

Mathias Eick Lullaby

Mathias Eick: trumpet, voice, keyboard; **Kristjan Randalu:** Klavier; **Ole Morten Vågan:** double bass; **Hans Hulbækmo:** drums

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For *Lullaby*, Norwegian trumpeter Mathias Eick draws on the quartet formation in a programme that includes some of his most exploratory and improvisatory qualities to date, with a cast of ECM familiars Kristjan Randalu and Ole Morten Vågan on piano and bass, and new arrival Hans Hulbækmo on drums. There's a strong sense of abandon within these melodic songs, as the musicians flow smoothly between tuneful harmonies, collectively building momentum from within the forms.

Eick's immediately recognizable and soothing tone is often confronted by Randalu's in turns lyrical and energetic keyboard-flights throughout *Lullaby*, soaring above a propulsive, always engaging rhythm section. Reviewing Eick's last album *When We Leave*, All Music emphasised how, "the delicacy in Eick's aching melody expressionistically weds the sacred and the natural worlds" – a quality that arguably rings even more true here.

"Every time I enter a new writing phase – usually for my next album –, I try to go somewhere different, check out new styles and new musicians," notes Mathias. "With *Ravensburg* and *When We Leave* I was so happy with the sound and constellation that – in an unusual turn of events by my standards – I made two albums in the same context and spirit. But, retrospectively, it also reminded me that I want to keep evolving and challenge myself in finding new directions."

The pastoral, often folk-tinged, cinematic landscapes that defined Mathias's previous records softly subside here and make way for more tight-knit quartet interplay – though the trumpeter's deeply melancholy compositional approach remains intact. Hulbækmo – the "wild card" –'s deep drum grooves are omnipresent, sometimes quite dominant, as in the opening "September", and always greeted by Eick's wistful melodic developments. Ballads are equally represented, shedding a light on more jazz-traditional interplay – "Lullaby" exemplifies the expressive quality of the group in such a balladic context from a more contemplative perspective, as it was written in the wake of the recent tragic events in Israel and Gaza.

However, it is not tragedy exclusively that inspired the music on Mathias's new album. "My Love", for instance, the trumpeter dedicated to his wife. He played it to her, accompanied by a band, the day he proposed. It's a striking mid-tempo jazz number, driven by the flowing impulses of each player and, as ever, by Mathias's deeply melodic spirit. On this song, as on the haunting "Partisan", Morten Vågan's sculpted bass lines help define the clear expression of the melodies and induce a particular drive that the drums pick up and expand.

"May", surely among the more immediate pieces on the record, highlights Mathias's soloist voice, whereas "Hope" focuses on the more spacious dynamics of the quartet. The latter features an especially sensitive solo from the "extremely brilliant" (Eick) Randalu. Mathias emphasises the significance of finally working with the Estonian pianist and how "exciting it was, to develop my playing in coordination with him – I learned a lot in the process. I've been wanting to record with Kristjan for about a decade. And I immediately knew I could write whatever I wanted to and just leave it to him to fill in the blanks."

Morten Vågan's delicately contoured pizzicato lines lend a particularly palpable dynamism to much of the album, while his arco strokes on "Free" scratch overtones on top of an atmospheric structure that picks up pace for its last temperament-shifting third. Mathias and Vågan share history – they studied together in Trondheim 24 years ago and shared the bandstand with several groups, among them the

bassist's band Motif. "He's always been ahead," Mathias notes about his fellow traveller. "He's a virtuoso and it's always been a dream of mine to feature him in my group".

"Vejle for Geir" – again introduced by Vågan's deep arco swells – is a late crescendo into jazzier terrain, with its driving pulse perhaps revealing the other inspiration that Mathias had in mind when writing the music for *Lullaby*: "I'm so inspired by ECM recordings from the 70s, particularly by the Keith Jarrett albums with the so-called European quartet – the freedom they had. Albums that are milestones in many people's lives, including mine. So my idea was to create a band influenced by that energy – a different energy – and that acoustic sound."

Recorded at Rainbow Studio in Oslo, the album was produced by Manfred Eicher.

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Mathias is on tour throughout Europe from February through April, presenting the new music on the road. Released only a month prior to his own album, Eick also appears on pianist Benjamin Lackner's new recording *Spindrift*, and he will join the pianist for his tour in Europe throughout January, alongside Mark Turner and others.

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Mathias Eick's catalogue belongs among the broadest in ECM's 21st century roster, with many leader recordings but an equal amount of collaborations – among them the album *Evening Falls* (2004) and *Sideways* (2007) as part of Jacob Young's groups, several dates with Iro Haarla, 2007's *Playground* by Manu Katché, Sinikka Langeland's *Wind And Sun* group and most recently alongside Benjamin Lackner.

His leader-debut *The Door* (2008) presented the trumpeter in a quartet with Jon Balke, Audun Erlien and Audun Kleive – quite "the achievement" according to *Jazztimes* magazine with Eick's "patient playing style suggesting maturity beyond his years." *Skala* (2011) and *Midwest* (2015) followed with shifting line-ups and to great acclaim, as "modal jazz and north European folk idioms often work well together, and they certainly do here. Eick has a beautiful tone and writes attractive themes, by turns haunting and energetic" (*The Observer*).

Yet another configuration was revealed for *Ravensburg* (2018), with Mathias joined by violinist Håkon Aase, pianist Andreas Ulvo, Audun Erlien on electric bass, Rostein Lofthus on drums plus percussionist Helge Andreas – a line-up that remained unchanged for follow-up *When We Leave* (2021) except for the addition of Stian Carstensen on pedal steel – recalling the American folk tinges of the earlier recording *Midwest*. "The painterly trumpet style of Matthias Eick — whispery, murmuring, yet possessed of a clarion focus — has been a standout feature of Norwegian jazz over the last decade. 'When we leave', his captivating new album on ECM, reinforces his additional prowess as a bandleader, as well as an organizer of sound." (Nate Chinen, *WBGO*)