

Fiddle player Nils Økland was a featured artist at the 2016 Vossa Jazz Festival.

ODIN DRØNEN/VOSSA JAZZ



## NILS ØKLAND

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### *Nordic Tradition Expanded*

One of the cherished traditions of the venerable Vossa Jazz Festival goes by the title “Tingingsverket,” a commissioned work by an artist of note. A special meaning, depth and local angle were attached to the 2016 honoree, Nils Økland, the innovative and tradition-respecting master of the Hardanger fiddle (aka hardingfele).

His connection to the Norwegian town of Voss is integral to his artistic evolution. In the 1990s, as a student and then teacher at Voss’ widely respected Ole Bull Akademiet, Økland was on his way to finding a personalized path—including jazz, free improvisation and vestiges of rock—from the deep, loamy tradition of the indigenous Hardanger fiddle. The instrument’s unique resonance is created through a set of sympathetic strings, which are positioned beneath the bowed strings. This fiddle, which originated in the Norwegian region called the Hardanger, typically has a total of eight or nine strings.

Økland’s hour-plus suite at Vossa Jazz, titled *Glodetradar* (a rough translation is “glow thread”), played like a seamless blending—and synthesis—of two important recent albums on the ECM. The first is Nordic post-rock trio project *Lumen Drones* (2014) and the second is the hauntingly lovely and introspective 2015 release *Kjølvatn*. Økland’s compositions draw heavily on the influence of Norwegian folk music and the country’s vintage hymn tradition (to which he paid more direct tribute on the 2011 ECM album *Lysøen—Hommage À Ole*

*Bull*), but all through the prism of his own musical voice.

On the phone from his home in the small town of Haugesund, where he was born in 1961, Økland explained that creating the tapestry-like piece *Glodetradar* was a challenge, well rewarded by the outcome. “I’m not an educated composer,” he said. “The difficult part was to try to make some links between the different parts. It was quite easy to get ideas, but more challenging to put them together.”

What is it that makes the Hardanger fiddle so unique? “The sympathetic strings have a big influence on the sound,” Økland said. “And the bridge is almost completely flat, so you often play on two or three strings at a time. It’s a different way of playing, because you almost release the sound. When I play violin, I have to be quite active with my bow to make a good sound. But with the Hardanger fiddle, it’s more like you lift the sound out. You have to be more careful.”

While he has recorded for other labels, including Rune Grammofon, Økland has been strengthening his discography on ECM, thanks to an empathetic connection with the head of the label, Manfred Eicher. “I worked closely with him in Christian Wallumrød’s group,” Økland said, regarding his central role in the keyboardist’s mystical, radiant chamber-jazz project, as heard on the 2005 disc *A Year From Easter*. “But on my recordings I have done for ECM, [Eicher] has not been in the recording situation, but he had worked on

the material after that.” The basic tracks for *Kjølvatn*, for example, were recorded in an ancient stone church near Lena, Norway, and then Eicher added post-production touches.

One of Økland’s most trusted collaborators over the years, including on his latest ECM album and at the 2016 Vossa Jazz Festival, is the harmonium player Sigbjørn Apeland, with whom Økland also has a fascinating improvisational trio—with a drummer—called 1982. The trio has recorded for the muscular-ambient-inclined label Hubro, which will release its next album in February.

Økland describes Apeland as an extremely flexible musician. “Sigbjørn studied free improvisation with John Stevens in London, when he was young,” he says. “He also worked as a church organist close to my hometown.” They began making music together in the late ’80s, and the bond is stronger than ever now, as Økland raises his international profile. (Stateside, he hopes to make his New York debut in 2017, and has been invited to the acclaimed, adventurous Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, Tennessee, in March.)

Økland relates his eclectic musical evolution to the deep tradition of Hardanger fiddlers, which dates back to the 17th century. “Especially with old players who I have met, all of them play differently. They were like poets. I like that the music ... can be so individual. That makes it more personal. You can see that happening in jazz and rock and classical music, as well.”

—Josef Woodard