

ENCORE



KLAUS KOENIG

BEING BACK ON THE SCENE

BY ANDREW SCHINDER

Switzerland has long played an important role in the growth of jazz music, and pianist Klaus Koenig has been right in the middle of the Swiss jazz scene throughout his adult life, either in front of the microphone or behind it. Koenig's Jazz Live Trio, the house band of Swiss Radio's live jazz concerts, has supported the many iconic American and European jazz artists who have passed through Switzerland—from Johnny Griffin and Slide Hampton to Karin Krog and Karl Berger. With his other projects, including the brilliant funk/fusion group Magog, classical, jazz, solo and ensemble work, Koenig has created music of quality and diversity that rivals any of his peers. This month, Koenig celebrates his 90th birthday (Oct. 18) with a special performance at the Moods club in Zurich, accompanied by the new version of his longstanding Jazz Live Trio, featuring bassist Patrick Sommer and drummer Andreas Wettstein. For those lucky enough to attend, the concert will represent a rare opportunity to witness a living legend of jazz who is still performing.

Raised in the small town of Braunschweig, West Germany, Koenig grew up studying classical piano while listening to jazz on American radio. He developed his jazz sound on his own and with friends; but insecure about his prospects as a full-time professional pianist, instead he became a radio engineer for Swiss Radio in Zurich. It was soon thereafter that his career took an unexpected turn. "The radio station was very surprised that I could play piano," Koenig says. "I started accompanying musicians who had a recording reserved, but they had no piano player. So I was responsible for church music and jazz."

Eventually, Koenig formed a trio with friends, bassist Peter Frei and drummer Peter Schmidlin. Through the pianist's relationships at Swiss Radio, the three together began accompanying visiting jazz musicians and soon became known as the Jazz Live Trio (named for the Swiss Radio show *Jazz Live*). In total, the Jazz Live Trio performed over a hundred times between 1964 and 1982, sharing the stage with such luminaries as Dexter Gordon, Kenny Wheeler, Clark Terry and many others. Koenig remarks: "Dex was wonderful. He was very calm, not a great talker, but always very friendly. He loved drinks, it was well known, but he always had total control of himself. One day he was

in Zurich with his great Copenhagen-based trio with Kenny Drew and Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, the Danish bass wonder. I went into town to listen and during the intervals Dex came to me—I probably was the only person he knew in the audience—and we sat at the bar smiling at each other nearly without any talking. But you felt the sympathy he had for you, after having played together two or three times. And he accepted totally that I was not a second Kenny Drew. He was realistic."

Empowered by his status as a renowned jazz musician, by the early '70s Koenig sought to expand his artistic ambitions. Along with Frei and Schmidlin, he recruited trumpeter Hans Kennel, saxophonist Andy Scherrer and trombonist Paul Haag to form Magog, an intensely groove-heavy project that eschewed the straight-ahead jazz played by the Jazz Live Trio in favor of exploratory funk and fusion. "The idea was to come together, without thinking of gigs, to develop something from point zero," Koenig says. "We knew how to play the post-bop thing. We knew something about free jazz. We had experiences in New York jazz. My idea was to bring these three directions together, because at the time it looked like they would spread out and never come together again."

"Magog was incredible," says Barbara Frei Schmidlin, owner of TCB Records (founded by her late husband, Peter), which has released numerous Koenig recordings. "They had a really great response all over England and in other places. They were performing in Eastern European countries where there was still the Iron Curtain." Frei Schmidlin also confirms that the group's stunning *Live in Montreux* (1973) album, which represents the group at its apex, has just been remastered and reissued. Good news for any and all fusion fans the world over.

"Magog was all thanks to Klaus," says Peter Frei (no relation to Barbara). "He had a different approach to the music at that time. At first, everything was new for everyone; but over time they came to understand what he meant. Magog was an interesting experience—quite a change from playing the standards." The group disbanded in 1978, mostly for financial reasons, and the original Jazz Live Trio broke up in 1982. Nevertheless, despite the lack of a regular group (which he lamented), Koenig continued to work, prolifically composing both jazz and classical music, working solo and accompanying such established European musicians as Albert Mangelsdorff and longtime Swiss colleagues Franco Ambrosetti and Pierre Favre (on whose classic 1968 trio recording, *Santana*—with German bassist Peter Kowald and Swiss pianist Irène Schweizer—Koenig was the recording engineer). In 1982, Koenig contributed masterfully to Italian saxophonist Gianni Basso's European Quartet's post-bop recording, *Lunet*, and the pianist's avant garde composition "Gog's

Dreams" (originally the title track of his 1988 solo album) became a staple of his late-career repertoire.

Says the soon-to-be 85-year-old Ambrosetti, "Klaus is an excellent musician with large experience in both classical music and jazz...His approach to jazz isn't the traditional one, which makes him interesting to work with, to discover new ways of approaching our music." Unfortunately, in 1997, Koenig's productivity came to a crashing halt. The day after engaging in an extended composition session, Koenig found himself unable to play the piano. "I went to a rented room in a studio about 10 am," he recalls. "I worked on the piano from ten to six without a pause. I didn't drink, I didn't eat, I just played and played. And at 6 pm, I stood up, and I felt wonderful. I felt fresh. I went home, and I said, 'Well, it was a wonderful day. I'll do the same thing tomorrow.' And when I went to my studio the next morning, nothing worked anymore. Nothing. I had focal dystonia."

Focal dystonia is a neurological disorder that affects the ability of a person to manipulate a particular body part—in Koenig's case, tragically, his hands. Koenig spent the next 15 years unable to play the piano, searching for a way to alleviate the disorder's symptoms. "That was a very, very hard time," he says. "I went to doctors. I tried different therapies. I spent much money." Koenig eventually met Professor Eckart Altenmüller, who specializes in the neurophysiology of musicians. With Altenmüller's support, he was miraculously able to perform again, and since his return in 2013, Koenig has released a staggering 13 albums with his new Jazz Live Trio, as well as his quintet, Seven Things.

"Without [Altenmüller's] encouragement, I would have never dared to go back to the jazz scene. I wouldn't have dared to go onstage again. But it went quite well. Playing with dystonia is very hard because you have to look very keen not to play a false note. And so I'm never relaxed and free when I play with dystonia, and that is a drag. But I couldn't do it any other way. I went back, and I'm still in the scene."

For more info visit klauskoenig.ch

Recommended Listening:

- Dexter Gordon & Magog—*Swiss Radio Days Jazz Live Trio Concert Series, Vol. 38* (TCB, 1972/75)
- Magog—*Live in Montreux* (Evasions Disques-TCB, 1973)
- Magog—*Magog* (JAPO-TCB, 1974)
- Jazz Live Trio (Klaus König, Peter Frei, Peter Schmidlin)—*Galatea* (Dire, 1984)
- Klaus Koenig Seven Things—*Seven Things I Always Wanted To Say* (TCB, 2016)
- Klaus Koenig Jazz Live Trio—*Songs For Laila* (TCB, 2023)

LEST WE FORGET



KEITH INGHAM

ENCYCLOPEDIA PIANIST

BY MARILYN LESTER

Although this column usually honors musicians of the more-distant past, this month, we are moved to remember pianist-arranger and music director Keith Ingham, who died earlier this year, on March 12, at age 87. He recorded prolifically beginning in the early '70s and worked with an A-list roster of musicians and

vocalists who would fill a jazz *Who's Who*.

Keith Christopher R. Ingham was born in London on Feb. 5, 1938, at the outset of World War II. Although his father was a church organist, Ingham was self-taught, beginning his exploration of the piano at age ten. Before formal education, he entered government service in Hong Kong in 1960, monitoring Chinese airfields. Yet it was in Hong Kong that he first began playing jazz, sitting in at clubs with a local Filipino quartet. Returning to the UK in 1962, he enrolled at Oxford, specializing in Mandarin and Chinese studies, graduating in 1966. But jazz called and so he dove into the British jazz scene, performing with the likes of Humphrey Lyttelton, Bruce Turner, Wally Fawkes and Sandy Brown. In 1978, Ingham made a permanent move to NYC, kicking off a robust international career.

Ingham quickly became a fixture of the jazz and festival circuits, playing in major clubs and venues. Over the years, his collaborations included Benny Goodman, Bob Wilber, Bud Freeman, Harry Allen, Bobby Gordon and Marty Grosz, as well as vocalists Peggy Lee, Maxine Sullivan, Joyce Breach, Barbara Lea and Susannah McCorkle. Loren Schoenberg, saxophonist and noted jazz scholar and educator, who played and recorded with Ingham, notes, "I have no doubt that if he had been born just a decade or two earlier, Keith would have been Billie Holiday's and Mildred Bailey's accompanist. Not only because of his piano playing, but also his temperament was very much like Teddy Wilson's. Keith made magic happen."

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