

Hilde Hefte – On the Corner

by Skoot Larson

The truly great jazz vocal stylists, like Billy Holiday, Irene Kral, and Ella Fitzgerald are recognizable by hearing just a couple notes. For a small country, Norway seems to have a disproportionate number of such unique improvisational ladies: Karin Krog, Radka Toneff, Sidsel Endresen, Magna Wentzel, and, **Hilde Hefte!**

On the current jazz scene, Hilde Hefte is leaving a bigger footprint than any other current European vocalist. If this reigning queen of the Scandinavian scene were better known in the States, I believe she would be at the top of most “favorite vocalist” jazz polls here as well.



Hilde Hefte & Nisse Sandström

Hefte’s newest disc, “**On the Corner**,” is fine example of her abilities, both as a lyricist and a truly gifted singer. Along with Hefte on this recording is one of this writer’s all-time favorite rhythm sections as well: Egil Kapstad’s gentle touch on the 88s, and Bjørn Alterhaug plucking the bass strings to the beat of Eyvind Olsen Wahlen’s drumming. And, as if that isn’t enough, Norway’s legendary Nisse Sandström blends his solid and expressive tenor saxophone into the mix with Ms. Hefte and the band.

Hefte’s voice is light and bright, with a kind of innocent “little girl” sparkle to occasionally add emphasis on the words she intones. Her improvisation is often rooted in rhythmic and harmonic variance from the notes on the page.

“**On the Corner**” is an easy, straight-ahead album. There are no commercial gimmicks or fads in the music, and on this recording Hefte doesn’t scat any of the choruses. Hearing Hefte, Sandström, Kapstad and Alterhaug, together in this environment, however, leaves no doubt that this is solid, swinging jazz of the highest order.

The title selection, penned by Hefte and Kapstad for Hefte’s son Simen and his wife Ane who own a bar of the same name, is an intriguing bluesy line telling a lonely,

haunting story of a local public house and its clientele. Alterhaug's solitary walking bass solo over Kapstad's sparse comping adds to the alone-in-a-crowd feeling until Sandström's breezy "Lester Young" touch resolves the tension. On this cut, Hefte and company dig into pop poet Tom Wait's bag, and leave that scruffy iconic singer-writer behind in the dust.

With a similar feel, this ensemble lends their special touch to Peggy Lee and Quincy Jones' "New York City Blues." Hefte begins the reminiscence-for-the-big-city riff with a slow and low down lament that, after a couple verses, is suddenly brightened by the entrance of Nisse Sandström's rollicking double-time tenor. The saxophone carries the melody well through some very tastily improvised choruses that lead into an exchange of eight-bar lines between Hefte's voice and Wahlen's intricate solo drumming. Wahlen then launches into a serious solo circuit around his traps, but as his efforts move toward their finish, his tempo begins to slow until, eventually, Hefte and Kapstad return at the piece's original slow blues meter.

One of Hefte's own favorites, nearly always a part of live performances, is Cole Porter's "The Laziest Gal In Town," Sandström's tenor making the introduction for Hefte's playfully seductive "little-girl" tones as she tosses a splash of Marlene Dietrich into the fun and fantasy of this Broadway classic. The cherry on top is Hefte's proud and sexy "That's **me!**" over the final descending piano arpeggio.

The most intriguing selection here is Bronislau Kaper's Hawaiian show tune, "Hi Lilli, Hi Lo." Hefte states that "since childhood," when she closes her eyes, she can hear her mother's voice. "I don't think she ever sang it," Hefte smiles, "but it's her clear voice I hear." Her interpretation of the song finds the melody modulating up a step the second time it's stated, then resolving back to the original key for the finale.

Throughout this fine CD, simplicity is the key. This is wonderful jazz that doesn't distract with complicated ornamentation. The music is relaxed, and it's *relaxing*. "**On the Corner**" is the kind of jazz recording a listener can enjoy revisiting often for the pure joy expressed in the songs and the musician's styles.

Along with being an exceptional singer, Hefte is also a multi-instrumentalist (playing piano and saxophone), a composer and lyricist, and a businesswomen: owner–producer of her own record label, **Ponca Jazz**. You can learn more about Hilde Hefte on her web

site, www.hildehefte.no. “On the Corner,” as well as Hefte’s other recordings can be purchased from CDBaby.com. Ms. Hefte has a new release scheduled for release next month as well.