

SINGLE-MINDED

An excerpt from John Corbett's forthcoming biography of legendary German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL JACKSON

Asked about his kinship with Sidney Bechet, Peter Brötzmann once said, "I think what we have in common is that we both blow straight through the horn."

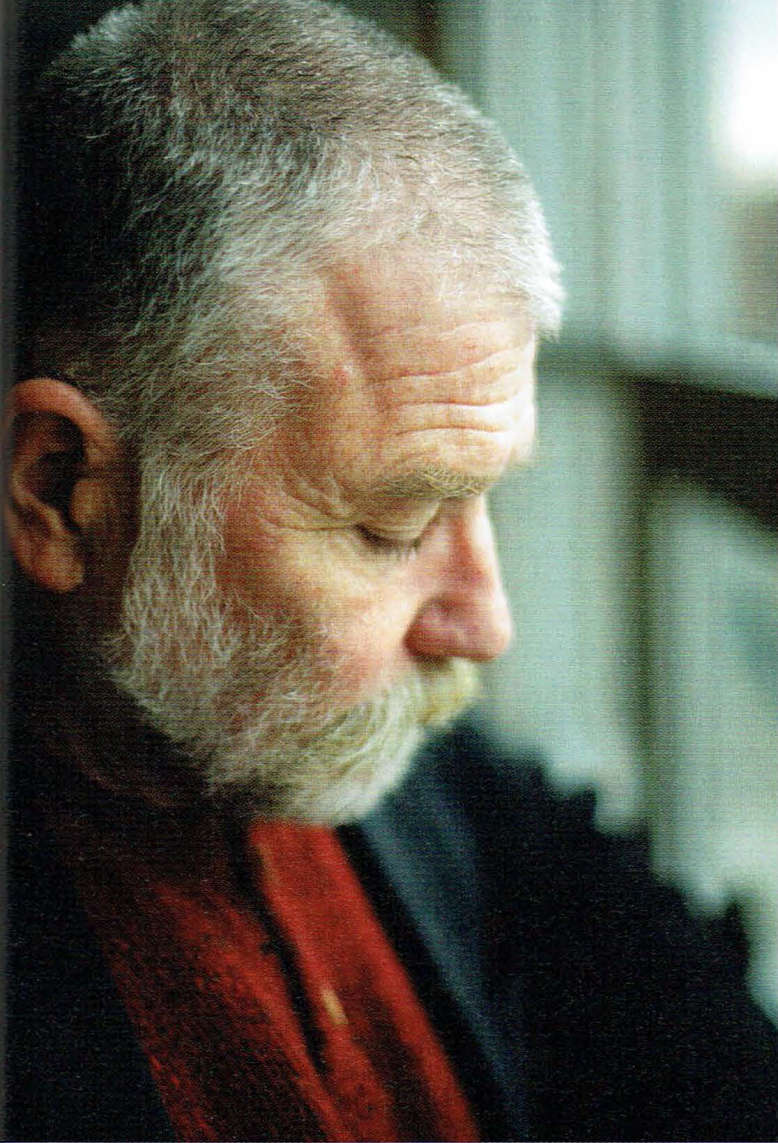
It's a strong image: the musician's breath seeking the shortest path to the bell, not stopping for any funny business along the way, expressing a kind of evenness and simplicity that in itself is the byproduct of immense preparation and discipline. The object: to avoid the unnecessarily fancy, the puffed-up, frills or trills or inconsequential ornament — anything that calls attention to one's greatness or special abilities, what sets one apart from others, the sophistry of technical mastery. One simply gathers air in the lungs and, with all available force, pushes it forward. To be straightforward isn't so easy. It demands patience, perseverance and struggle. And its production requires techniques of its own, not least learning how to blow through the saxophone or clarinet as if to snuff out a candle on the other side. But that drive toward clarity and simplicity — coupled with a gnawing existential question mark — is perhaps the best way to understand Peter Brötzmann.

Brötzmann loves to walk. He is, in fact, a nearly insatiable peripatetic. On tour, deposited in an unfamiliar town, one of his great joys is to learn the place by foot. Brötzmann's walks can take on the feel of a mission. He'll sometimes set his sights on a distant landmark and, with little calculation, walk there. Once, having admired bassist Kent Kessler's cowboy boots, Peter left the apartment he was staying at on the North Side of Chicago and set off to buy a pair for himself. More than five miles later, he arrived at the store, tried them on and, to break them in, wore them back. Straight on ahead. Brötzmann's stamina is legend, onstage and off. It's part of his mythology, but it's also a key to his personality. He's not one for doing things halfway.

Indecisiveness bothers him terribly. Once on a path, he likes to push on through, finish the job.

Sitting at the small kitchen table in his Wuppertal flat, a few years before he stopped drinking — another of his legendary capacities — Brötzmann and I were busy draining a bottle. I had arrived that afternoon, only a few days after his mother, about whom he had rarely spoken, had died. Reflective, tender and sorrowful, Peter's disposition was the most emotional and intimate I'd ever witnessed. What he told me that night was, reflecting back on it now, no doubt the spark for writing a book-length story about him. Fairly drunk as we both were, Peter recounted the time when his mom, near the end of the war, was forced to leave her home in Remscheid (near Wuppertal), chased out by the advancing Allied forces. Putting her four-year-old son beneath her arm and taking the hand of his elder sister, the diminutive Mrs. Brötzmann set out on foot and walked some 400 kilometers into Poland. After being camped there for a period, the war finally over, she packed the kids up and walked back home.

In many ways, Brötzmann is not in step with this age. He admits this himself. In an email era, he's more of a quill pen man (in spite of the fact that he now makes judicious use of a computer). He is not built for multitasking. Indeed, the very term irritates him, almost as much as perky ejaculations like *super* or *awesome* (in either German or English). The indignities of standing around with a cell phone while looking at a palm pilot and loudly chatting with someone nearby — these are anathema to him. In this, as in other areas, he is old-fashioned, more 19th than 21st century. But apart from that, he's got a special way of handling the world, a unique manner of dealing with things — one at a time. That's not to say he's incapable of keeping multiple projects



going at once. But Brötzmann tends to them in sequence, rather than distract himself — pecking at two or more simultaneously. At work in his studio, he might have a poster he's designing out on one table, his disassembled tenor saxophone (all springs and corks and keys and tiny screws) on another, some wooden boxes he's stained to possibly use for artwork on the end of yet another table, a CD player with a disc he's reviewing for a possible release, a hole dug for a new plant in the garden *and* a Swedish detective show on the television. Each of these tasks, each station, when he turns toward it, obtains his full attention. It's like a juggler who, rather than throwing all the balls in the air, throws each one up, catches it, then places it back on the ground before moving to the next one. Full attention. Nothing fancy. Straight through the horn.

Walking together with Brötzmann, a peculiar trait confirms this single-mindedness. By temperament a quiet guy, he can go long stretches on a hike without talking. But when conversation erupts, he'll almost always stop walking. When he does, I'm

usually a few steps ahead before I realize it, and then turn and also halt. I'm sure he's not conscious of this habit — or if he is, he doesn't think about it or find it unusual in any way. But it says an awful lot about his way of being in the world: One doesn't walk and talk at the same time. If you're talking, stop walking, consider what you're saying and say it straight. As a result, walks with Peter always involve periodic circling, facing each other, conversing a bit and then resuming the walk. It's a ritual I've come to delight in — a play between ambulation and discussion. I think it comes from a deep desire on his part for clarity and straightforwardness. Stop. Think. Then talk. In that order.

Over the course of his 45-year career in improvised music, Brötzmann has often had to endure some persistent and twisted misunderstandings. He's been portrayed as a beastly maniac and some sort of Teutonic screamer. One of the most hurtful moments in his career came when a national newspaper portrayed him as a savage wearing a Viking helmet in a cartoon. To be honest, Peter's behavior in some periods has not helped diminish this impression. A drinker whose stamina and sense of purpose at one time gave new meaning to the notion of drinking with a vengeance, he earned a reputation in European jazz circles for a certain aggressiveness and recklessness perhaps not out of scale with its place in his music. He lives what he sometimes calls "the steaming life," and his approach to sex was equally frank, forthright and unrepentant. I recall with some lingering shock the moment when Peter, completely drunk, left a party at my apartment, saying of my then-girlfriend: "Corbett, you didn't tell me you two weren't married. You'd better watch out!"

We shouldn't pretty up or perfume over the rough parts. Anyway, the rough parts are some of the best parts — they're [PETER BROTZMANN: CONTINUED ON PAGE 135]



[ROBERT BARRY: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 111]

there were clubs on both sides of the street, all the way down. A lot of guys started walking: They'd walk from 29th, stop at each club in the 30's, walk down to the 40's and hit all the clubs, and just keep going.

SS: And how many clubs do you think there were?

RB: Oh man, there was a lot of money to be made. It attracted a lot of people, a lot of nightlife. The clubs would be open from six in the afternoon until six in the morning. So anybody who was anything in New York would come play Chicago. They would have stage shows in the theaters, even in the neighborhood theaters. This was before and during the war — everything was wide open, man. There was a lot of money to be made; there was a lot of partying to be done. They had a place called the Breakfast Dance. The club opened at six o'clock in the morning and people wouldn't even go to work. Why go to work when you can party? [*Laughs*] That was a good time. And if you went to St. Louis, they had the same thing down there. I started going there when I was 14, because I had a little lady there. I used to take the train down. It took about five hours. A round-trip ticket cost \$7. I used to go there on Friday evening, get there before 12 or 1 a.m., go to the hotel, scout out and see who was where and what was going on. Ain't nobody asleep. Those were really good times in this country, as far as music goes.

When I was six or seven years old, we'd go up to Belmont and shine shoes, but you could get into clubs. You could walk into bars, shining shoes and dancing, just listening and learning.

SS: Did you ever tap?

RB: I didn't tap. I did sand. We'd take sand and put it down on a smooth surface. We'd be sanding like mad. We'd mess up people's hallways, because they had the tile floors, and we'd come up there with a pocketful of sand. People would come out and yell, "Hey, get out of my hallway!"

For the full version of the interview with Robert Barry, visit stopsmilingonline.com

☺



[PETER BRÖTZMANN: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 119]

frank and forthright, and they show how seamless, in some respects, the passage is from Brötzmann's life to his music and vice versa. On the other hand, there are few people, when you get down to it, who are as gentlemanly and honorable (a few philandering and brutish moments aside) as Peter. He possesses old-world charm — a rarity nowadays. And as his history makes clear, that brutish, uncivilized — perhaps even nihilistic — trait is aimed more inward than anywhere else. Those who consider Brötzmann's saxophone sound terrifying or some sort of cry of victory or domination — I think they're not listening closely, or at all. They're just reiterating something they've read. That's because he's German — his aggressiveness must be a sign of expansionism, of quest for territory. His must be a shriek of intended conquest.

But Peter is fundamentally a postwar German. His cries are postwar hollers, calls for a cultural and historical disquiet. Where some hear unabashed and terrorizing power, I think instead there is a more plaintive quality, a perfectly human tenderness and the immense power of a yawping, howling sadness. Perhaps that sadness is an epochal one. And it's mixed with other qualities: buoyancy, resilience — even joy. His music is a kind of blues, if we understand that not as a self-pitying quality, but as a delicate balance of melancholy and exuberance. In Peter's music, one hears a desperate call for something true and real — a scream in search of anything truthful. Against a historical backdrop of resolute silence — the silence of fathers and uncles who willfully participated in the unspeakable — one finds the proper context in which to understand this kind of intensity and even violence. Listen carefully and you'll hear that gnawing existential question mark.

Uphill and down. Into unfamiliar terrain, lacking in mileposts or landmarks. Keep moving forward. Push ahead. Straight ahead. The energy in Brötzmann's music comes from a special reserve; a private place kept for times when the walk is a little — or maybe a lot — longer and harder than expected.

☺