

Svend Asmussen: Phenomenal Jazz Fiddler

By Richard J. Brooks

(Reprinted with permission of Richard Brooks and Fiddler Magazine. This is the first part of the full article first published in the March 2005 issue of Fiddler Magazine. The article will be continued in future issues of the Fiddler's Rag.)

Svend Asmussen, the world-renowned jazz violinist, is by all measures a most remarkable person. This spry eighty-eight year old is still performing! I was thrilled to see his two superb performances at the Oslo Jazz Festival on August 11 and 12, 2003. He has been in the music and entertainment business for over seventy years and has recorded over thirty albums.

Svend was arrested by the Nazis in 1943, and only a stroke of luck saved his life. As a result, the world has benefited from his artistry as a versatile entertainer and artist: a jazz violinist and singer, a band leader and arranger, a film actor, and an artist (paintings and drawings). His movies are still shown regularly on Danish television. There is even a winding street named after him on the isle of Bornholm in Denmark. Its name is the Danish equivalent of "Asmussen Swing."

His latest CD, *Still Fiddling*, was released in 2002 and is currently available. Asmussen has played jazz violin with such jazz greats as Fats Waller, the Mills Brothers, Josephine Baker, Edith Piaf, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Joe Venuti, Stéphane Grappelli, Bucky Pizzarelli, John Lewis, Kenny Drew, Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen, Lionel Hampton, Toots Thielemans, Alice Babs, and Ulrik Neumann.

On April 17 and 18, 2002, I was honored to interview him at his home in Copenhagen, Denmark. He shared many personal and musical experiences with me, and I left with an even greater appreciation for one of the greatest talents I have ever met. While Svend said he had forgotten a lot, his memory for details amazed me.

Svend (pronounced "Sven," the "d" is silent) Asmussen's jazz violin style is truly unique and instantly recognizable. Stéphane Grappelli once told my friend Ed Wadsworth (violin with Hot Strings of New Orleans) that Svend was his favorite jazz violinist – a master of the odd interval. That is because his musical phrasings, or choice of notes, are based on the styles of horn players, not string players. Just as horn players must pause in order to breathe, pauses accent their playing.

Svend Discovers Jazz

Svend was born into a musical family on February 28, 1916, in Copenhagen, Denmark to parents of German origin. Svend had three brothers (Ernst, Johan, Andrea) and a sister (Grethe). At twelve, Ernst gave up on the violin because it was "no fun to watch his seven year old brother surpass his abilities so quickly," so he took up the piano [Bent Henius' 1963 biography of Svend Asmussen].

Among Svend's earliest jazz recollections was that of the great saxophonist Coleman Hawkins playing "Talk of the Town" on the piano in Svend's family living room. Svend was sixteen, and Hawkins had a great time humoring Svend about his ukulele and toy saxophone! Svend began violin lessons when he was seven years old, but by sixteen, he stopped his formal musical training.

This was also around the time when Svend first heard the 1927-1928 recordings made by Joe Venuti, the father of jazz violin, and Eddie Lang. Svend was "absolutely impressed." Svend mastered Joe's four-string violin technique: the bow is taken apart, the bow stick is placed under the violin, and the bow hair is placed



Svend Asmussen (Richard Brooks photo)

over the four strings, allowing all strings to be played simultaneously. Svend was very well-known locally because of his "trick" fiddling, which helped to establish his reputation as a very talented musician. By the time Svend was nineteen, he was becoming a known musician playing at dances.

Svend began his professional career in 1933, singing and playing on violin and vibes [online profile at www.oldies.com/artist/view.cfm/id/3400.html]. His first recordings date back to 1934. Svend's solos are reminiscent of Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang's "Stringing the Blues" made in the late 1920s. However, his musical life turned upside down the following year when he heard Stuff Smith. Stuff later became a personal friend. "He's still my man," Svend said. Stuff changed Svend's way of thinking about music: "Yes, you know — the phrasing to play jazz on the violin. Stuff—he didn't really treat the violin as a violin. He treated it as a horn and as a vocal. That's what I try to do. When I play ballads, I try to play as Sarah Vaughan sounded, or Dinah Washington. When I play a jazz number, I try to sound like Lester Young or Clark Terry."

Svend wasn't expected to be a professional musician. Svend was supposed to be a sculptor and later, a dentist. When his interest in art, sculpture, and science diminished because of his musical activities, his parents suggested a career as a dentist.

Svend Asmussen, continued -

After one year at dentistry school around the age of twenty, Svend said to his parents: "I can't stand that any longer. I can't see my future as a dentist." At the same time, he was developing a reputation and earning money as a musician.

In a compromise with his parents, however, he returned to the original plan to be a sculptor and attended the Royal Academy in Copenhagen. During one of his sculpture classes, the director of the academy mentioned to him that he had seen a newspaper article about his playing dance music at a restaurant. When the director learned that Svend was earning twice as much as he was as the Academy Director, he encouraged Svend to continue playing!

Svend's technique and style (his choice of notes) is astounding. His virtuosity was recognized and appreciated by all the jazz greats with whom he played. His accomplishments are even more remarkable when one realizes that he is basically self-taught. When asked whether he ever considered a career in classical music because of his outstanding technique, his reply was, "My technique is not for classical playing. The real classical technique you must acquire between your seventh and twelfth years — inside those five years. That's the period where you have to study eight hours every day. And I studied only fifteen minutes a week [for his weekly lessons]."

Multi-Instrumentalist and Multi-Stylist

Svend plays many instruments besides the violin, and many other styles besides swing jazz. His father used to bring home records from Budapest. Svend was first introduced to new musical styles in 1937, at a local club in Copenhagen that booked a Hungarian Gypsy orchestra and a Brazilian music band.

In 1938, he played swing dance music on a Scandinavian cruise ship. Those were luxury cruises lasting for months at a time, and were for very wealthy travelers. Many of the big names in jazz worked on luxury cruise

ships. Svend said that in all of his worldly travels, the best food he ate was aboard those ships.

Josephine Baker was also performing on that 1938 cruise ship along with a Brazilian drummer from Rio de Janeiro. This is where he first learned this style of music, and where he took lessons from a tambourine player during intermissions.

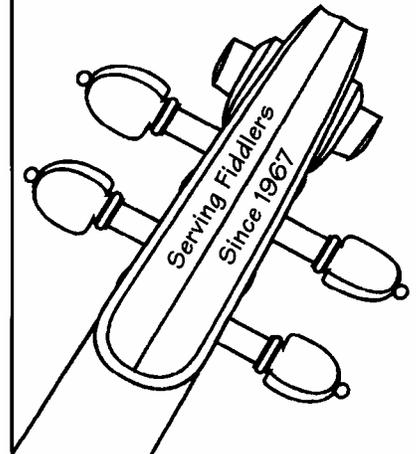
His facility at this style is evident in three tunes he wrote: "Fiddler In Rio" and "Calypso Colombo" [CD: *Fiddling Around*, 1993, Imogena IGCD 039], and "Cocoanut Calypso" [CD: *At Slukafter*, 1989, Phontastic PHONT-NCD 8804]. Svend also recorded "Limehouse Blues" and "Sweet Sue" with the great Argentinean guitarist Oscar Aleman [two CDs: Acoustic Disc ACD 29]. Svend modestly remarked, "I know a few things about Brazilian rhythm and Argentine tangos."

Svend also plays the alto violin (like an enlarged viola tuned the same as a viola), tenor violin (a baroque instrument tuned one octave below a violin; its size is between a viola and a cello), viola, cello, bass, guitar, mandolin, piano, vibraphone, flute, standard drums and conga drums, and the musical saw. In 1964, he and Alice Babs, the famous Swedish singer, were awarded the best European album of the year for their LP *Scandinavian Songs with Alice and Svend*. On it, Svend played all the instruments and arranged all the songs. It was recorded with about twenty-five overdubs and mixed on three- and five-track multi-track tape recorders under Svend's supervision.

Multi-track recordings were made possible by the German invention of the tape recorder, discovered at the end of WWII, and by Les Paul's invention of sound-on-sound recording. Les Paul also invented the solid-body electric guitar in 1951. He is alive and well today at eighty-eight (born the same year as Svend), and occasionally still performs in New York. Svend was an early experimenter of musical electronic effects along with his contemporary Les Paul. In the 1950s, Svend was

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experimenting with overdubbing on four-track machines in order to supplement his on-stage performances, and with Wa-Wa pedals that he used with Toots Thielemans ["Toots and Svend" or "Yesterday and Today," 1972] and on the Resource LPs [Resource, Asmussen/Thigpen Quartet, recorded 1973, SONET SLP-2551].

The Consummate Entertainer

Svend is a consummate entertainer and is not satisfied with just being a fiddler and band leader. His rapport with the audience is legendary and humor pervaded his shows. Svend said, "They pay just to watch. If they don't have a good time, you can't expect them to come next time." His on-stage antics would have the audience all shaking hands with their neighbors.

Using his multi-track tape recorder, Svend recorded backgrounds for many on-stage performances during the '50s and '60s. Examples include orchestrations with Svend recording all the string parts, five harmony voices of Alice Babs so she could accompany herself on the sixth (middle) part, and special sound effects for the band's skits which were followed by songs related to the skit.

Svend's band practiced hard to synchronize the skit with the pre-recorded sound effects. Recordings of horses and guns accompanied skits of western brawls followed by western-like songs such as "Ole Oleanna" [*En Kvall med Svend & Ulrik*, 1962, RCA International] and "Ten Thousand Miles." The following is an excerpt from a 1966 show performed in Glassalen (the Glass Hall) at Tivoli. The band members are dressed in western costumes and hats.

[Talking to a costumed band member:] Hey you. You didn't clap your hands. Maybe you didn't like the soooooong [long pause]. I suppose you don't know my pardner, Stinker, Whisky Stinker, the Smiling Shotgun. [Huge audience laugh] He's a nice kid. He's willing to shoot his mother for ten dollars. Nice kid. Five dollars. Hey master - mister. Excuse me master - mister. [Audience laughs] Maybe you like flowers. Flowers, you know - the multicolored

stuff outside. Stinker. The gentleman likes flowers [to the audience]. [Loud gunshot with ricochet sound. Guy falls down sound] You'll get flowers - tomorrow. [Audience laughs]

[Svend plays an old-time sounding square dance fiddle tune with shuffle bow followed by these syncopated words:] Come on pardner, that's no fun, better put down your shootin' gun. Tune your fiddle, join the band, the best band in all Texas land. Wonderful music made by me, in the Death Band Valley Symphony. Come on ladies, swing your skirts, don't mind about dust and dirt. [More fiddling]



Stuff Smith and Svend Asmussen in the '60's
(Richard Brooks photo of earlier photo)

In another skit in the same show, Svend practices his tennis using his fiddle as the racket. Svend swings his fiddle and the audience hears the pre-recorded sound of a tennis ball being hit. After several hits, we hear the loud sound of glass breaking everywhere. The joke is a huge success as it was performed at Glassalen, the glass hall, in Tivoli.

The most ingenious and humorous skit that I've heard about is one where the audience is able to hear the thoughts of the band members. The house lights are turned off and a spotlight shines on Svend's face. He asks the audience to concentrate on his thoughts because there will always be some who misunderstand him. With the spotlight on him, Svend slowly plays the classical melodramatic-sounding "Avant de Mourir." In the background, a pre-recorded voice slowly speaks "Svend's thoughts" in a deep tone and in Danish: "I'm wasting my talents on this audience. They don't really understand my music." The spotlight shifts to the bass player

who is playing along with the slow tune and the voice offers his thoughts. He is only thinking about eating food and what his next meal will be. The spotlight moves to the vibraphone player who is only thinking about money for his family and how stingy Svend is about paying his band. At last, the spotlight moves to the drummer and the audience hears a can with rocks banging away — an empty head.

When asked where he gets his ideas, Svend said, "I had a lot of thinking about ideas, inspiration from different fields, from other kinds of music, like the idea of the audience hearing our thoughts. I did imitations of Italian dance orchestras. I thought of how to dream up funny situations based on music, so musicians always would find it interesting, and people who were not musical had something to laugh at at the same time. My trouble was always to find new ideas — one a year at least, for a completely new thing. It's difficult in a small country with the same audience always. The press are always after you to renew yourself."

Svend is a great singer and is fluent in English and several other languages. He acknowledges, "I always had a sort of love for singing. [But] I wasn't born with a singing voice." Many would dispute that assertion. He sang the lead in his band. Other members contributed to the two-, three-, and sometimes four-part harmony vocal arrangements. When asked if the other band members enjoyed singing, he said, "Yes, I threatened them to do it whether they could sing or not." [laughter]

Svend taught himself the art of arranging for voices (human and instrument) by listening to popular American vocal groups of the time. They included the Mills Brothers, the Modernaires (which became the HiLo's), the Boswell Sisters, the Singers Unlimited, Paul Whiteman's trio with Bing Crosby, and The Smoothies, also known as Babs and her Brothers (no relation to Alice Babs).

(To be continued in a future issue. Thanks to Fiddler Magazine. See www.fiddle.com to learn about the magazine.)

Svend Asmussen: Phenomenal Jazz Fiddler – Part 2

By Richard J. Brooks

(Reprinted with permission of Richard Brooks and Fiddler Magazine. This is the second part of the full article appearing in the March 2005 issue of Fiddler Magazine. Born in Denmark in 1916, renowned jazz fiddler Svend Asmussen began his career in the 1930s and is still playing today.)

The Swe-Danes Era — Fame and Fortune (almost)

Svend came closest to fame and fortune with his group the Swe-Danes. “We had a colossal success, especially in Sweden. We were on the edge of it [fame and fortune] with the Swe-Danes — not because I’m a jazz fiddler — because we were entertainers.” The Swe-Danes were a huge phenomenon traveling throughout the U.S. and Europe between 1959 to 1961. They appeared on the Ed Sullivan show several times, and played the Palladium in London, the Olympia in Paris, and the Coconut Grove in Los Angeles. Their concerts in California were well attended by LA’s professional studio musicians.

The Swe-Danes were essentially a vocal trio group with some hot fiddling for added flavor. They included Svend, Ulrik Neumann, who was Svend’s Danish boyhood friend who played in his band throughout the ’30s and ’40s, and the Swedish singer Alice Babs, who was becoming famous for her fabulous voice and from the movie “Swing it Mister Teacher.” Hence the name Swe-Danes.

Among their most requested songs



The Swe-Danes – Asmussen, Alice Babs, Ulrik Neumann
(photo courtesy Richard Brooks)

was the “Swe-Dane Symphony” in which they mimicked a whole orchestra with just their voices. It was terrifically difficult to do. Svend did all the vocal and instrument arrangements for the trio.

However, after three years of almost constant work, the personal demands were too much for the three. In Svend’s words: “We couldn’t think of a future traveling around in American night clubs — and being away from our children and wives. So we said ‘no’ to offers of staying in the U.S.”

Following the Swe-Danes, Alice went on to record with Duke Ellington, and Svend and Ulrik formed a two-man show that toured for a couple of years. “Ulrik and I went on and made sort of an entertaining vaudeville show — just the two of us plus an instrumental trio and a couple of girls on the stage. I think we played our two-man show — it must have been around a thousand times. So we knew it pretty well.”

Svend continues to have great admiration for Alice, describing her voice as “angel-like.” “She made a comeback in Sweden a year or two ago — with a huge success. She is seventy-eight now and sounds like she always did.” Alice turned eighty on January 26, 2004. In 2003, she was presented with the Swedish government’s medal Illis quorum for her “outstanding and long service as a singer in different musical styles, and for her warm and positive artistry.” [www.jazzfacts.com]



Svend Asmussen (Richard Brooks photo)

World War II and The Nazi Invasion of Denmark

World War II was responsible for some of the darkest hours of Svend’s life. In 1940, the Nazis invaded Norway and Denmark and terrorized civilians by the public hanging of men and women who opposed the Nazi occupation. In Germany, they burned as many American jazz records as they could. As Daniel Morgenstern said, “It was kind of symbolic of America, and freedom, and as the Nazis never failed to point out, it was black music, and it was Jewish, and to them it was a negroid, Bolshevik, Jewish conspiracy against culture. [www.allaboutjazz.com/journalists/morgenstern4.htm]

However, the Nazis permitted some jazz music to be played in Denmark. Svend owned a food and music club in Copenhagen called the Blue Heaven. It was the first club in Denmark to have jazz music jams, and became very popular until food and drink rationing made it unprofitable to run. While the Nazis’ official policy was anti-jazz, Nazi jazz enthusiasts were among Svend’s fans in his club. That may have saved his life.

On August 29, 1943, Svend was arrested by the Nazis along with two to three hundred other well-known people. He was neither a politician nor a “freedom fighter” but just a famous entertainer. He was never given a hearing, nor was he ever told why he was arrested.

Svend Asmussen, continued -

Svend spent some time in a Copenhagen prison, and was shipped to a prison in the center of Berlin where he spent three months in isolation in a bug-infested cell. "You were isolated. The door was never opened. And you were isolated from the only company you had. Everything was taken away from you — your watch, everything — no reading material. That was a terrible psychological strain."

From his third floor cell, Svend could hear the guards running down the stairs for cover whenever the British troops bombed Berlin. Of course, the prisoners remained locked in their cells. Prisoners were terrorized by hearing other prisoners being shot. For hours on end, the Nazis made him look at pictures of bald shaven people asking if he recognized them. He didn't know any of them. Svend remarked, "Nobody asked about human rights at that time in the Nazi prisons."

In December, he was released just as mysteriously as he was arrested — without explanation. In his own words: "Suddenly one day they came into the cell and said, 'Tomorrow you go home to Copenhagen.' That's the first time I broke down into tears." Two weeks after his release, the whole prison building was bombed and almost everyone was killed. Svend thinks there might have been an anti-Nazi Gestapo agent that helped him and several hundred other Danish people get out of the German prisons.

Musicians Union Prevents U.S. Engagements

One of the reasons that Svend is not better known in the U.S. and internationally is the political consequence of the policies of Mr. James Petrillo, former President of the U.S. Musicians Union. Benny Goodman had been impressed with Svend's recordings, and in 1948 he asked Svend if he would consider coming to the U.S. to play with him. Svend agreed.



Svend Asmussen with Benny Goodman
(photo courtesy Richard Brooks)

To play in Benny Goodman's band, musicians had to be members of the union. However, union policies required foreigners to live in the U.S. for one year and have a sponsor to pay them before they could join the union. In Svend's words, "That means you had to spend a year in America without playing or making any money. Petrillo was the head of it, and it was the strongest union in the world at the time — the Musicians Union."

In 1950, Goodman visited Copenhagen where his group played the first set. At intermission, Goodman sat in the front row and enjoyed Svend's group that included Toots Thielemans (guitar and harmonica), Zoot Simms (sax), Dick Hyman (piano), and Ed Shaughnessy (drums). Goodman wanted to bring the whole group to the U.S., and spent an evening phoning New York from Copenhagen (expensive in 1950!). But Goodman was unsuccessful in trying to convince Mr. Petrillo to let them work in the U.S.

A Chronicle of Svend Asmussen's Music

The purpose of this section is to give the reader a glimpse into Svend's music and his diverse musical styles. Although Svend excels as a swing jazz fiddler, he also played classical music as a featured guest with orchestras, and he experimented with bebop and

American fiddling music styles.

Svend's first hot jazz violin solos were recorded in 1935. He played in the Joe Venuti four-string style on "Tiger Rag" (1935) and later on "Auld Lang Syne" (1946). In 1936, he recorded with Ulrik Neumann on guitar, and Victor Borge (known then as Borge Rosenbaum) on piano and vocals.

By 1938, Svend was becoming known as a "hot jazz fiddler." That year, he started playing on Scandinavian cruise ships where he met Josephine Baker. That is where he first learned about Brazilian drum rhythms and Argentine tangos, and where he took tambourine lessons. In 1938, he recorded with Oscar Aleman in Copenhagen.

In 1940, he recorded "June Night," which eventually became Svend's theme song. Among the hottest pieces recorded in 1941 was Duke Ellington's "Ring Dem Bells." The Danish Resistance Museum in Copenhagen plays Svend's version in its multimedia tribute to the sacrifices the Danes made during the Nazi occupation of Denmark.

American jazz was extremely popular in Europe after WWII. Music publishers who wanted to sell their sheet music and records to a Scandinavian audience hired local musicians like Svend to record the Danish versions of American popular tunes. In those days, musicians were paid a fixed fee to play on a record. They never received royalties. Svend and his band were just grateful to be working in the music business.



Asmussen, Victor Borge, Ulrik Neumann, early 1940s
(photo courtesy Richard Brooks)

Svend Asmussen, continued -

In 1945, Svend began performing in a “show band” — what he refers to as Vaudeville Theater where he performed many comedy skits. In 1946-1949, Svend appeared on BBC television (London). He also worked with the famous singer Edith Piaf in 1947. In the 1940s through the 1950s, Svend appeared with his band in several films where they usually played comedy roles as musicians. These shows are still being aired on Danish television today. [www.def-musikportal.dk/musik-portal/emner/jazz/svend.zip, www.beta.webyoda.com/dumboozle/svend/svenfilm.html]

By the end of the '40s, Svend had developed his uniquely personal musical style with sophisticated vocal and instrumental arrangements. Grappelli's description of him as the “master of the odd interval” is apt. The names of three of his EPs (10” 33 rpm records) describe his music perfectly: *Rhythm Is Our Business*, *Svend Asmussen and His Unmelancholy Danes*, and *Svend Asmussen Plays Hot Fiddle*.

In 1950, Svend met Benny Goodman, who was unsuccessful bringing him to America. In 1953, Svend became a big hit in Germany with his “modern” music. The mid-'50s found him traveling around the world playing dance music for millionaires aboard cruise ships. From 1959-1961, he toured with the Swe-Danes.

In 1961, Svend and Ulrik Neumann (guitar) recorded the *Danish Imports* LP. This LP is notable because: 1) it was just the guitar and violin; 2) he played his sweet-sounding Guarnerius; and 3) the standards were all very carefully worked out with almost no improvisation taking place. “Honeysuckle Rose” sounds like a ballad! In 1962, their vaudeville performance was released as the *En kvall med Svend and Ulrik* LP.

The '60s was the decade when Svend recorded with John Lewis (1962), Duke Ellington (*Jazz Violin Sessions*, 1963), Stéphane Grappelli

(1965), and Dieter Reith (organ, 1967). One biographer suggested that “Despite the earlier interest of Benny Goodman, it was the Lewis recording session that drew widespread attention to his talents.” [www.oldies.com/artist/view.cfm/id/3400.html] In 1966, he recorded on the famous *Violin Summit* LP with Stuff Smith, Stéphane Grappelli, and Jean-Luc Ponty.

Of worthy note is the unique 1964 album *Scandinavian Songs with Alice and Svend*. He and Alice sound like they are playing with an orchestra, but it's only the two of them. Svend played violins, bass, guitar, mandolin, piano, vibraphone, flute, percussions, and arranged the all-male choir (just him).

In the 1970s he recorded separate LPs with Toots Thielemans (harmonica), Subramaniam (violin), Kenny Drew (piano), and Lionel Hampton

and looking much like George Washington in a white wig, with a long draping purple robe, and dressed in blue jeans and cowboy boots made to look like an American flag. This was also the decade that he spent playing unconventional chamber music programs with improvisations on chorales and vocal music in hundreds of churches.

In 1981 in Copenhagen, Svend was a special guest on Benny Goodman's last recorded live performance. [Svend's name is misspelled as Sven Osmussen. Still available.] The 1980s also brought him to the U.S. several times, where he recorded with Bucky Pizzarelli (*June Night*, 1983), Teresa Brewer (*On the Good Ship Lollipop*, 1983), and David Grisman (*Svingin' with Svend*, 1987).

In 1986, Svend appeared with Johnny Gimble on the “A Prairie Home Companion” radio show. He and David Grisman toured throughout the U.S. in 1987. Svend also recorded two CDs with his own band: *Slukafter* (1984), and *Fiddler Supreme* (1989).

In the 1990s, Svend formed the band with which he still plays today: Jacob Fischer (guitar), Jesper Lundgaard (bass), and Aage Tanggaard (drums). Svend describes his current band as, “Being with three wonderful musicians — with a jazz musician's sense of humor.

Now with a guitar player — he's fifty-two years younger [Jacob Fischer] but the age difference disappears when we are playing together.” Jacob Fischer is one of the most outstanding guitar players in the business. He has won numerous awards and is famous throughout Scandinavia. [www.touche-music.se/fischer.html] This band recorded *Fiddling Around* (1993), *Fit as a Fiddle* (1996), and *Still Fiddling* (1999).

In 1992, Svend played the voice of “Kong Morfeus” in the Danish version of Little Nemo. [www.beta.webyoda.com/dumboozle/svend/svenfilm.html]

(Thanks to Fiddler Magazine for use of this material. See www.fiddler.com to learn about the magazine.)



Svend Asmussen (4th from left) with David Grisman (2nd from left) and others, 1987 (photo courtesy Richard Brooks)

(vibes). He and Alice Babs played a few reunion concerts, one of which was recorded in 1972 as “Antiligen” with Red Mitchell (bass) and Kenny Drew (piano).

The early 1970s were also a time of electronic experimentation. He and Ed Thigpen (drums) recorded the *Resource* album in Copenhagen in 1973. It is mostly a rock-n-roll and electric blues LP with heavy drums, electric bass, mini-Moog synthesizer, electric organ, and electric fiddle with Wa-Wa pedal and reverb electronic effects.

In the mid 1970s, he recorded two classical LPs: *Amazing Strings* and *Telemann Today*. The cover of the latter is a reproduction of Svend's painting of Telemann playing drums

Svend Asmussen: Phenomenal Jazz Fiddler – Part 3

By Richard J. Brooks

(Reprinted with permission of Richard Brooks and Fiddler Magazine. This is the third and final part of the full article that appears in the March 2005 issue of Fiddler Magazine. Born in Denmark, renowned jazz fiddler Svend Asmussen began his career in the 1930s and is still playing today.)



Svend Asmussen as a young man
(Richard Brooks photo of earlier photo)

Svend Asmussen Today

At eighty-eight, Svend is still playing music. His *Still Fiddling* CD, recorded in 1999, was released on his eighty-sixth birthday, February 28, 2002. [www.storyville-records.com/asmussen.htm, www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=9982] There is an interesting story about the two Jewish melodies on it. In Svend's own words: "One of the tunes was sung to me by Edith Piaf when we worked together in Oslo in 1947. After the show, we were invited out and we had red wine. I would bring my fiddle along and she would be singing. She said you must play that tune on your fiddle. I was not very interested at the time. I was into Stuff Smith and playing American jazz. Fifty years later it popped up when I heard David's CD [*20th anniversary of the David Grisman Quintet*, www.acousticdisc.com/acd_html/acd20.html]. I said to myself, 'What was that tune that Edith Piaf sang to me — My Yiddisha Momma?' It turned out [that] at least the guitar solo was a little masterpiece on our recording."

In 2003, Jim Lowe's website tribute to Svend listed over twenty-five performances in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. However, in 2004 he only performed once [www.dumboozle.com/svend/svendex.html]. Svend said of his July 31, 2004 show, "It was very well received. We got a standing ovation."

In February, 2004, Svend made a generous donation of his memorabilia to the Carl Nielsen Academy of Music in Odense, Denmark. My visit there in October revealed over 200 historical photographs and a box full of newspaper articles covering Svend's entire career. Svend is currently

proofreading a biography of his life which will probably be published in early 2005.

Svend Asmussen lives and breathes music. His remarkable career spanned almost the entire history of jazz music and leaves us with a wonderful legacy of over seventy years of recorded music. He plans to continue performing for his favorite audiences — listening audiences in small jazz clubs.

Svend's Violins and Electronics

Svend uses the latest gadgetry to enhance his sound. His on-stage instrument is a Danish-built fiddle about 120 years old that was sold to him by his former drummer, Frederik. Because of feedback problems with conventional amplification systems, he added a unique non-piezoelectric electric violin pickup system called StringAmp, made by MusikLab¹ in Denmark. The electronics are hidden from view - located under the



Svend Asmussen Quartet 2004 (photo courtesy R. Brooks)

fingerboard and inside the violin. Also visible on the violin's tailpiece are four white potentiometers, which are the remnants of the StringAmp's predecessor Elkit.

¹ StringAmp pickup system:
<http://www.musiklab.dk/index.html>

On stage, Svend prefers the sound of an amplified instrument to an acoustic for the fuller sound. He uses American amplifiers like Gallian-Krueger, which are light and easy to travel with. The special effects he uses are the basic echo and reverb. Svend also uses a rubber two-opening Tourte mute on some songs. On his electric violin, he uses Danish-made Jargar strings or Swedish-made Prim strings.

Svend has a collection of beautiful old Italian violins made by Storioni, Landolphi, and Carcassi. But the best one he owned was a Guarneri that he used to record the "Danish Imports LP². In his own words, "*The best one I had, and was silly enough to sell it too early, was a Petrus Guarnerius from Mantua. If I had kept it, it would have been worth ten times as much as I got for it. And I miss it, really. It's the one I use on the record with Ulrik Neumann that we recorded in Hollywood. That's the one I used in about a thousand churches through the 10 years we played in Scandinavian churches – 1970 to 1980 or 1975 to 1985.*"

Svend believes that 30% of the sound we hear comes from the bow. When I asked how he arrived at such a precise measurement, he laughed and said that it was only a guess. He said he has some good bows, but his best bow was made over 100 years ago by James Tubbs in London.

(Thanks to Fiddler Magazine. See www.fiddle.com to learn about the magazine.)

² Danish Imports 1961 Warner Bros - WS-01408

Swing Manouche

Transcription by Paul Anastasio

Svend Asmussen

Violin

1 Am7b5 D7 Gm

6 Gm G7b9 Cm G+ Cm

11 D7 Gm D7 Gm A7

16 A7 D7 0 0 Am7b5 D7

21 Gm D7 Gm G7 Cm G7

26 Cm F7 Bb

32 A7b9 D7 Gm Solo D7 Gm Am7b5

37 D7 Gm D7 Gm G7b9

42 Cm G7 Cm Adim

46 Gm Eb7

Detailed description: This is a violin score for the piece 'Swing Manouche'. It consists of ten staves of music in a 3/4 time signature with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The score includes various chord symbols such as Am7b5, D7, Gm, G7b9, Cm, G+, A7, F7, Bb, A7b9, Gm Solo, and Eb7. Measure numbers 1, 6, 11, 16, 21, 26, 32, 37, 42, and 46 are indicated at the beginning of their respective staves. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'Adim' (ad libitum). The piece concludes with a final chord of Eb7.

Partial Svend Asmussen Discography (from discography compiled by Joel Glassman)

- Evergreens-(Telefunken, BLE 14187) 1965
- Hot Violins!-Stuff Smith (w/SA and Poul Olson)
- Svend Asmussen and Stuff Smith - Live broadcast recording from 2/66
- Svend Asmussen & De Gode Gamle (Metronome MLP-15264, 1966) -- live Tivoli performance
- Violin Summit (w/Grappelli/Smith and Ponty) (MPS)1967
- Jazz Fiddlin'Around - SA and Dieter Reith (Murbo Records) 1967
- Telemann Today (Polydor)
- Jazz Pa Stampen (w/Red Mitchell) (Gazell GMG-1216) EP 1969
- Amazing Strings (MPS) jazz string quartet (SA overdubs)
- Yesterday and Today Toots & Svend (Gazell GJCD-1008)
- Garland-Dr. L. Subramaniam - (Storyville SLP 4075)
- Chamber Choir with Eric Ericson and SA 1972(Swedish Society SCD 1025)
- "Dance Along" vol. 1&2 EMI 058.39304 & 058.39305 (France) w/Boulou Ferre
- "Resource" Asmussen/Thigpen Quartet (SONET SLP-2551) 1974
- As Time Goes By (with Lionel Hampton) (Storyville SLP)
- "Spelar för er" Works by Ellington,Asmussen,Renliden,Bach,Telemann 1977
- Prize Winners (with Kenny Drew, NHOP) 1978-Jazz
- [video] Live in Copenhagen 1986 (with Kenny Drew, NHOP)
- On The Good Ship Lollipop-Teresa Brewer (Signature A 26229)
- June Night-(Signature AK 39150) (also packaged w/Grappelli recording "Live at Carnegie Hall/June Night")
- [video] Benny Goodman at Tivoli- Svend guests on 3 tunes
- Svingin' With Svend-David Grisman Quintet (Zebra)
- [video] Tribute to Floyd Tillman (television broadcast) w/ J. Gimble.
- String Swing (with Ulf Wakenius) Jazz and Hot Club style cuts
- Live at Slukafter (Phontastic NCD 8804) Jazz
- Fiddler Supreme (Intim Musik 6)1989
- Fiddling Around (Imogena IGCD 039) 1994
- Fit as a Fiddle (dacapo DCCD 9429) 1998
- Still Fiddling (Storyville)2002