



ROOT 70 ANNIVERSARY BOX

NILS WOGRAM ROOT 70

nwog 30

EAN 0683818290693

Release Date: 10.04.2020



Content: The entire Discographie von Root 70 (8 CDs + 1 LP), History of the Band in pictures (Photobook), USB Stick with all kind of Videos (Studio and On Tour) Root 70 Songbook (Sheet Music).



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A strong tree has many roots.

The jazz band Root 70 is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2020 and it puts down this longevity to a whole series of facts. Trombonist Nils Wogram, saxophonist Hayden Chisholm, bassist Matt Penman and drummer Jochen Rückert form one of the most stable formations in jazz history. Making music for two decades in an unchanged line-up is not only remarkable in itself, but in the case of Root 70 it is particularly impressive because the band did not choose the easiest path. But let's start at the beginning, when four young musicians decided to travel a while together.

To make it quite simple: Hayden Chisholm and Matt Penman are from New Zealand and have known each other since their early youth. Already as a teenager, Chisholm came to Cologne via Switzerland. At about the same time, Nils Wogram returned from New York to the conservatory in Cologne where he met Chisholm and Jochen Rückert. The latter had already played in New York with Matt Penman, but not with the saxophonist. Rückert was drumming in Wogram's quartet, and when the trombonist asked the drummer who he would like to play bass with, he chose the New Zealander from New York. Meanwhile Chisholm played in a trio with Rückert and Penman and invited Wogram as a guest one evening in 1999. "It was the first time there were the four of us in this combination, and I said that this concentration of persons is something special, we have to do it for a little longer than just this one gig," Wogram recalls.

Expressing such a fundamental insight is one thing, but putting it into practice, not only into action, but into continuous work, is quite another. Nils Wogram decided to take the reins and forged a band out of four musicians who were musically very close to each other, a band that would function according to Alexandre Dumas' principle "One for all, all for one." "It always takes one person to catalyze things and get to the heart of the matter," said Wogram. "We knew each other from various musical contexts and learned to appreciate each other. But it's like being in a family. You respect each other, but it's not all just about agreeing with each other. Everyone thinks for himself. We don't have to be the best of friends and don't always want the same thing. One of the prerequisites for the band to function for 20 years is that each band member can fully develop and shape the band sound through his own way of playing."

In May 2000 Root 70 gave its first concert under this name at the Moers Festival. It is unusual that four personalities who are such strong individualists, not only on their instruments but also as musical characters, should nevertheless achieve a highly symbiotic band sound. These four protagonists feel connected by a similar system of musical values and are committed to a similar basic aesthetic. So they laid the cornerstone for a common route. "But just as important is the fact that we let each other do what we want," Wogram postulates. "I remember various situations in which I wanted to give in to the impulse to say, 'Jochen, can you play a little louder,' or 'Hayden, can you step on the gas?' But then I always thought the others have their own character, and it's this character that makes the band sound. Each individual musician has great aesthetic control, and each knows what he can and wants to play and what he can't or won't play. This is combined with our deep respect for the each of the other three musicians. There is no must, no obligation, but everyone is happy when we get together again as Root 70. Everything is still based on playing a voluntary role. The secret is that everyone can use and appreciate this voluntary role for themselves."

So they had common intersections; looking for them was unnecessary. But Root 70 managed to do something that few bands have been able to do over so many years: The group has built their work using contrasting ideas – the tension between the musicians – from which new overlaps, breaks, changes of perspective and approaches constantly emerge. Each of the four has found their own place in the band, a place that is flexible and takes personal differences into account. If things were different, the salt would be missing in the soup. You can have differences with your fellow musicians and still make music together, because you basically understand your companions.

Nobody is more called upon than the bandleader himself to point out the special features, strengths and differences between the musicians. "I am certainly the one who stands for continuity, reliability and a certain meticulousness," Wogram states. "I'm relatively analytical, always keeping a bird's eye view over things, and I can sense when a repertoire has been exhausted to the point where it leads to routine and boredom. Then you have to set new impulses. Hayden has an extreme amount of ideas and is incredibly talented in many areas. He plays several instruments, writes texts, draws and is interested in all kinds of art forms. But he doesn't work very continuously; rather he is driven by impulse. For a long time he didn't even have an apartment, because he was travelling the world non-stop and collected his influences everywhere. He is a very empathic person, which always benefits the band. Jochen is an accomplished perfectionist. He always asks the right questions, can hardly accept his own short-comings and is hard on himself and others. Dealing with his honesty and high standards is not always easy, but it helps us all. For a while he struggled with the profession of a jazz musician because he wanted to go in a different direction socially. Jazz sometimes has something very bourgeois about it, and he rather wanted to get away from that, but thank God he got his act together. Matt is a natural talent. He also has very high expectations of himself. He is very curious and likes to deal with socio-critical, linguistic and intellectual topics, which he often has an ironic approach to. Matt knows what he can do, and anyone who wants something else from him should leave him alone. He also leads a life outside music, presses his own wine, enjoys playing tennis and knows the most exotic places to visit. When we're on tour, he has us go to these places, even if it means getting up early."

A master plan or formulated dream has never existed in Root 70. Purely musically, the band wanted to achieve a kind of sophistication. They wanted to translate their skills as musicians into music with

character, not something that is simply well played. "We were serious in realizing our aspirations, but we didn't want to take ourselves too seriously," Wogram assesses it in retrospect. That was probably the reason why the music of Root 70, for all its depth, always had a cheerful lightness to it. Far away from thinking about any business plan, they were happy that organizers offered them gigs, but never thought about the famous next step. "The content was always in the foreground. Of course we also discussed how we could attract a larger audience, but this question never competed with the music. That's why we always tried things that were rather counterproductive from a commercial point of view. It was important to us to surprise the audience."

Last but not least, Root 70 also managed to surprise itself with ever new ideas. Which brings us to another point in the band's internal survival strategy. In the beginning, the band was content with declaring the basic sound resulting from the character of the musicians as conceptual terrain. But after the first three albums, Wogram and Chisholm sat down together and drew up a list of themes they wanted to realize. So the band moved on to concept albums, until on *Luxury Habits* it even became a concept not to have a concept. Wogram gives two reasons for the concept albums. "By avoiding playing randomly, we came up with a conceptual framework that didn't let us digress into incoherence. This focus was helpful when we composed and formulated our programs. The other reason was the precise occupation with a theme. We didn't just want to scratch the surface, but to go into depth. We were excited by the question of how one can explore and find freedom within certain boundaries."

While Cologne was initially a kind of epicenter for Root 70, there is now a great spatial distance between the musicians. Wogram lives in Switzerland, Chisholm in Ireland, Rückert and Penman in New York. Logistically, this creates challenges that are not always easy to overcome, but instead of the former spontaneity of meeting, today there is an unconditional will to harmonize with each other even over long distances. What brought the four musicians together in the beginning still connects them today. Root 70 is more than a musical institution, more than a success story documented on eight albums, more than one of a million band biographies, which almost all read the same. Root 70 is a utopia of reconciling opposites without corrupting the individual claim of each part of the whole.

Discographie

Root 70 (die erster CD der Band)

Release: 2001 (2nd Floor)

Getting Rooted

Release: 2003 (Enja, Werner Aldinger)

Fahrvergnügen

Release: 2006 (recorded at Avatar Studio New York, Intuition, now on NWOOG Records)

Root 70 on 52nd 1/4 Street

Release: 2007 (recorded at Funkhausstudio Nalepastrasse Berlin and the first production with three microphones on analogue tape, Intuition, now on NWOOG Records)

Listen to your Woman

Release: 2010

Riomar

Release: 2013 (the only recording with guest musicians and strings)

Wise Men Can Be Wrong

Release: 2015 (the only release with jazz standards)

Luxury Habits

Release: 2017

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