



Nils Landgren

Swedish trombonist Nils Landgren is completely in his element musically in all kinds of different settings, whether he's playing groove-laden funk or fronting a big band, whether he's giving energy a modern jazz group or conveying strong emotion as he plays or sings a ballad. Known as "Mr. Red Horn" because of his instantly recognizable, custom-made Yamaha instrument, he has embraced all kinds of musical styles throughout his career. Landgren is a particularly charismatic performer who can reach and appeal to a wide audience, from classical music lovers to jazz fans to the pop and rock audience. He has a very strong work ethic too, and is also blessed with the stamina to go with it: he normally plays well in excess of 200 concerts a year. He is also enormously productive, having made more than thirty albums in his own name. And then there is his versatility: 'trombonist/singer/composer' doesn't get the measure of his skills at all: he is also an extremely effective talent scout and mentor, a talented arranger and producer, a polished and thoughtful university lecturer, and a highly experienced and able director of orchestras and festivals. This tireless man says of himself: "Even if I'm not someone who gets bored, it is always good for me to have several things on the go at once. That enables me to have many different perspectives, which in turn has a positive effect on the way I sing and I play the trombone. So my audience gets to benefit too."

The sheer scale of what Nils Landgren has achieved makes him one of the most important and influential European jazz musicians of the past few decades. In addition, he is also among the most commercially successful, and one of the few capable of reaching a broad audience far beyond the jazz scene, something which, remarkably, he has achieved without making artistic or personal compromises. Two books about him (the most recent, from 2018, is the conversation and picture book "The Nils Landgren Alphabet") and countless awards testify to the regard in which he is held. Several of his albums have received either a German Jazz Award or the Swedish equivalent of the GRAMMY, and he has also received honours such as the Sir George Martin Music Award, the Tore Ehrling Prize and the Joachim Ernst Berendt-Ehrenpreis, an honorary doctorate from Karlstad University, the Swedish medals "Letteris et Artibus" and "Medaljen för tonkonstens främjande" which were personally presented to him by King Carl Gustaf. He he was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2019. The citation singled out his "role in the cultural exchange between Germany and Scandinavia, as well as for his multifaceted commitment to supporting young artists from Germany and Scandinavia."

Nils Landgren was born in 1956 in Degerfors, a small town in the rural Swedish region of Värmland, otherwise known for not much more than its ironworks and for the quality of its youth soccer talent promotion programme. He came to music at an early age thanks to his father who played jazz cornet. He started learning the drums at the age of six, and when he was thirteen he found the right instrument for him, the trombone. His basic tuition was classical – he studied from 1972 until 1978 in Karlstad and then in Arvika – but he soon acquired a new direction after meeting the Swedish folk-jazz pioneers Bengt-Arne Wallin and Eje Thelin. Moving to Stockholm, he soon became the go-to trombonist in the studios and local jazz bands. His first major success was a tour with Swedish pop singer Björn Skifs, who was also

successful in the USA, and as lead trombonist in Thad Jones' "Ball of Fire" project. These projects opened doors for him and he became sideman for world stars like ABBA (on "Voulez-Vous"), The Crusaders, Eddie Harris and Herbie Hancock.

In 1984 Landgren's debut album "Planet Rock" was released, setting his unique career as a band leader in motion. And the pace picked up substantially ten years later when Siggı Loch recognized his potential and he became an ACT artist. The quite radical idea was to make a distinctly European version of funk popular – at a time when it was deemed to be archetypically American – with the Nils Landgren Funk Unit. "Live in Stockholm" with star guest Maceo Parker caused a sensation in 1994, followed by "Paint It Blues" from 1996, a homage to Cannonball Adderley with Bernard Purdie, the Brecker Brothers, Till Brönner and Aírto Moreira as guests. The album reached No.2 in the jazz charts and was ranked in many countries among the most successful jazz albums of the year.

To date, Landgren has released eleven albums with the Funk Unit, discs with catchy titles like "Funk da World" or "License to Funk", including "Funk For Life", in which he supported a project to bring music to children and young people in Kenya, in cooperation with Médecins Sans Frontières. And when it came to "Funky ABBA", a homage to the most famous of all Swedish pop groups – Landgren himself had been in the studio with them decades before – ABBA mastermind Benny Andersson himself contributed to the project, and the CD stands out as one of the most successful jazz albums of the 2000s. In the group's most recent album, "Unbreakable" from 2017 – with regulars such as bassist and vocalist Magnum Coltrane Price, saxophonist Jonas Wall, guitarist Andy Pfeiler and drummer Robert Mehmet Ikiz, plus special guests such as Ray Parker Jr., Randy Brecker and Tim Hagans – the Funk Unit demonstrated that they have a capacity to get into a groove that is as potent as any funk band in the world.

However, alongside this role as a jazz-funk action hero, Landgren has also consistently nurtured a very different side: he is a highly convincing interpreter of ballads. His strong sense of melody has its roots in Swedish folk music. First there was "Gotland" with Tomasz Stańko (1996), and then two acclaimed duo albums with pianist Esbjörn Svensson, "Swedish Folk Modern" (1998) and "Layers of Light" (2001). More of his own ballad albums have followed: "The Moon, The Stars and You" (2011) and "Eternal Beauty" (2014), with a quartet of Michael Wollny, Johan Norberg, Lars Danielsson and Rasmus Kihlberg.

His most recent album, released in January 2020, is "Kristallen" in a duo with pianist Jan Lundgren. It also has lyrical chamber jazz feel, and continues the line of the duo albums he recorded with Esbjörn Svensson. In addition to his own compositions, Landgren interprets standards ranging from Hoagy Carmichael to Keith Jarrett and Abdullah Ibrahim to the Beatles. And then there is the "Christmas With My Friends" series. Fourteen years ago, Landgren went on a tour of Swedish and German churches with his closest companions for the first time. The idea was to celebrate the Christmas season in a very personal way, and all of the musicians involved brought their personal influence to bear on the project. Since then, this festive tradition has been renewed every two years. There have now been six albums in the "Christmas With My Friends" series, which many fans and critics have considered to be among the most beautiful Christmas albums ever made.

In addition to working with singers such as Jeanette Köhn, Ida Sand, Jessica Pilnäs, Sharon Dyll or Viktoria Tolstoy, Landgren himself is often called upon himself as a vocalist in his own right. After a long break from singing – in the mid-eighties he had performed 360 shows of the Swedish hit musical "SKÅL" – he increased this activity again with albums of ballads. For example, on "I Will Wait For You" (2003),

recorded together with Rigmor Gustafsson, one can admire his very distinctive, throaty, bright soul voice. "Creole Love Call" (2005) with Crusaders star Joe Sample and Ray Parker Jr. was a platinum-seller. Another prominent and consistent part of Landgren's work is his love of the big band. Between 1998 and 2001 he was a permanent member of the NDR Big Band, and thereafter an artistic advisor, and he has kept a close association with the band which still continues. From 2007 to 2015 he led the Bohuslän Big Band in Gothenburg, one of only two professional and permanent Swedish jazz orchestras.

To have an interest in pursuing new ventures is a part of Landgren's nature, and he has always found time for interesting and special projects. Whether in "Salzau Music on the Water" (2005) with his friends bassist Lars Danielsson and vibraphonist Christopher Dell, which was a high-point in of live improvisation as a 'visual sound field'; whether in the homage to "The Music of Cole Porter" with the Bohuslän Big Band (2011); whether in the joint choral projects with Jeanette Köhn, who delivered enchanting new interpretations of Bach, Handel and Purcell (2013 on "New Eyes on Baroque" with the Swedish Radio Choir) or the folk songs written and collected by Martin Luther (2017 on "New Eyes on Martin Luther" with the Boys' Choir Hannover); or with a "Tribute to Leonard Bernstein" with Manhattan Transfer star Janis Siegel and the Bochum Symphony Orchestra ("Some Other Time" 2016).

As recently as 2019 Landgren and his long-time companions Michael Wollny, Lars Danielsson and Wolfgang Haffner joined together to form the supergroup Four Wheel Drive, a band which interpreted songs by Sting and Genesis through a high-energy prism of jazz. They produced both a studio album and a live version, and these albums were fixtures at the top of the German jazz charts for several weeks, and the group's tour of major concert halls was completely sold out.

He has been the producer of most of his own albums, as has also had the role on albums by artists such as Torsten Goods, Mo' Blow, the brothers Julian & Roman Wasserfuhr and Wolfgang Haffner. He has also produced albums for ACT by singers Viktoria Tolstoy, Rigmor Gustafsson, Ida Sand and Jessica Pilnäs, whom he discovered and has been accompanying as a mentor ever since. And it is not only as a musician or producer that Landgren tries to advance jazz. He passes on his experience to students as professor in Hamburg and Shanghai. In 2001 and from 2008 to 2011 he was Artistic Director of Jazzfest Berlin. Since 2012 he has headed the JazzBaltica Festival, the event where his international career began several decades ago. In the region of Southern Sweden that he comes from, he and his wife, the actress Beatrice Järås, also organised the festival "Jazz under the starry sky" in Brantevik for several years.

Landgren has a formula for success which is essentially the same whatever he is doing: what he brings to the many and disparate musical situations is an open-mindedness which nonetheless has its roots in tradition. He is just as committed to the folk music of his homeland as he is to the canon and the traditions of European classical music, and to American jazz and soul. And one thing is certain: if European jazz ever runs the risk of becoming over-intellectualised, Landgren is there to give it the just the right dose of naturalness, strength and also to ensure that it appeals to the audience. In that sense, Nils Landgren is and will remain not just a central but a very necessary figure in European jazz.

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