



Prince of Trumpet

ITALIAN HORN MASTER **PAOLO FRESU** FINDS A ROYAL BLEND OF MYSTICISM AND POLITICS

Paolo Fresu has the air of a prince. Given to scarves, he dresses with casual cool and speaks English with a disarming Italian accent. Playing the trumpet is hard, but Fresu makes it look easy. He can lift a flugelhorn to his lips with one hand, appear to simply breathe into it, and fill a large auditorium with the golden aura of his sound.

But few princes work so hard. He plays around 200 concerts a year, records prolifically, leads over 20 different current bands, and operates both a festival (Time in Jazz, in his native Sardinia) and a record label (Tuk). Just one example of his work ethic is how he chose to celebrate his 50th birthday in 2011: He played 50 concerts in 50 days with 50 different ensembles. That the American and European jazz scenes are separate worlds is proven by Fresu's relative anonymity in the United States and his fame in Europe.

At the JazzMi festival in Milan in November 2018, Fresu appeared in a duo with bassist Lars Danielsson, playing music from their recent album on ACT, *summerwind*. They nearly filled the 2000-seat Conservatorio di Milano. Interviewed before the soundcheck, Fresu spoke of beginnings: "I am from a small village, Berchidda, in the northeast of Sardinia. My family was poor. My father was a farmer. Everything started for

me with the 'banda,' the local marching band. For many Italian players, the 'banda' is the first important school. We made processions in the village. The world changed for me when someone in the band gave me a cassette of *Miles Davis in Europe*, with 'Autumn Leaves.' I spent a week with it, trying to find the melody. I came out knowing I wanted to play in this completely open way. Then I heard Chet Baker."

Miles and Chet are present in Fresu's long soulful calls (sometimes made longer by his use of electronic effects) and his nocturnal atmospheres. But his sound has its own richness and luster. He says, "My idea is, if you are always yourself with the sound, you can fit anywhere." He has fit into an enormous variety of settings, from edgy small groups like Carla Bley's Lost Chords to chamber orchestras to string quartets to all those bands of his own, from his Angel Quartet to his Devil Quartet. Yet within the restless curiosity of his career, there has been continuity. The first group he ever led, the Paolo Fresu Quintet, is still together with the same personnel. They put out their first record, *Ostinato*, in 1984, and 30 years later released *j30!*

He is especially strong in duos, where his lines, with their clarity and spare lyricism, are vivid in open space. His duo

partners have included Ralph Towner, Uri Caine, Richard Galliano, and bandoneon player Daniele di Bonaventura. At JazzMi, with only Danielsson on bass beside him, Fresu's ideas were both fresh and hauntingly familiar, like beauty you barely remembered from somewhere in your life. On muted trumpet, Fresu went way back in his own life and played "Autumn Leaves," or rather whispered it into the hall. (The song is on *summerwind*.)

His newest album, *Danse Mémoire*, *Danse*, on his Tuk label, requires him to fit into yet another unique musical environment. His collaborators are di Bonaventura and a vocal ensemble singing in Corsican. The music sounds spiritual, but liner notes reveal a political component. The album "celebrates the commitment and sacrifice" of two communist activists, Aimé Césaire of Martinique and Jean Nicoli of Corsica, who fought fascism and colonialism in the 1940s. Fresu, like many jazz musicians today, is sincere in his sociopolitical engagement. He says, "It is important to use the emotion of music to speak truth to the people about our present moment, to spread compassion."

By his reckoning, he plays four distinct instruments: trumpet, flugelhorn, muted trumpet ("where you have to use a different respiration"), and electronics. He is not a major stylistic innovator except on that fourth instrument, where he has brought new possibilities and perspectives into jazz. He uses, selectively, a t.c. electronic effects unit and "one from the past" by DigiTech. Paradoxically, he sees this equipment as a way to go back in time: "Electronics for me is a kind of mystic idea. The sound is of the East, or Africa. I change presets with my hand, no pedals. Nothing is decided before. It's like instant composition."

Fresu played twice in Milan, once with Danielsson and once in a Pentecostal church with a sonorous classical/jazz ensemble called Lumina. (Fresu produced their stunning recent album on Tuk.) In both concerts, he sometimes played one note, then, by touching a preset, created a trumpet choir. Sometimes he created a whole synthesized orchestra, a caravan winding its way through the village, a procession over which he presided like a prince. **THOMAS CONRAD**