continue to this day. In the UK, the stalwarts of the scene (saxophonists Evan

Parker and Elton Dean, pianists Howard Riley and Keith Tippett, and others) are still producing music of great passion and energy, and there also seems to be growing interest in all aspects of free jazz. Earlier this year, for example, the London Musicians' Collective series of free music concerts at the Conway Hall attracted capacity audiences.

In the folk-jazz field, too, European musicians like Garbarek and the UK's Danny Thompson are proving just as skilful at harnessing the improvisatory spirit to their own artistic and cultural traditions as the Americans have been hitherto. The upsurge in folk-based jazz is tellingly represented in Garbarek's affecting, keening, anthemic work; in the fusion of free form and folk by UK reedsman Paul Dunmall and his partner, bassist Paul Rogers; by UK

multi-instrumentalist John Surman; and in the work of many other Europeans, from Bulgaria's virtuoso clarinettist Ivo Papasov to Finland's composer/drummer Edward Vesala (see *Releases* overleaf).

But it is just as important to document and disseminate cutting-edge jazz as it is to produce it, and in this area, too, Europe scores heavily. Indeed Graham Lock, in his recently published interview collection *Chasing the Vibration* (Stride Publications), states bluntly: '... fans of contemporary jazz owe a great debt to the handful of European labels that have championed the music over the last two decades. (It's arguable that label owners such as Giovanni Bonandrini and Werner X Uehlinger have done at least as much to ensure the continuation of the "jazz tradition" as Wynton Marsalis has.)'

Perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from these assertions is not one based on linguistic notions of cultural supremacy, but rather one concentrating on the sheer vitality and adaptability of the jazz form itself. As UK saxophonist Andy Sheppard says: 'Perhaps jazz is Afro-American-European music. After all, Charlie Parker listened to Bartók all the time.' ■

TOURING DATES

Jan Garbarek, US tour. **3 Dec** New York; **4 Dec** Chicago; **5 Dec** Washington; **7 Dec** San Francisco.
The John Surman Quartet, UK tour. **18 Nov** Norwich; **26 Nov** Sheffield. **28 Nov** QEH, London.
UK Trio tour (Evan Parker, Barry Guy, Paul Lytton). **24 Nov** York; **25 Nov** Darlington; **26 Nov** Leeds (tbc); **27 Nov** Sheffield; **28 Nov** Newcastle; **1 Dec** Purcell Room, London (tbc).
Keith Tippett and **Paul Dunmall**. **9 Nov** Southampton.
Keith and Julie Tippett with the **Dedication Orchestra**, Europe Tour. **8-10 Dec** including Hamburg, Wuppertal, and Amsterdam.
Edward Vesala. **4 Nov** Zurich Jazz Festival. Keith Tippett's **Rare Music Club**. **3, 10, 17, 24 Nov, 1 Dec** Bristol, UK.