

Jan Garbarek:

weaver of (jazz) dreams

Michael Tucker on the abiding popularity of Norway's master of valley jazz



'A lot of the time, jazz has meant: no barriers.' – Sonny Rollins

In late November 2004 the Jan Garbarek Group played in Brussels, winding up their lengthy, thirty-nine-dates tour of Europe with the last of many sold-out concerts. Part of the tour included a range of concerts in Britain, with a headline closing appearance at the London Jazz Festival, broadcast soon afterwards on Fiona Talkington's Late Night Junction slot on BBC3. I caught the group at Brighton's Dome Theatre. The two-hour-plus, wide-ranging set had changed significantly since the last couple of times I had heard the quartet at the Bergen Jazz Festival in May 2002 and at Salisbury Cathedral a year later. Towards the end of the performance, some tough and lengthy passages of blues-inflected tenor testifying from Garbarek offered welcome complementary contrast to some typical moments of rubato soprano tenderness, before the beautifully modulated drama of the *Hasta Siempre* encore (an old favourite from the 1970s) left a good many in the audience baying for yet more.

Over the past fifteen years the group – which besides saxophonist and flautist Garbarek features German keyboardist Rainer Brüninghaus, his compatriot the electric bassist Eberhard Weber, and the Danish drummer and percussionist Marilyn Mazur – has established the sort of reputation that enables it to fill substantial concert halls, year after year. For a

promoter, the Jan Garbarek Group is probably the only European jazz group working today which offers such a bankable guarantee. Naturally, this has led certain members of the jazz police to ask whether or not what the Jan Garbarek Group plays today can be called jazz any more. Should jazz music really be so popular? And should it be presented, as it is with this group, with a special stage rig and lighting show? Do all such factors not mean that the essential spontaneity of jazz has been abandoned for the polished slickness of the 'sold-out' – indeed, 'show-biz' – spectacle?

Similar questions have been raised by some critics about Garbarek's latest solo album *In Praise of Dreams*, the first release under his own name since the 1998 double CD *Rites*. Co-produced with long-time friend and producer Manfred Eicher and released on the latter's Munich-based ECM label, the new disc has sold in gold-plated bucketfuls and been nominated for a Grammy. Within its overall unity of mood, for me the record contains many truly arresting features, such as the modulation from the initial soprano-led 'As seen from above' to the later, searing passages of declamation in this opening piece, the electronic textures and folkish echoing of lines on the title track and the granite-like authority of the austere tenor meditations of 'One goes there alone', a classic example of Garbarek's