

# The Herald

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**Getting Under the Surface: how jazz has gone Dutch**



SCOTLAND gets its first extended taste of Going Dutch, a major UK and Ireland-wide celebration of jazz from the Netherlands, when one of Holland's most intriguing new groups, Under the Surface tours here next week.

A joint initiative by the Jazz Promotion Network, a body comprised of promoters, festival organisers and media workers, and Dutch Performing Arts, Going Dutch has already seen Dutch musicians feature in weekend events in Newcastle and at **Glasgow** Jazz Festival, where the Slovenian-born, now Amsterdam-based pianist Kaja Draksler appeared last June.

Two pilot tours last autumn also saw the legendary Instant Composers Pool Orchestra play a series of concerts in England and Ireland and the young french horn-guitar-drums group Kapok visit England. Over the next 18 months there will be further tours and festival appearances and Under the Surface, who were one of the highlights of the Jazz International festival in Rotterdam in October, are an ideal illustration of what the project set out to achieve.

"The Dutch jazz scene is especially vibrant at the moment," says the Jazz Promotion Network's Nod Knowles, formerly music director at the Scottish Arts Council. "Dutch musicians have always had a reputation for bringing a touch of theatre or performance art to the music. The veteran drummer with the Instant Composers Pool Orchestra, Han Bennink is the outstanding example, and we wanted to reflect this and introduce audiences over here to more of the same.

"At the same time, though, we're looking to make connections so that our own musicians will be able to export themselves to the Netherlands and benefit from the work we're doing on Dutch musicians' behalf."

Although not nearly as flamboyant as Han Bennink, Under the Surface's drummer and spokesperson, Joost Lijbaart has the experience of working in a ground-breaking group back in the 1990s when the saxophonist Yuri Honing's trio, popular visitors to **Scotland**, led the revival of jazz musicians interpreting pop songs of the day. In Honing's hands songs by Abba, Blondie, the Police, Greenday and others became sketches for jazz adventures.

Lijbaart, who still works with Honing, was introduced to his colleagues in Under the Surface through Beaux Jazz, a project that offers young musicians an opportunity to collaborate with more experienced players.

“Our singer, Sanne Rambags was selected by Beaux Jazz to be part of its Next Generation strand,” says Lijbaart. “The idea is that the younger musicians are given carte blanche to create something with players who are already established. So Sanne selected the guitarist Bram Stadhouders, who I knew a little bit, and myself, giving us musicians from three different generations.”

Rambags chose her musicians wisely. As well as being an experienced drummer with a willingness to try something new, Lijbaart had the nous and contacts to find gigs for the new group, which he set about with enthusiasm. In Stadhouders, Rambags has a guitarist who has worked with one of Europe's most distinctive singers, Norwegian Sidsel Endresen. More significantly for the purposes of Under the Surface, however, is his experience with another Norwegian, the ultra-imaginative drummer and percussionist Terje Isungset. Isungset is a character. One of his specialisms is performing ice concerts, featuring instruments he has made himself from

blocks of ice, including guitar and trumpet, and performed in extremely low temperatures. Stadhouders won't be bringing an ice guitar for Under the Surface's Scottish dates but the atmospheres and sounds he created with Isungset have fed into the trio's music.

"The minute we started to play I felt we had something special," says Lijbaart.

Rambags' singing style is very spontaneous and she often functions like another instrumentalist, although she also uses poetry to introduce the rhythm of speech; John Donne's No Man is an Island features on the group's self-titled debut album and texts by American Modernist poet Wallace Stevens have also acted as source material. Her approach has been described as calling up ancient spirits and Lijbaart believes that this folk music element, a kind of shamanistic chanting, has opened doors for the group.

"After our first get-together I organised a recording session because I wanted to capture what we were doing while it was still new," Lijbaart continues. "I'd had an idea for something like this for a long time but with Sanne and Bram it happened very naturally. In the studio we discovered that Sanne has compositions of her own, and that was cool, but we also found that interesting things happened when we just improvised and we were able to move in the same direction."

Lijbaart has experienced the other side of improvising freely and it was a chastening exercise. In the early days of the Yuri Honing Trio they thought it would be a good idea to bring in the godfather of Dutch improvised music, the late pianist Mischa Mengelberg, a founder of the aforementioned Instant Composers Pool. The plan was to play together in duos and

Lijbaart, only too aware of Mengelberg's duo partnership with Han Bennink, was possibly overawed in Mengelberg's presence but their duo improvisation didn't go anywhere.

"I learned an important lesson from that day," he says. "You need to approach improvisation with a strong idea and stick with it. Two people can have two different ideas that can work together or apart but you need to stay strong. With Under the Surface we don't play free jazz but we were able to create a language that we communicated in so it was a matter of building up a vocabulary and developing a way of composing together in the moment."

The music they play changes with every performance, so before the group recorded Under the Surface, its sole album to date, Lijbaart went walking in the forest near where he lives to try and imagine how the finished item would sound. He worked up a series of sketches drawn from atmospheres he encountered and he also spent a lot of time in his practice room working on sounds and rhythms. His percussion kit includes gongs, hand bells and a violin bow, all chosen to create colours that will complement Rambags' voice and Stadhouders' guitar and electronics.

"There was a review of our Jazz International Rotterdam gig on the London Jazz **News** website that picked up on the unspecified or mysterious folk traditions that Sanne appears to be drawing on with her singing," says Lijbaart. "Calling up spirits actually describes what she does very well and it's interesting because the first time we were invited to play outside of the Netherlands was in Mali, at this huge world music festival.

“We don’t play African music, certainly not like African musicians play it, but while we were in Mali we got to play with the kora master Toumani Diabate’s brother, Mamadou Sidiki Diabaté, and that worked incredibly well. We were also invited to another big world music festival, this time in Mexico, on the strength of our performance in Mali. So, between Sanne’s interest in Scandinavian traditions, Bram’s background in electronic music and my own history of playing jazz and some African and Indian music, we’ve somehow arrived at this spontaneous world music style.”

Under the Surface play the Blue Lamp, **Aberdeen** on Thursday, February 22; Eyemouth Hippodrome, Friday, February 23; and the Blue Arrow, Glasgow, Saturday, February 24.