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Enjoy Jazz Festival: Heidelberg / Mannheim / Ludwigshafen, Germany, October 30–November 7, 2012

by [JOHN KELMAN](#), Published: November 26, 2012

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October 31: Manfred Bründl Silent Bass

One of the biggest pleasures of attending a festival is the opportunity to find out about an artist who may have been around for awhile, but who's yet to come onto the personal radar. Bassist [Manfred Bründl](#) may be less known than he should across the ocean in North America, but clearly he's garnering attention in Germany. He has, in fact, just won the *SWR Jazzpreis 2012*, and his performance at Ludwigshafen's *dasHaus* was both an award celebration and a chance to hear just why Südwestrundfunk (SWR)—Germany's southwestern public radio station and an Enjoy Jazz sponsor—chose Bründl for the prize, which comes with a 15,000 Euro award attached to it. Performing music from *Tip of the Tongue* (Laika, 2011), his most recent recording with his Silent Bass quartet, also including pianist Rainer Böhm, saxophonist Hugo Read and drummer Jonas Burgwinkel, Bründl paid tribute to Peter Trunk, a fellow bassist (and cellist) who, dying in 1973 at the too-young age of 37, has been largely forgotten in the history of jazz, despite a résumé that included work with everyone from saxophonist [Stan Getz](#) to trombonist [Albert Mangelsdorff](#).



Bründl doesn't pay tribute by recording any music by Trunk—the entire album is self-penned—but *Tip of the Tongue* is the result of considerable investigation into the late bassist's work; if his

Enjoy Jazz performance was any indication, it's a case of lessons learned, to be sure, but all subsumed into Bründl's own inimitable style as a composer, bassist and bandleader. The band has been around since 2006, but only Read remains from that initial incarnation, with the younger Böhm and Burgwinkel more recent recruits, though it was hard to tell, so deep was the level of communication and so profound the chemistry.

Perhaps the most intriguing thing about Bründl's performance—beyond the unquestionably high level at which he and his band operated—was how songs expanded considerably in concert were, in fact, mere miniatures on the recording. "Flashbacks," for example, is a mere minute and fourteen seconds on record; live, it was stretched beyond its through-composed form to allow the band considerable freedom around which to maneuver. Bründl's opening solo to "Page 59," a more energetic track where Burgwinkel—on fire for most of the set, while still remaining as finessed and nuanced as Bründl's music sometimes demanded—was particularly impressive. A fountain of ideas, but never without ears wide open to the rest of the group, Burgwinkel is clearly someone to watch.

As are Böhm, a player capable of hard-edged attacks and delicate phrasing, all within a context of focused invention, and Read, whose tart alto was a perfect foil for Bründl's warmer, more round-toned bass. And whether he was delivering lithe pizzicato lines, ethereal harmonics or deeper arco, Bründl demonstrated, once more, that just when it seems as though you're getting familiar with a scene, out comes a new player, previously unheard, to make it clear that there aren't just great players out there, but great conceptualists as well.

November 1: Michael Wollny's [em]

Since first appearing on the scene with the cryptically titled *Call it [em]* (ACT, 2005), German pianist [Michael Wollny](#) and his [em] trio have—not unlike sadly disbanded label mates [Esbjörn Svensson Trio](#) (e.s.t.)—forged a reputation and burgeoning career that's been on a solid upward trajectory. With e.s.t. gone, ACT seems to be positioning [em] as the next big thing, and based on the packed house at Mannheim's Alte Feuerwache, it seems to be working. The beyond enthusiastic response for Wollny, bassist Eva Kruse and drummer Eric Schaefer—and the number of people buying multiple copies of the group's now-five releases, including the most recent *Wasted & Wanted* (ACT, 2012), after the show—certainly suggests a group whose star is on the rise.



But beyond two similarities—that [em] has become these three musicians' primary focus (not quite like, but close to e.s.t.'s rock band aesthetic, where it was the trio's *only* focus) and that it approaches the traditional piano trio format with a mix of influences that include plenty of rock energy and attitude—[em] should not be compared tightly to the Swedish group; if anything, [em] feels a little more connected to [The Bad Plus](#) than e.s.t., and being touted as "the next e.s.t." could actually hurt the trio.

And that would be a shame. Performing many of *Wasted & Wanted's* tracks, along with selections from its previous releases, [em] proved it had its own approach, and if Wollny has virtuosic tendencies, they're less overtly connected to European classicism than the late Svensson (who favored fugue-like counterpoint to Wollny's more direct style), though that's not to suggest the music has any stronger link to the American jazz tradition either. Still, the two pianists clearly share pianist [Keith Jarrett](#) as a nexus, though [em] (and Wollny in particular) sounds nothing like the stalwart ECM pianist, especially on songs like the thundering, four-on-the-floor rock pulse of *Wasted & Wanted's* title track—the first of three encores, from an audience that was simply unprepared to let the group go, even after two largely unrelenting sets. Opening with "Whiteout," the album's closing track, however, [em] took a refreshingly different way in, using a calmer rubato tone poem that seemed intended to bring the audience's pre-show energy down and refocus it more intently and intensely on the stage before Wollny, Kruse and Schaeffer turned more intense with the episodic "Phlegma Phighter," first heard on *II* (ACT, 2006).

As impressive as Wollny was—head usually down, but still animated and somehow charismatic, spending plenty of time inside the box, muting strings, strumming them and employing a wine glass as a preparation—the rest of the trio was no less worthy of attention. Kruse's tone was deep and grounding, but in moments where she was a melodic foil for Wollny, as well as her few rare solo spots, she demonstrated impeccable timing and taste. Schaeffer was even more impressive, a relaxed player capable of turning up the heat for those around him, but equally ready to stop on a dime and bring the dynamics to a whisper; [em]'s music was often characterized by metric and temporal shifts, and the trio's effortless navigation spoke clearly of a group of players racking up plenty of road time together.

If [em] tends to downplay Wollny's jazz cred, his ongoing work with near-octogenarian

saxophonist Heinz Sauer, heard to great effect on the 2008 ACT compilation *The Journey*, should put any such suggestions to rest. And if [em] is less inclined to use electronics than e.s.t., its contemporary and, at times, unrelenting energy made for a show suggesting that, if the trio can find proper representation in North America, it might be able to begin building a similar reputation there.

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