

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."

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 34)

(NOMAD CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

NoMad Plaza and the **Michael Leonhart Orchestra** at the Rizzoli Bookstore. The Jazz Gallery played host to the **Trap Music Orchestra** and the incandescent **Roy Hargrove Big Band**. The storied jazz club, located just a few blocks north of Madison Square Park, allowed the audience to experience the symbiotic organism that is a well-oiled big band, in a truly intimate setting.

In the Park itself, **Yuhan Su**, the Taiwanese-American composer and vibraphone maven, played a vibrant, playful set on a sunny Saturday. Her compositions included “Ringside”, “Rainy Day” (which evoked memories of the previous day’s deluge) and “Hi-Tech Pros and Cons”, a tongue-in-cheek dig at our phone addictions. Su seemed to embody each note on the vibraphone as she engaged in lively, syncopated interplay with her band. She was backed by some unapologetically sonorous bass playing by Luke Stewart reminiscent of the giant, Charles Mingus, along with saxophonist Caleb Wheeler Curtis and drummer Adam Cruz.

A regal **Godwin Louis** followed, playing saxophone with a searing set of politically relevant music. As expected from the erudite musician, he drew in diverse influences from the Bible (“Psalm 6”), a medley that included “Benin Tovi” (the national anthem of Benin), along with “Soldats de Christ et Haïtiens” and “Ayiti Cheri” (based on traditional Haitian songs). He also performed his arrangement of the Charlie Chaplin-associated tune, “Smile”, which plays at the end of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936).

Erstwhile Jazz Messenger, pianist **George Cables**, at age 81, peeled back the years. His large hands are worn with use, but he still proved a sensitive player, helming a trio consisting of Alexander Claffy (bass) and Jerome Jennings (drums). Cables breezed through his performance, which comprised a couple of his compositions (“Helen’s Song”, “Mr. Baggy Pants”) along with “Speak No Evil” (Wayne Shorter) and “Prelude to a Kiss” (Ellington). His touch and attack bore witness to his deep pockets of experience.

Jaleel Shaw’s set was a step up in pace. He was joined by fellow saxophone colossus and vocalist **Camille Thurman**, the two of them tearing up the stage, going toe to toe for some dream runs. Thurman finished the set crooning in her signature scat style, her voice sounding as much an instrument as a horn.

Joined by professional pianist, **Jonathan Paik**, coached by Alfredo Colón and conducted by public defender turned teacher Keith Szczepanski, the students of the **South Bronx Charter School for International Culture and Arts** played a tight set, which showed a lot of growth, according to their teachers. Saxophone player Aaron Perez Sanchez (17) showed a maturity far beyond his years when he shared, “You have to

understand what torch you’re bearing for the future. So me playing the saxophone is not just me trying to make new things. It’s me also carrying a torch that Benny Golson (and) John Coltrane left behind. It’s me embodying that music and trying to put my voice to it, put my own perspective to it.” Sanchez was joined by trumpet players Oliver Acevedo (17) and Roy Frazier (15), drummer Rony Ramirez Jr. (17) and bassist Jesus Romano (14).

Closing out the NoMad Jazz Festival 2026 were **The Jazz Gallery All Stars**, led by the vocal brilliance of songwriter Renée Neufville, who paid rich tribute to the late Roy Hargrove, her friend and collaborator. “Where Hargrove was with his people, he darn near raised the whole generation of musicians because he was so generous with his gifts,” she said. There were stirring solos from saxophonists Miguel Zenón and Nicole Glover, and sublime trumpeter Skylar Tang, especially on Miles Davis’ “All Blues”.

As the music faded into the night sky, the audience trudged out reluctantly, still greedy for more delectable music. Leslie Spira Lopez, the founder-president of the NoMad Alliance, summed up the reasons for the festival’s success: “When cultural organizations, businesses, property owners, parks and community groups work together, everyone benefits.” Rio Sakairi, however, had a more philosophical take: “Creating the moments of joy and connection and togetherness—that is amazing and it doesn’t have to lead to anything. It could just be that.”

For more info visit nomadjazzfestival.com

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

Watson. As with the venue, Gottfried emphasizes the artist-driven, collaborative nature of these albums.

In listening to these records, one is struck by what is sonically possible in a live record in 2026. The masterful work of Katz and Opsvik can at times put you right in the listening room or transport you somewhere else entirely. There’s a freshness and energy on records such as drummer-percussionist Eliza Salem’s *Haven* or trombonist Zekkereya El-magharbel’s *A Mysterious Letter*, which could only exist in that setting, or as pianist Yvonne Rogers of My Trio puts it, “It captures a moment, raw and imperfect and alive, and I think that’s really beautiful.” My Trio’s new release, *my live record*, is one of those aforementioned transportive experiences. It’s hard to classify this record into a genre, but this largely electronic album is sure to blow minds. Gottfried, when describing the expanding nature of genre definitions, notes “The My Trio record...there has never been a live album from a jazz club that sounds like this!”

This stylistic variety is one of the new label’s greatest strengths. Despite it being pitched as a jazz label, fans of a variety of genres will find something to like in these releases, and perhaps it will grow the listenership for those other styles in the process. At the end of the day, Close Up does not seem concerned with taking a preservationist approach to running a club or a label. The community in and around this venue continues to push the music ahead, and these nine records are highly representative of this push.

Let’s embrace the newness and look forward to what’s to come from the movement that is Close Up.

For more info visit closeupnyc.com. Close Up presents the Orchard Street Jazz Festival Sep. 30 - Oct. 5 featuring Anna Webber Shimmer Wince, Craig Taborn Trio, Trio Imagination (with Andrew Cyrille, Reggie Workman, David Virelles), Mary Halvorson/Tomas Fujiwara, Dan Weiss Trio, and Close Up Records album release concerts by Kayvon Gordon, David Leon, My Trio (with Tim Watson, Yvonne Rogers, Jon Starks), Zekkereya El-magharbel, Tony Malaby, Carmen Quill and Daniel Prim. See Calendar.

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

Possessed of an encyclopedic knowledge of jazz piano history, Ingham also ferreted out forgotten or overlooked compositions. “Having worked with Keith on a number of recordings, I have fond memories of the excitement for the tunes covered,” recalls bassist Greg Cohen. “Each song was a Dickens novel to him. His small-group arranging skills were straight out of the book of McKinney’s Cotton Pickers or Andy Kirk. Clear, clean, to the point.” Ingham’s piano style was harmonically rich and adaptable to styles such as Dixieland and stride. On a 1997 appearance on her NPR *Piano Jazz* program, Marian McPartland highlighted Ingham’s sophisticated grasp of genre and style, how naturally he navigated complex harmonic structures while maintaining a deep, infectious groove and his knowledge of jazz. Multi-instrumentalist Scott Robinson notes, “I am grateful to Keith for having me play on a number of his projects, with Marty Grosz and others, and for the many live performances. I learned a lot of tunes from Keith; in fact, one of the tunes on my new all-tarogato album is one I learned from Keith long ago. He knew the history of the songs, the verses, all about the films they were in. He inspired me to get to work and really dig in on learning tunes.”

As a leader, Ingham fronted several bands and ensembles, such as the New York Nine and the Hot Cosmopolites. He also prolifically recorded, including several albums of 1930s songs for Jump Records and tribute albums dedicated to the music of Billy Strayhorn, Victor Young and songwriting teams such as DeSylva, Brown and Henderson. Ingham’s leader discography begins in 1977 with *Keith Ingham Plays the Music of Jerome Kern* (World Records-EMI) and through to 2015 encompasses frequent releases on Sackville and Stomp Off. Saxophonist-trumpeter Glenn Zottola, who was a member of the Keith Ingham Sextet, and who recorded three albums with Ingham for Harbinger, two for Maxine Sullivan and one for Peggy Lee, remembers, “The arrangements Keith did were fantastic and the all-star bands he put together for those sessions were a true joy to play with and a top-notch production. Keith was a great musician and artist with a true passion for the music.”

On a personal level, Ingham lived a relatively private and work-focused life, most defined by the friendships and collaborations of his career. Within that frame was his long partnership with Susannah McCorkle, to whom he was married briefly. (Later she married and divorced jazz critic Gary Giddins in the ‘90s.) Throughout, Ingham and McCorkle were steadfast musical soulmates; his grief following her tragic death in 2001 was well-known in the jazz community. And over his long years, there’s no doubt Ingham was much-loved and respected. Robinson reports that “he once stepped in to rescue my wife from a drunken patron! What a guy!” Indeed, Keith Ingham.

The Keith Ingham Memorial concert is at Saint Peter’s Church Oct. 19. See Calendar. For more info visit artsconservancy.org/events.

Recommended Listening:

- Bud Freeman and The Keith Ingham Trio – *Superbud* (77 Records-Jazzology, 1974/92)
- Susannah McCorkle – *The People You Never Get To Love* (Inner City-The Jazz Alliance, 1981)
- Maxine Sullivan (with Keith Ingham Sextet) – *The Lady’s in Love with You* (Maxine Sullivan Sings the Music of Burton Lane) (Stash-Harbinger, 1985)
- Marty Grosz & Keith Ingham and Their Paswanky Serenaders – *Unsaturated Fats* (Stomp Off, 1990)
- Keith Ingham – *A Mellow Bit of Rhythm* (Sackville, 1997)
- Keith Ingham – *Rockin’ in Rhythm* (Arbors, 2010)

Sarah Pillow
Wanderer

Available on all streaming services

CD release show 10/30 7pm

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