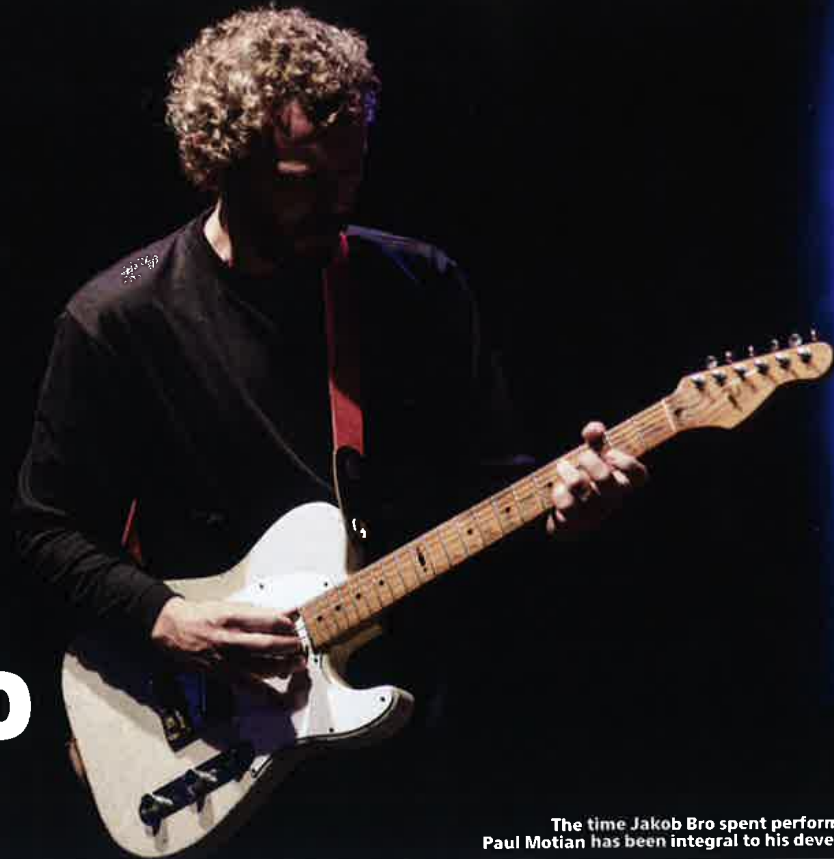


66TH ANNUAL CRITICS POLL
**RISING STAR
GUITAR**

JAKOB BRO UNDERSTATED NUANCE



The time Jakob Bro spent performing with Paul Motian has been integral to his development.

A KEY MOMENT OF THE 2016 COPENHAGEN JAZZ FESTIVAL ARRIVED IN QUIET, BOLD AND DEEP STROKES WHEN GUITARIST JAKOB BRO MET VETERAN DANISH TRUMPETER PALLE MIKKELBORG AND NORWEGIAN DRUMMER JON CHRISTENSEN, ALONGSIDE BRO'S KINDRED SPIRIT BASSIST-ALLY, THOMAS MORGAN.

The setting: the ancient Kastelskirken church in the 17th century Kastellet fortress, an enchanting site for a group sound at once musing, exploratory and reverent. The next day, the quartet took its collaborative songbook into the storied Rainbow Studio in Oslo, Norway, and the result is Bro's acclaimed ECM album, *Returnings*.

Bro, winner of the category Rising Star-Guitar, has been winning fans around the world, thanks to his subtle and often darkly lyrical musical voice. Guitarists can be loud, fast and brash, but players such as Bro and Bill Frisell (with whom Bro has worked and shared an important mentor—the late, great drummer Paul Motian) have waged a veritable revolution of understatement and nuance. At times, Bro can be a minimalist master, but he's also a well-rounded, uncommonly sensitive composer and bandleader.

At 40, Bro is no longer a newcomer, boasting 14 albums—mostly on his own Loveland label, including *Balladeering* (featuring Lee Konitz, Frisell and Motian). A much higher public profile has resulted from his signing with ECM. The label previously released his album *Gefion* in 2015, followed by 2016's *Streams* (featuring his ongoing trio with Morgan and drummer Joey Baron). A new live trio album and U.S. tour are scheduled for later this year.

The soft-spoken Dane humbly said, "I'm still far away from the U.S., somehow. The fact

that DownBeat is even noticing is nice for me to see."

Bro is something of a reluctant guitar hero. He started on trumpet and eased into the guitar, inspired by Jimi Hendrix, studying formally at the Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen and Berklee College of Music in Boston. He counts among his influences and heroes a variety of jazz instrumentalists—Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus and Thelonious Monk—as well as guitar icons Pat Metheny, John Scofield, Jim Hall and John Abercrombie.

The transition from releasing his music independently to working with ECM was a big step, he admitted: "I never listen to myself and say, 'How did I sound? Was that a good guitar solo?' ... Entering with ECM and Manfred wanting me to do a guitar trio, I was thinking, 'Can I figure out what I want to do with this?' But I really learned a lot from that. I'm happy that I waited so long to take that step. I felt proud of [*Gefion*] as a whole, and I also thought, 'Wow, I didn't even know I could play these things.' I had always been writing sketches for Lee Konitz, who would interpret them. All of a sudden, I had to interpret myself."

Bro's relatively late emergence as a leader occurred after close, inspirational contact with veterans. His ECM debut came as a sideman with Motian on 2005's *Garden Of Eden*, leading to a gig with Polish trumpet legend Tomasz Stanko, appearing on 2009's *Dark Eyes* (ECM).

Playing in Motian's Electric Bebop Band in the early '00s was a major catalyst in Bro's musical evolution. "Playing his songs and him saying that he liked my writing really set me on some sort of path," Bro explained. "For a while, I thought the ideas in my writing were obviously coming out of Paul's things, but slowly, that developed into something else."

Bro also was profoundly touched by the legendary elasticity of Motian's time feel, a loose, rubato relationship that has carried over to Bro's trios, both with Christensen and Baron. In that mode, he said, "You don't have to dictate the melodies. They can make their own life. For me, that was a revelation. I never thought about the fact that time is loose, because when playing with Paul, it felt so natural."

That central link to Motian is something he shares with Morgan, who also played in Motian's band and first worked with Bro in 2009. Morgan offered that "Jakob is distinguished by his sense of melody—the kind that transcends genre—and blend, and his way of setting up situations to unfold beautifully and naturally."

Bro currently is composing a choir project, also including Christensen, in addition to steady work with his trio, noting, "It took awhile for me to find a group that I could tour and record with. Joey and Thomas helped me a lot in that sense, because it's a band I enjoy, both socially and musically."

In terms of basking in a sense of having "arrived," though, the still-rising Bro abides by the creative creed of remaining open to exploring and evolving. "I'm still working," he insisted. "I'm still thinking about what I want to do."

—Josef Woodard