

Interview – Mikolaj Trzaska:

You have been considered one of the founding figures of the Polish scene Yass. In your opinion – what was/is yass?

First of all it is necessary to know what was the socio-political situation in Poland at the end of the 80-ties. Everything started to free itself, free market started to form itself and one could start saying what one thinks. Earlier such an initiative wouldn't be possible. All of this provoked us to rough action. During communism, of course after Stalin's death, it was allowed to play jazz but unfortunately only a very standard one. To make it more funny this system mainstream had a very gastronomic dimension, it tried to be very similar to American jazz. Of course we had in Poland also very interesting phenomena. In the 60-ties there was great Krzysztof Komeda, in these times also our Polish jazzmen played better. We heard jazz in our own way and we wanted to play it in our own way. So to avoid being mixed with Polish jazz we decided to call our jazz Yass. So briefly put Yass means 'Personal View Of Jazz'. I think that for a Dane such a declaration can be strange as jazz in its nature is a free phenomenon. But for us, young people living with bans and orders it was a signal for rebellion.

Do you think that the term yass is still valid today or is it more connected to a certain time around the start of the 90s?

The term yass related to the phenomenon that took place in 80-90- ties in Gdańsk and Bydgoszcz. It concerned a group of musicians who decided to break the silence. We were fed up with the opportunism and trashiness. And although the scene itself doesn't exist physically anymore, I think that the attitude of independence still flickers. I'm still a Yassman although I don't call it like that anymore. There are still things to fight for and I try to do that.

What was your own musical background before joining Milosc?

Before Milosc I was associated with experimental rock. I didn't play saxophone then yet. I studied painting and I had a lot of time to listen to music. Of course the basis of my education were the Beatles from their first to the last album, then Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, King Crimson, Soft Machine and Focus, Syd Barret, Iggy Pop and many groups that I haven't mentioned. Then classics - so whole Johan Sebastian Bach by Glen Gould. I was also delighted with Shostakowich, especially string quartets and piano concerts. What could be next? Only the holy trinity of composing: Arnold Schonberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern and very important to me, American composer from the turn of the century - Charles Ives. Also when I started to listen to jazz I found this most interesting trend – John Coltrane – I started to listen to his albums from the end, Eric Dolphy, Ornette Colemann, Monk, Lenie Tristano, Scot la Faro etc.

A keyword for the yass-scene seems to me to be "freedom". Partly the freedom to break down barriers of genre conventions and liberate the music but also a more general search for freedom connected to the general liberation process in the end of the 80s. Furthermore it seems to be connected to a more mental/spiritual liberation. At least a person like Tymon Tymanski seems to represent this point of view of the music and the improvisation as a spiritual proces of releasing your mind from the boundaries of the ego – a thought connected to a buddhistic thinking. Do you feel connected with those aspects of yass? And do you at all see it in the context of a general search for freedom?

Yes, that's true. Freedom was a main Curriculum Vitae for the yass scene as well as for me. The crisis of the values was so big that we were searching not only for political but also for spiritual freedom. So we followed it and became total ideologists – some got over it but unfortunately not me. For me music is still a road of spiritual and intellectual development. Improvised music strengthens personality and teaches humility. It is probably the best road.

At least in one way you seem very occupied with crossing borders – namely the national borders. Many of your releases are cooperations with musicians from other countries and your recent release "Malamute" even seem to celebrate this in its concept while at the same time stressing the roots and the connection to a place – the North. So your music seems to have a strong feeling of the place at the same time as it celebrates a cross cultural dialogue and an almost nomadic idea. Do you agree with this point of view?

This is one of my conceptions. Music should point to the place where it is born. It turns out that many borders between countries are in wrong places. Living in Gdańsk I live mentally closer to Copenhagen than to many big Polish cities. In Peter Brotzmann's case it turned out that his family comes from the Pomeranian region as I do. I have suspected that his wildness comes from Slavic blood mix. But it is also like it that the world of musicians, especially the improvising ones, consists of so called human archipelagos. Thousands of kilometers away from your home you meet people who are very close to you and with whom you feel as if you were at home. It has happened to me many times in my life.

Speaking of being connected to places: yass has often been associated with Gdansk in particular. Is the city an inspiration for you and if yes, in what way?

My city is a place where the atmosphere of ferment was something natural. Here was Solidarity and I have the impression that we are still going to rebel here. We were not the only ones at the coast. The inspiration for us was a literary-artistic group 'Totart'. At the end of the 80-ties Totart organized half-legal evenings where writers and musicians performed, there were exhibitions, presentations of slides, happenings. Of course everything happened in the atmosphere of scandal. 'Totart' invited us to those meetings.

It is necessary to remember that the cradle of yass were two cities: Bydgoszcz and Gdansk. In Gdansk it had a more spectacular character, maybe because of the fact that Milosc became a commercial success later. We played concerts and we were in the papers. There were hundreds of people coming to see us. It is hard to imagine today.

But when it comes to breaking barriers Bydgoszcz was more radical – but media weren't very interested in it.

In a very concrete sense you have used the city of Gdansk on the "Danziger Strassenmusik" performance and album. Could you tell me more about the idea of this project and how the response was from the surroundings?

Gdańsk is a very special city! In its history it changed owners, it was Polish, it was German, it was also a 'free city'. There are many traces of former hosts. It is also a place of troublesome tourist pilgrimages. My dream was to record an album on the street. For the place of the recording I chose acoustically the best Mariacka street which is in the tourist sense the worst street – there are many tours that look for entertainment. And it was good, as it was supposed to be an exercise in 'being nobody', becoming only a relay for music. I was lucky, I worked with good musicians – I'm thinking about Oleś brothers who have the improvisational skills. The whole concert apart from the last piece is an improvisation. On the basis of what is

happening around, the sounds of the street, sounds of people, place – a story is created. The story which is really a beginning of sunset and meeting with the darkness as the performance takes place within so called ‘magic’ hour. At the end you can only hear birds that call: - Go to sleep!

How do you find the music scene in Gdansk right now?

I’m sorry but I don’t really know what is happening in Gdańsk. I’m on the road all the time, last to years were very busy for me. I played a lot in Germany. I was between Gdansk and Dusseldorf where I composed for the theatre. In Poland I concentrated only on projects in international lineup. When I come back home I relax, write music or practice. All more ambitious musicians are on the road or left our city. There are of course some very creative people as Wojtek Mazolewski, Michał Gos. But the yass scene is not there anymore.

What about the general music climate in Poland? Is there an openness to the sort of music that you work with?

It is obvious that Polish society is divided and a big part chose a commercial lifestyle. There is also a lot of frustration, to such a degree that Polish society has chosen politicians that are a threat to our still very fragile democracy. I think that the climate for artistic work is very good and still very inspiring. Our poor political situation paradoxically favours development, strengthens the rebellion atmosphere. Thanks to the fact that improvised music has such a social character there is time and chance for the next protest. Of course there are several places where you can play improvised music. In each big Polish city there is a club that prefers impro-jazz. So there is a lot happening now. There are many interesting musicians that come to us from abroad. When it comes to musicians there is a next generation of more liberated guys growing. But I myself haven’t found good partners in our country, I had to look for my closest family abroad.

You have chosen to release your music on the independent label Kilogram (a label I suppose is run by yourself and Ola?). In Denmark it has been a great trend for artists to start their own labels instead of working with more established labels. What do you find are the advantages and disadvantages with a small label like this contra a bigger one?

Together with Ola we decided to start our own label when it turned out that nobody wants to publish my album Pieszko. We thought that it was a good album and we thought - now or never. Now we know that it was the only way out for us. Since we have our label my name has started to exist in the right context and it is very important for a musician like me. I know that my publisher takes care of the smallest detail of my album. I think that Kilogram is the best and the strongest label in Poland when it comes to this type of music. And it works, you can buy my albums in Germany and France.

One thing that seems to be characteristic for many musicians associated with the yass scene is an openness to other art forms such as literature, theater and visual arts. This also seems to be the case with you. At least you have been working a lot with literature and with some quite prolific Polish and Ukrainian writers like Stasiuk, Swietlicki and Andruchowycz. You have also worked with theater and film. What fascinates you with those artistic meetings? Do you find new inspiration for your music through other art forms?

Whole yass stage consists of people educated in arts. There were only a few professional musicians among us. Then we didn't play as well as we do now. Tymanski studied English Philology, Mazzol Philosophy, Gwincinski Medicine, I studied Painting. We all read a lot of books, we were interested in painting, history of arts, we watched good cinema. We had a better contact with artistic and poetical scene than with the scene of professional musicians. Contrary to the traditional jazz option we had a kind of comfort, we maybe didn't know how to play exactly but we knew very well what to play and it is the most important.

Very quickly I started to write or rather make music for the theatre. Directors invite me to cooperate because I understand the content of the play. Apart from that I'm always very engaged in my work. My work with writers is quite special. I have one complex, I would very much like to be a writer so I cooperate with writers who would very much like to be musicians. Each of them: Swietlicki, Andruchowycz, Stasiuk have amazing skills of using phrase in every sense. Rhythmical, even melodic. But the most important is that they operate with meaning. So phrase is a common thing for writers and musicians. There is another, probably the most important thing. A possibility to tell a simultaneous story with words and with music. Each project demands individual approach, each album is different. Each of these people inspires me in a different way.