

Trio Elf Triple Essence

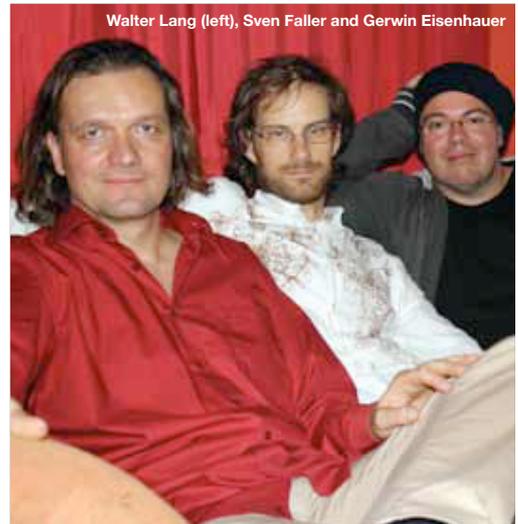
Trio Elf drummer Gerwin Eisenhauer remembers it vividly: “When the kids realized they were actually dancing to a live band, they freaked out!” Eisenhauer had been asked to play along with DJs at drum’n’bass raves in Germany. He had developed a way, as he noted, “to translate programmed and sampled rhythms to the drumset.” At one point, he brought along his musical cohorts, pianist Walter Lang and bassist Sven Faller. And that was the beginning of Trio Elf. With a name derived by combining the first letter of the surname of each member, the group extends and expands the notion of the traditional jazz piano trio.

The players have made their way in the jazz world and honed their chops by working in a variety of settings. Lang has studied at Berklee College of Music, collaborated with Lee Konitz and James Moody and made six albums as a leader. Faller graduated from Mannes College in New York and has worked with Jane Monheit, Charlie Mariano, Bobby Watson and the New York Philharmonic. Eisenhauer graduated from the Drummers’ Collective, has published a drum’n’bass workbook and was part of a Frank Sinatra tribute band.

Based in Germany’s Bavaria region, Trio Elf combines melodic lyricism, deft rhythmic expression and electronic technology. “Jazz musicians have always used known melodies to improvise on,” said Lang. “In that respect we are in the tradition. To get our individual sound, we modify the material greatly without sacrificing the essence of the music.”

Another vital part of the group’s dynamic comes from their sound engineer, Mario Sütel. “Mario surprises us with a different drum sound for every piece, which makes Gerwin alter his beats all the time,” said Faller. “We have these three layers: Gerwin’s virtuoso beats with a lot of turns and stops, Walter’s wide melodic and lyrical phrases, which open a lot of space, and my melodic counterpoint to his melodies and connection to Gerwin’s beats on the bottom.” Sütel also often spontaneously cuts loops out of the flow of improvisation, thus offering the band what they think of as a “sampled doppelgänger.”

The group came to the attention of Enja Records’ Matthias Winckelmann in 2006. “I thought this was something truly new,” said Winckelmann. “I’ve always loved the piano trio as a format, and I thought these guys really changed it around and managed to sound both



old and new at the same time.”

Elf’s first album for the label was simply called *Elf* and was released in 2006. What a mix of source material it was—Richard James (or his pseudonym Aphex Twin), Thelonious Monk’s “Off Minor,” Paul Desmond’s iconic “Take Five” (done here in 10), two by Milton Nascimento (a favorite of all three members) and originals by Lang and Faller. Additionally, the album included Lang’s arrangement of a traditional Korean song.

Trio Elf uses the repertoire of jazz history but also finds bases for inspired improvisation in varied popular material. All the instruments are altered in their sounds at times but never for wacky effects. Their second Enja album, *746*, has a hypnotic and engaging version of a tune by the band that Faller calls “our favorite German cultural export.” That would be Kraftwerk, and the tune is “The Man-Machine.” Everyone wins here—the original tune is recognizable and powerfully revealed, the drumming is deft and enthralling, yet the trio functions like an experienced, well-oiled jazz combo.

Trio Elf tours regularly, and their sonic colors work just as well on stage as in the recording studio. They played at New York’s Zinc Bar in May to promote their latest Enja release, *Elftand*, which features their old friend Nascimento on two of his classics, “Ponta de Areia” and “Anima.” At the Zinc Bar, the band’s compadre Beat Kaestli took the Portuguese-lyric vocal on “Ponta” and offered a shimmering complement to the textured arrangement. The CD also features an impressionistic tribute to Antonio Carlos Jobim and a guest performance from Brazilian percussionist Marco Lobo. Trio Elf continues its signature exploration of the best of what’s out there in the world of sound.

—Donald Elfman