

# Umlaut Records

by Ken Waxman

For Swedes the umlaut, or two dots over common vowels, transforms one sound into another. The transformative concept appealed to Swedish-born, Berlin-based bassist Joel Grip so much that when he founded a record label he decided to adopt Umlaut as its name. Since 2004, Umlaut, now a musical collective with members in Sweden, Germany and France, has released 25 productions. The discs feature a cross-section of young improvisers, including Grip, trumpeters Axel Dörner and Niklas Barnö, saxophonist Pierre-Antoine Badaroux and pianist Alexander Zethson plus established musicians like drummer Sven-Åke Johansson.

Initially, Grip, who describes himself as Umlaut's "founding father" started the label and began producing concerts "as soon as I realized that no concerts or CD productions would come to me sitting at home waiting for the phone to ring." Until around 2008 he administered Umlaut by himself while organizing tours and festivals. "Umlaut evolved from being a one-man job to a collective one when the one man - me - realized that it was too much job for one man, especially when this one man is foremost a musician," he notes. Luckily, by that time he had met other similarly committed musicians in Paris including Badaroux and pianist Eve Risser and saxophonist Pierre Borel in Berlin, who joined forces with him and Sweden's Barnö. Today 11 musicians are involved.

"Each entity works independently on artistic and creative issues," he elaborates. "We coordinate and share the administrative workload, such as distribution, press/media contacts, online sales, website, etc. For example: when a record is released in Sweden, the collectives in France and Germany make sure it's covered in the media and distributed in their territories and vice versa. The responsibilities among us are constantly changing. One day you're the head producer, the next day you're cleaning the toilet at the concert."

Despite the number of people involved, everyone has the same power and decisions are made on democratic principles. It's then up to the producer of the decided-upon project to procure funds. Sometimes the money comes from musicians' own pockets or from concert or CD sales; just as frequently some sort of state association, such as the Swedish National Council of Cultural affairs, helps. About 1,000 CDs are pressed and at this point Corpulent's *Wolfwalk* and Donkey Monkey's *Quature* have already sold out. Any profits made are shared among the participants.

Dörner, featured on two Umlaut CDs, became involved when, after playing a Paris concert, he recorded a date with the Peeping Tom band. "What I like about the experience was that everything was on a high professional and technical level and realized in a very efficient way," he recalls. "The record came out shortly after it was recorded and it sounded good - we also communicated about the mix - and it had a very tasteful cover and design. Joel and the other members do a good job organizing small festivals around the label and I think this is very clever. If, as a label, you

organize a festival and you later want to release music from the concerts, you already have publicity from the festival and just have costs of the CD cover and pressing." Explains Grip: "One big part of Umlaut's activity is getting live music heard. In both Berlin and Paris we organize regular concert series. In Sweden it's more irregular. Since we're all active musicians we're constantly looking for new possibilities. I've been organizing tours, festivals and concerts for Umlaut musicians as well as non-affiliated artists during the last 10 years. I especially like to take improvised music to places where it's not usually heard."

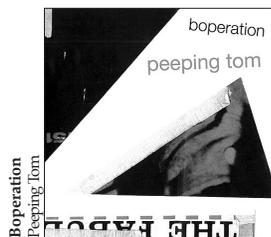
With this emphasis on in-person merchandizing, although some Umlaut discs are available for download, those sales don't contribute much to the bottom line. Any LPs are also in that format purely for artistic reasons. "I wanted to make a completely analog recording to get as close as possible to the natural sound of the bass," explains Grip about *Pickelhaube*, his solo LP. "Also, I like the restrictions applied on an analog recording; there are time limits; there's an end to it. Sometimes in the digital world, the feeling of 'no-end' reduces creativity."

Some of Umlaut's artists are familiar with LPs, having begun playing when the 12-inch format was the only medium. Why does Grip figure established figures want Umlaut releases? "This collaboration with the older guys took shape out of a mutual interest in learning from each other and playing together. What makes them great is that they continuously want to develop themselves and their music. I don't think they see us as young and un-established, just as we don't

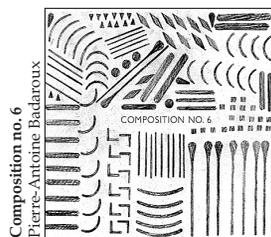
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Mistluren  
Je Suis!



Boperation  
Peeping Tom



Composition no. 6  
Pierre-Antoine Badaroux



1974-2004  
Wallin/Johansson



Pickelhaube  
Joel Grip

## LISTEN UP!

**JAMISON ROSS**, winner of the 2012 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Drum Competition is a native of Jacksonville, Florida. He is a graduate of The Florida State University, where he received a Bachelors of Music in Jazz Studies. Ross currently resides in New Orleans, Louisiana where he is pursuing his Masters of Music in Jazz Studies.

**Teachers:** Leon Anderson, Marcus Roberts, Jason Marsalis.

**Influences:** Billy Higgins, Frankie Dunlop, Shannon Powell.

**Current Projects:** This year I will be creating a joyful musical sound that will touch the hearts and souls of the world. With a recording contract with Concord Jazz, I will be releasing my debut album in January 2014. This project will embody the sound of great original compositions performed by world-class musicians, but most importantly it will serve as an experience of joy and soul.

**By Day:** Family, friends, gym, fun.

**I knew I wanted to be a musician when...** I realized that music chose me.

**Dream Band:** This is tough... Nate Werth (percussion), Dayve Stewart (tenor and alto saxophone and EWI), Rick Lollar and Kurt Rosenwinkel (guitars), Daryl Hall

(bass) and Eddie Brown (piano/keyboards).

**Did you know?** I also won awards for my vocal ability.

For more information, visit [jamisonrossmusic.com](http://jamisonrossmusic.com). Ross is at Tribeca Performing Arts Center Feb. 2nd as part of *Monk in Motion*. See Calendar.



Jamison Ross



Colin Stranahan

Born in Denver, CO and son of a jazz educator, drummer **COLIN STRANAHAN** has always been surrounded by music. By his teenage years he was already actively working on the local Denver scene and had recorded two records as a leader (*Dreams Untold* [Capri, 2004] and *Transformation* [Capri, 2006]). After receiving the prestigious NFAA Presidential Scholar in the Arts Award in 2005, he studied in California for one year as a Brubeck Institute fellow. Shortly thereafter he attended the college program at Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. Stranahan was 2nd runner-up in the 2012 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Drum Competition.

**Teachers:** Paul Romaine, Ari Hoenig, Nasheet Waits, Terri Lyne Carrington, Brian Blade, Lewis Nash, Herlin Riley, Rudy Royston.

**Influences:** Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, Paul Motian, Jeff Ballard, Marcus Gilmore, Kurt Rosenwinkel, The Beatles.

**Current Projects:** Kurt Rosenwinkel Trio; Jonathan Kreisberg Quartet/Trio; Stranahan/Zaleski/Rosato; Noah Preminger Quartet; Lagarto; Zodiac Ensemble.

**By Day:** I am a musician...I am always listening, writing or practicing something. Of course I take time away for films, food or whatever else, but MUSIC!

**I knew I wanted to be a musician when...** I got into the Denver School of the Arts. I saw many different artists around me, not just musicians but all kinds of artists that were passionate in the same way that I was.

**Dream Band:** My current band but also lots of people I dreamed of playing with I have had the honor to: Fred Hersch, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and many more.

**Did you know?** I have been told I am very good at impressions of people.

For more information, visit [stranahanzaleskirosato.com](http://stranahanzaleskirosato.com). Stranahan is at Tribeca Performing Arts Center Feb. 16th as part of *Monk in Motion*. See Calendar.



## MAGIC BEANS

SSC 1338 / in Stores FEBRUARY 26

**BENNY GREEN** piano  
**PETER WASHINGTON** bass  
**KENNY WASHINGTON** drums

For this Sunnyside release, *Magic Beans*, Green crafted ten new pieces performed by his working trio. Remarkably, this release marks Benny's first self-produced trio recording of all original compositions in a career that spans decades: notably as a star sideman with Betty Carter, Art Blakey, Freddie Hubbard, and Ray Brown and culminating in over 20 years as a leader himself.

While having favored to sprinkle his recordings with standards, Benny Green has always been a composer, contributing new music to all of his leader dates, as well as records by Blakey, Hubbard, and Brown. However, in 2012, Benny experienced what could only be characterized as a compositional break-through—prolifically writing all the tunes recorded on *Magic Beans* in what was, seemingly, one afternoon. Benny then decided to embark on the recording of this album with his trusted Messenger mates the brilliant Peter Washington on bass, and the legendary Kenny Washington on drums. Thus, *Magic Beans* took root.

Appearing at JAZZ STANDARD  
 February 21, 22, 23 & 24



www.sunnysiderecords.com



Sunnyside

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**CP:** Because it was a challenge to try and figure out how to make it work. I didn't really know how it would work. I could imagine a sound but it wasn't exactly like anything that I had heard. And it just kinda had to happen by osmosis. Obviously, I could write music that would maybe help steer it in that direction, but a lot of it was just playing the music night after night. And to me, it feels like it really grew. It really changed as we got focused into what it was. Just because everybody kind of figured, myself included, "What do I do in this situation? What do I hear a saxophone doing?"

And I'm still trying to figure that out sometimes, when we do gigs. It just feels a little bit uncharted, in a way that I liked because it forces me to not be comfortable and to try and build something new. That was always the attraction of it. And it still is. I'm hoping that it's not over. I want to continue doing work with that group.

**TNYCJR:** *The Sirens* was inspired by the Greek poet Homer's epic *The Odyssey*. How did you translate those themes into music?

**CP:** It was really just first impressions. I didn't read the book thinking, "I'm gonna write some music about it." I just wanted to read it again. There have been a few recent projects that I've done where I did something that was kind of new, which was thinking of a story and then writing the music. It kind of helped me get out of my own way. Like, thinking from a mood. That it's a song about something or a musical portrait of something.

So I finished reading the book and I thought, "Wow, it's so great, so evocative, let me just write different episodes." And I wrote it all very quickly, as I recall, within a couple of weeks. Because there's not a whole lot of written material. It's more how we use it. That was the point. And hopefully the written material that's there is what's vital to create that mood. That was how I approached it. I had this more spacious sound in mind. And that seemed to be a good catalyst to get myself to write that way.

**TNYCJR:** You don't have two pianos on every track.

**CP:** No, it's only on four tunes. And David [Virelles] is never playing straight piano. The piano was prepared - paper clips and stuff like that - to have a more percussive thing. I was thinking, like, kalimba. And then the sound of the celeste. And the harmonium is kind of a key part, like on "The Sirens". The way the harmonium has a droney kind of sound. I really didn't hear an electric sound in there, but I wanted something else. Some other change of texture. And also, we had done some gigs and I had originally thought of the band with Craig [Taborn], because I've known him for so long and I'm such a fan. He wasn't able to make the first gig and I called David. And he did such a great job, I really wanted him in there. To me, it really does change the sound of the record. That there's this other element in there that's a little hard to pin down. ❖

For more information, visit [chrispottermusic.com](http://chrispottermusic.com). Potter is at Village Vanguard Feb. 5th-10th. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Chris Potter Quartet - *Sundiata* (Criss Cross, 1993)
- Chris Potter - *Moving In* (Concord, 1996)
- Dave Douglas - *Leap of Faith/Magic Triangle* (Arabesque-Green Leaf Music, 1997-98)
- Dave Holland Quintet - *Extended Play* (*Live at Birdland*) (ECM, 2001)
- Chris Potter 10 - *Song for Anyone* (Sunnyside, 2006)
- Chris Potter - *The Sirens* (ECM, 2011)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

see them as old and established. We simply like each other's way of working and want to create something together. I think they will continue to put out discs on Umlaut because of a shared desire to develop, experiment and explore live and recorded music."

Johansson, whose recording history goes back to Peter Brötzmann's 1967 album *For Adolphe Sax* (itself on a musician-run label) concurs. "It seems that most of my preferences and my aesthetics correspond to those of a lot of the younger players," he notes "I've been a friend of Joel for some time and we play in different groups together. He's interested in new recorded music as well as historically important ones and we plan to bring out more new and historical music together, such as my cooperation with Bengt Nordström."

In fact Umlaut's most spectacular future release will be a boxed set of discs from 1970, 1977 and 1982 by Swedish alto saxophonist/producer Bengt 'Frippe' Nordström with pianist Alexander von Schlippenbach and Johansson. Says Grip: "Many American free jazz fans don't know Nordström's great work, which, among other things, resulted in Albert Ayler's first released recording [on Nordström's Bird Note imprint]. 'Frippe' became an underground figure, but always showed up at concerts with his horn like Ayler, pushing music to its outer limits - or to its most inner howl."

That sort of commitment can be linked to the free-music idealism of Umlaut as well. "Umlaut isn't owned by anyone but itself and the music it creates," says Grip. "Umlaut is a voice by itself, but it listens and reacts to the voices of the collective's members." ❖

For more information, visit [umlautrecords.com](http://umlautrecords.com)

Lexington Avenue  
at 54th Street  
New York City  
[www.saintpeters.org](http://www.saintpeters.org)

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10 Blue Pipa Trio

17 Carol Morgan Quartet  
featuring Joel Frahm

24 James Weidman Group

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**JAZZ FOR ALL**

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Joseph Brent, mandolin

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6 Hilary Kole, singer/pianist

13 Ash Wednesday — No Concert

20 Sheila Jordan, singer  
Cameron Brown, bass

28 Aaron Graves, piano