



Tom Prehn Quartet 1967, Reissue 2001, liner notes excerpts:

Even for very informed fans of avant-garde jazz, Denmark is an awfully remote spot on the map. A basic cross-reference of "new thing" and "Danish" will yield two references. Firstly, of course, it brings to mind the great alto saxophonist John Tchicai, and second, the Danish metropole Copenhagen is significant as the site of Café Montmartre, the venue where Albert Ayler and Cecil Taylor made important early recordings. But the existence of an active scene with highly developed and unique players in Denmark during the prime free jazz era is all but absent from the historical record. That elision is unfitting – Denmark in fact produced a handful of extremely personal and powerful figures in the mid-60s, such as the members of the Ayler-influenced Contemporary Jazz Quintet, including saxophonist Franz Beckerlee, trumpeter Hugh Steinmetz, and the wonderful musical saw player Niels Harrit.

Among the most interesting (and the most unduly obscure) of the Danish musicians of the period is pianist Tom Prehn. Prehn was educated at the Danish Conservatory in music theory and history. His father, Holger Prehn, was a cellist, well known in the '20s, and later a symphony conductor who

also composed. Steeped in classical music, Prehn was introduced to jazz by his older half-brother, Ulrik Neumann, a guitarist who played both classical and pop jazz. Together they listened to the trans-Scandinavian group the SweDanés, and Neumann taught the young pianist some jazz standards before he was even in his teens. "I can't deny the effect this milieu had on me," says Prehn. "American songs, the clever entertainment with its virtuous profundity behind a smooth surface, the swing, the importance of good technique, healthy humor, courage—and limits! Qualities important to recognize when you later attempt to break down surfaces."

In 1963, Prehn assembled a band for a radio concert, and this became the Tom Prehn Quartet. This group included tenor saxophonist Fritz Krogh and bassist Poul Ehlers, both of whom had been members of the Århus-based mainstream ensemble Jazzminerne, along with drummer Finn Slumstrup. In October, '63, the Prehn Quartet recorded an LP for the Danish Sonet label; titled Axiom, the record was prepared, but unfortunately it was never issued, and it remains one of the great enigmas of European vanguard jazz. In August '64 and January '65, Prehn recorded again with the quartet (Ehlers playing cello on some tracks), and this resulted in two reel-to-reel tapes titled Centrifuga and Solhverv, recordings that are also virtually unknown as they had extremely limited distribution.

In summer '66, Slumstrup was replaced by Preben Vang, a prodigious drummer whose creative energy is abundantly evident on the band's only official vinyl release, Tom Prehn Quartet. The music for this LP was recorded in Copenhagen in '67 and issued in a very small edition on the V 58 label – so named for Vestergade 58, the address of the cultural center where the band often performed. Prehn notes that the band played much more on concert stages than in bars or clubs, and they played often on the radio and even on TV as early as '66. The record's producer, Jens Okking, became a famous film star in Denmark and is now a member of the European parliament in Brussels. Another tangential tidbit about Tom Prehn Quartet: the sketch on the back of the cover is by artist Mogens Gissel, who, with Prehn and Ehlers, created a daily comic strip called Kosmo between '65 and '67. Kosmo was an odd character whose self-reflexive meditations on the paradoxical predicament of existence seem congruent with Prehn & company's musical investigations. (We've included two of the strips here just to give a taste of Kosmo.)

The music on this record is startlingly original. When it was released, Tom Prehn Quartet garnered critical attention in the major Danish press, but it didn't manage to make much impact too far outside of its homeland. Nevertheless, decades later it is still a remarkable document, effectively merging jazz energy with characteristics that wouldn't fully emerge in European free music until later in its development. Note, for instance, the organic collective improvisation on "Det va en søndag morgen" (it was a Sunday morning) – this is original free music of the highest calibre, quite far ahead (or maybe outside) of its time. Certain elements come from the realm of composed music. Indeed, in '67, on the verge of formally finishing his studies, Prehn took lessons in composition from Earle Brown and Witold Lutoslawski, and the importance of the modernist tradition makes itself heard, particularly on Prehn's highly unusual rhythmic study "Modus Vivendi."

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In some form, the Tom Prehn Quartet continued into the '70s.

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"It was more than just protest," Prehn says of their music in the '60s. "We were also in search of new landscapes. And I must say we did it with great joy!" The message of Århus, 1967: four joyous cartographers boldly charting new landscapes, leaving behind a document that should force free music aficionados to rethink familiar maps 34-years later.