

## Phronesis live review, The Sage Gateshead Jazz Journal 2014

Fred Grand catches Phronesis on tour at the Sage Gateshead, with drummer Anton Eger letting loose in a set packed with the band's characteristic vigour

Out on the road to plug their recent album *Life To Everything (Edition)*, Phronesis have a burgeoning worldwide reputation based in no small part on their electrifying live performances. Following rave write-ups in the mainstream and specialist presses I'd fully expected a sell-out crowd, but was as surprised as I was disappointed by the relatively sparse audience walk-up on the night.

The band used the same "in the round" format as the Cockpit Theatre shows which spawned the new album, and the visual cues and on-stage camaraderie which tend to be lost with a conventional stage set-up were brought within touching distance. It was a rare glimpse into the anatomy of a live performance, and those amongst Tyneside's normally reliable jazz public who stayed away missed a real treat.

Rather than following a prescribed set-list the trio were more inclined to follow their moods, though they still managed to cover the majority of the pieces on the album.

From my vantage point I had a birds-eye view of drummer Anton Eger, and I'd wager that it was the best seat in the house. His brilliantly theatrical solos consistently drew the largest ovations of the evening. Splitting beats into improbable but mathematically precise fractions, he had a volcanic early solo on *Wings 2 The Mind* which proved to be a mere loosener. Limbs, sticks and an entire torso flew in every direction as the young Swede took the limelight on *Behind Bars*, but even when not soloing his unpredictable accents added rich detail. It's certainly no coincidence that the pre-publicity video teasers for the new album were built around his fascinating rhythms, and for once I'd beg to differ with Nate Chinen, whose New York Times review of the trio's show last July at NYC's Jazz Standard observed that Phronesis are manifestly a "bassist's band".

All of the "staccato tension" that Chinen had heard that night was still very much in evidence, however, and energy levels scarcely wavered. On *Herne Hill*, which brought the first set to an incident-packed close, the trio toyed with the elastic time signature and simply stretched it inside out. Bassist Jasper Høiby is undoubtedly a towering presence in the group and to a large extent Phronesis remains his vehicle, but hierarchies are too blurred to fit the conventional leader-sidemen paradigm. In a shorter second set he hit the ground running with the tricky serpentine bass-line of *Urban Control*, and his often amusing announcements between songs kept the audience on their mettle.

Neame can often appear as the straight guy holding the line amidst the unfolding drama, and his elegant lines firmly root the trio in jazz's post-bop tradition. Cutting through the angular groove of the opening *Deep Space Dance* like a scalpel, his thoughtfully constructed solo illuminated the piece's inner melodies with all the sprightliness of vintage Corea. It was Corea's more abstract muse which surfaced on the rubato intro to *Nine Lives*, though the piece soon cohered around another precision groove.

This had been a more relaxed affair than last year's Cockpit residency where the group had played as if their lives depended on every note, but it was no less engrossing. Whilst Avishai Cohen's groups from the turn of the millennium are an obvious antecedent, their almost garage band-like energy and zeal speaks plainly to a wider audience. I can think of few groups in contemporary jazz who revel in the joy of making music like Phronesis, and even fewer who do it with so much panache.