

The Americanization of an artist

Wim Wenders: In and out of Hollywood

Howard Goldstein
The tall, brooding man slouched in the chair appears uncomfortable, but it is difficult to be sure. Ambiguity, however, is nothing new to Wim Wenders.

Born in West Germany, just months after the second world war, he was deprived of any German upbringing, making do instead, on a diet of pinball, rock and roll and American movies.

At 37, Wim Wenders has every right to be considered one of the world's best filmmakers. His work, which includes ten feature films has received international critical praise.

It appears Wim Wenders ought to be on the verge of stardom; he isn't.

Hammett is Wender's first film for an American company. He worked with Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope Studio. And though this entrance into the U.S. market should be enough to secure the recognition the director deserves, the opposite appears to be happening.

With most critics viewing *Hammett* as a simple detective story, the reviews have been quite negative. One well-known Toronto critic called it, "excessive aesthetic masturbation." And *Excalibur's* Marshall Golden wrote, "Not even Bogart could have solved the puzzle of paying five dollars to see this film."

As difficult as it was, *Excalibur*

managed to get some comment from the introspective director. Responding to the question of misinterpretation, Wenders said: "We agreed on that completely from the beginning to the end, Coppola and I that it was not a biography, and on the other hand it was not a detective story; it was going to be a mixture. Our main interest was always meant to be a biography of his imagination. I read all the other mystery writers; I always come back to Hammett as the one—he was the



master. The movie tells everything that I wanted it to tell and it's pretty tight. It was in between a detective story and a biography and that is a film that has never been done before."

It might seem odd that a German director would be so dedicated to filming a homage to an American tradition (ironically, he turned down a chance to remake the German classic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*). "It's hard to imagine here, what it meant to grow up in post war Germany where people avoided like hell anything referring to their own history. It was as if it was a country that never had any history. Images and stories that I grew up with were imported and I was glad that they were imported."

"Besides", he added, "the American cinema has always been my guide. My whole education has been the American cinema, and to work in Hollywood is a great myth in filmmaking, especially for one like me who found all of his heroes and all of the directors that I've learned from had either gone to hollywood and kept on working there, as Fritz Lang, or had been American. To shoot there in the tradition that I had so much learned from—in the tradition of a hired director who worked for a studio and a producer; and the tradition that really produced all these films that I had been referring to all the time."

Wenders commented upon the difference between American and European film: "The big difference is how spontaneous you can be, and obviously the one big difference between American and European filmmaking is the notion of script and pre-production. So that most of the creative work is done before the first day of shooting. The film is very much completely previsualized. This is something which is contrary to the other films I've done. The European idea is that the film happens during shooting."

Talking with Wim Wenders you are immediately impressed by the caution with which he speaks. Seldom does he talk more than a couple of minutes without taking a few moments to stare at the floor, and contemplate. This is not a strong, assertive, cocky man.

After the interview is over, he appears relieved. On the way out, a woman stops him to ask about the ending of his most-seen film *The American Friend*. "What happens to Hopper (in reference to Denis Hopper)," she asks. "What do you see?" he replies. "Does he kill himself?" she wants to know.

"What you see is what you get." responds Wenders with a big smile. The tongue-in-cheek American cliché uttered with a faint German accent is fitting; epitomizes all of Wenders work. As does the shyness with which it was spoken. For

Wenders knows that appearances are often deceiving. It is around this ambiguity that he builds his films.

What you see then is not what you get, that is the mark of a Wenders film; in fact, what you get is a whole lot more.

EXTRACKS

Jazz Giant

American Classic -- Dexter Gordon (WEA/Musician)

By Steven Hacker

The title of this album couldn't be more appropriate. From the vintage automobile on the cover, the guest appearance of organist Shirley Scott, the compositions by Jay McShann and Hoagy Carmichael, right down to the man himself, Dexter Gordon. This is pure jazz, America's art form.

For his first outing for the new Musician jazz label, Gordon has given us two records in one. Side One is highlighted by the addition of Shirley Scott and saxophonist Grover Washington Jr. Scott, who has been virtually invisible since the days when the organ was in vogue in the jazz world, giving this session that unmistakable bluesy sixties sound. The contribution of Grover Washington Jr., making a rare appearance on a straight jazz date, is relatively insignificant. His soprano sax is rather dominated by Gordon and Scott.

Side two is a more typical Dexter Gordon recording. He is joined by his regular sidemen including the brilliant pianist, Kirk Lightsey, for an original hard blowing number, Stickey Wicket, and a lovely ballad, Skylark. Dexter Gordon proves handily that he is equally adept at both forms.

This latest in a string of fine albums by the giant is rounded out by a brief interview. The fledgling Musician label deserves praise for its efforts to give the listener a bit more insight into the artists musical conception. Unfortunately this is a poorly recorded, superficial interview that would be better left to the album liner notes.

Undeserved Anonymity

Ondas -- Mike Nock (EM)

Howard Goldstein

Like many a talented jazz musician, Mike Nock has enjoyed a substantial career (spanning more than twenty years) without anybody really noticing. A long time sideman of Yusef Lateef in the 60's, Nock has spent his latter years giving solo performances at jazz festivals around the world.

Hopefully, the release of this, his first album for the popular German-based ECM label, will end this anonymity.

Aided by American Eddie Gomez on bass and the Norwegian Jon Christensen on drums, the self-taught New Zealand pianist has turned out a record that is more than just another "piano-trio album". Unlike those albums which present perfunctory performances of worn-out standards, *Ondas* features five new original pieces by Nock.

What is interesting about these compositions is the large degree to which they utilize solo space in their execution; most memorable is the crispness of Christensen's cymbals and the tone of Gomez's steady bass line (particularly on the album's 16-minute first cut, "Forgotten Love").

This ensemble approach to the creation of music is often overlooked in jazz. To Nock's credit, he makes it the central focus of *Ondas* and what results is some of the most sympathetic group playing you are likely to hear.

For those who think Keith Jarrett is the beginning and the end of music, here is a record of delicate beauty to prove otherwise.

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