

Less is more

It's hard to believe that a year has gone by since the last edition of JLN. Why such a long gap? A combination of other projects, the increasing amounts of time needed to keep FoJL's website up to date and, I have to admit, an element of writer's block. Not that there's any shortage of things to scribble about; there have been so many Jan-related stories coming across my desk that I haven't really known where to start.

But I've finally knuckled down to it and here, at last, is the third edition of JLN. Among other articles, you'll find some reflections on Jan's place in the Nordic folk-jazz firmament from a Danish professor of music (page 2); the third and final instalment of our *How it happens* series (pages 3-4); a few fun statistics extrapolated from the Jan Lundgren discography compiled by Gerard Bielderma last year (page 5); and an explanation of what those apparently random initials mean in Jan's original compositions (page 8). We've also got another *Being Jan Lundgren* piece (page 6).

Unlike JLN 1 and 2, there isn't anything especially topical in this edition. That job is now done – often on a daily basis – by the Updates page of friendsofjanlundgren.com. In fact, FoJL's website is going to be significantly expanded in the coming months. Instead of saving up stories for future editions of JLN, I'm going to put them on FoJL so that you don't have to wait for the next newsletter. Which means that the editorial format of this third JLN will be the last of its kind. The newsletter will from now on become a place where we explore probably only one or two subjects at a time, but in greater depth.

Don't worry, though. This change will result in more frequent, larger volumes of information about what Jan's doing. The only difference is that it will appear on FoJL, rather than in JLN. In fact, it's one of the few instances in life where, to use a very Jan Lundgren-type of aphorism, less really does mean more.



Photo: Bass Nilsson



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Fascinatingly Nordic

Fabian Holt is associate professor of music and performance at the University of Roskilde in Denmark. He's just written an extended article about Scandinavian music for a major new publication. The book will be accompanied by a CD, which includes Jan's version of the traditional Swedish song **Brännvin är mitt enda gull**, taken from JLT's 2003 album **Landscapes**. Of all the recordings Fabian could have chosen, why did he go for Jan's?*



"Jan Lundgren is such a fascinating pianist" says Fabian. "His music brings together important strands of specifically Swedish folk and jazz, as well as drawing from the broader Nordic musical landscape."

"But the beauty of his playing and his sheer musical quality mean that we don't actually need a historical rationale for being interested in Jan's music. He recognises and he engages with the history of Swedish jazz, without being explicitly nostalgic or programmatic about his position. Jan's style is modest and quiet, yet very intense musically.

"I picked *Brännvin är mitt enda gull* [Liquor is my only gold] for the CD because Jan's approach to this track illustrates an artistically important interpretation of the folk-jazz idiom in Sweden. It also shows how today's musicians can make sense of the relationship between jazz and their own place in the world."



What does Fabian actually mean by that? "Jan doesn't play the tune as an imitation of Jan Johansson" he explains, referring to Johansson's inclusion of the song on his 1968 album, *Musik Genom Fyra Sekler*. "Lundgren is more ambitious artistically and, as a result, he sets the music free in a way that makes it much more international. It's almost as though he's opening up Sweden to the rest of the world."



"At the same time, Jan remains very true to the art form of jazz in his treatment of the tune. He uses the traditional melody, while drawing on a wide-ranging emotional palate."

Fabian's article not only includes a discussion of Jan's *Brännvin är mitt enda gull* recording, but also, among other things, Alice Babs' yodelling phase (unfortunately, there was one), Lars Gullin's derided attempts to 'Scandinavianise' the otherwise very American jazz scene in 1950s Sweden, and the towering influence of Jan Johansson's *Jazz På Svenska*. It's well worth a read if you can get hold of a copy.



* The book, which doesn't yet have a title, will be published by the University of Chicago Press later in 2015. The chapter written by Fabian is called **Jazz and the politics of home in Scandinavia**. As well as teaching and writing, Fabian publishes a very informed and interesting blog, which you can find at fabsound.blogspot.dk.

How it happens: Part III

No surprises

In Part I, we talked to Jan about how he composes. In Part II, we went behind the scenes at a recording session. For Part III we promised we'd follow Jan as he prepares to perform. So on a snowy winter evening, JLN found itself at a jazz club deep in the Stockholm suburbs.



“This is a bit like playing in someone’s house...” says Jan to no-one in particular as we approach the club. It’s a typically Swedish wooden building, at least a century old, that sits in a municipal park surrounded by apartment blocks from the ‘60s and ‘70s.

Having taken a ride to the venue with JLN, Jan is the first member of the band to show. The time is 5.30pm and the performance starts at 7.30. So we’re two hours early, but there are already several club organisers and members milling around. Jan knows a number of them by their first name, and they greet him like a returning son. He’s not ‘Jan’ to this crowd; he’s the much more familiar ‘Janne’.

The rest of the band turns up 20 minutes later. They’re in a rented minivan driven by Danish drummer, Kristian Leth. Kristian has organised tonight’s gig, along with the rest of this particular Scandinavian tour, and wrestles with taking his kit out of the bus.



Next to emerge from the vehicle is American saxophonist Scott Hamilton, followed by Swedish bass player Hans Backenroth. Scott’s instrument fits into a sturdy little case that he carries in one hand. Hans’ bass is a monster, and seems to take up half the bus. They all troop into the building and, while Jan is on the receiving end of yet more Swedish-style hugging by the club’s early arrivals, Hans and Kristian begin setting up their instruments on stage.



Jan’s luggage is a suit bag and a battered old leather briefcase, bulging to the seams with sheet music – virtually none of which he’ll use during the performance.

“It’s just for emergencies” says Jan. “This is Scott’s band, not mine, so I need to be prepared in case he springs a tune on me I don’t know.” Which, in practice, is not very likely, since Jan seems to know everything by heart. And he’s performed with Hamilton and the others so often that he’s lost count of the gigs they’ve done together.

How it happens: Part III (contd)

Jan wanders towards the piano. He's played this venue many times before – "Clubs like these are what keeps jazz alive in Sweden" he reminds us. Jan climbs the stage and sits down at the keyboard. His instrument is a standard-sized grand, which has clearly had a long life. The piano's a Schiedmayer, manufactured in Germany, that Jan reckons could easily be 100 years old. Is it in tune?

Jan rattles off a few scales before answering. "Well, pianos should ideally be tuned before every concert" is his diplomatic response. "But it'll be OK" he smiles.

Looking at the stage from the audience's perspective, the piano is on the left, the bass is in the middle, and Kristian's drums are on the right. Scott will hover around the centre front of the stage during the performance. "I didn't specifically ask for this layout tonight, but I always like to be on the left. It makes communicating with the band much easier" explains Jan.

"We did a gig in Denmark a few nights ago where the piano was on the right, so the rhythm section was actually behind me – the way Oscar Peterson liked it, in fact. The layout worked fine, but it's not really my preference."



The hall seats around 200 people, and is starting to fill. "I wouldn't have minded warming up first..." sighs Jan. But he can't do it now because there are too many people. So the band leaves the hall and goes upstairs to a kitchen area, which is doubling as the 'green room'. Jan changes into the suit he's brought, as do Hans and Kristian. Scott was already dressed for the occasion when he arrived.

Everyone's incredibly relaxed. Scott doesn't speak Swedish, Kristian's Danish can only be understood by Jan and Hans, so the lingua franca is English. There's a lot of joking and laughing, especially between Hans and Kristian.

"Of course we don't need to warm up!" Hans tells JLN with mock derision. "We've been playing in this group for a long time. Aren't we supposed to be professionals?!"



We ask Kristian what it's like to be on the road, night after night, performing at often quite small venues like this. "It can be hard being away from the family, but it's what we do. And I really like promoting these tours. It gives me the chance to do what I love doing, which is playing great music with these guys."

Scott is possibly the most relaxed of everyone, even though he's leading. Does he know what they're going to perform? "I haven't got a clue" he says mischievously. "I never prepare a play-sheet. Many musicians write out a precise running order of songs beforehand, but I don't. I just play what comes naturally, based on the kind of feedback I'm getting from the audience. In any case, this particular band knows all the tunes I'm likely to pick, so I'm never going to surprise them."

Suddenly it's 7.30 and the band needs to return to the hall. They descend the staircase while the club's president starts his welcoming announcement, and stand quietly just by the doors at the back of the hall.

The president stops talking, the audience breaks into enthusiastic applause, and they stride towards the stage to start their evening's work.

Discomania!

*How many thrills can you get out of a discography? More than you might think. Last year, one of our Friends in the Netherlands, Gerard Bielderman, published an exhaustive disco of all Jan's recordings up to and including his appearance as a sideman on Hannah Svensson's **Each Little Moment** (released in March 2014). JLN thought it only right to salute Gerard's skill and dedication by crunching a few numbers.*



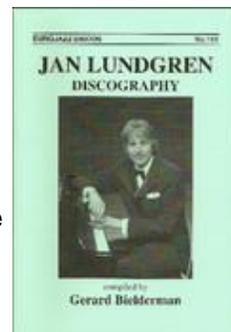
First album: no, it wasn't *Conclusion*. Recorded in the summer of 1990 in Malmö when Jan was 24, it's actually something called *The Art Of Survival*, with a line-up led by the Sweden-based American tenor sax player, Ed Epstein. Never heard it? That's OK, because neither have we.

Volume of music: the numbers are simply too big to count accurately, but we estimate that the recordings catalogued in Gerard's disco cover almost 1,200 different songs. Let's say each song lasts 4:30 minutes, and that makes for 90 hours of continuous music – which, if you were physically able to do it, would mean nearly four days of non-stop listening, 24 hours a day.

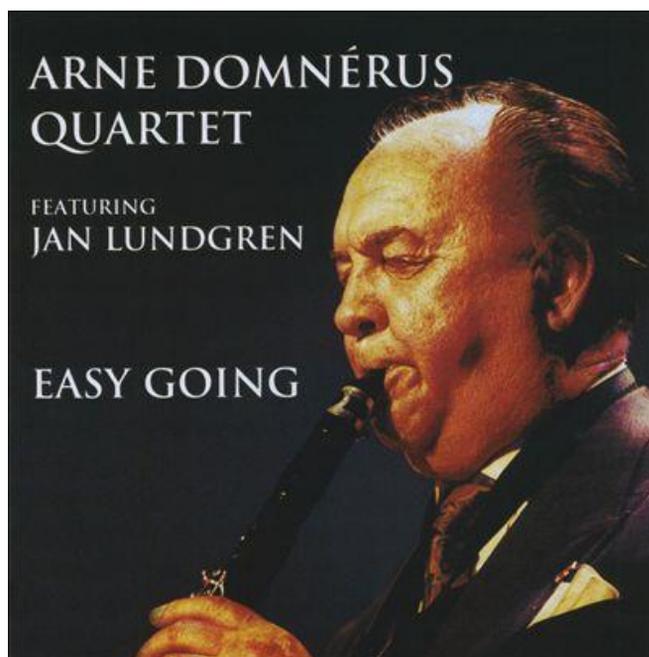
Most-recorded song: it's a three-way tie. Jan's made five different recordings each of three songs: *Secret love*; *I didn't know what time it was*; and *Flying home*. *Dear old Stockholm* comes in with four separate versions, as does *Body and soul*, *I've never been in love before*, *On Green Dolphin Street*, *Things ain't what they used to be* and, maybe a little curiously, Rodgers' and Hart's *Thou swell*.

Total number of collaborators: excluding choirs and string sections, Jan has recorded with a total of 307 musicians since 1990. Staggering.

'Favourite' musicians: you think it's someone like Arne Domnérus or drummer Alex Riel? You're wrong. Jan's most frequent collaborator in the studio – at 14 recordings – is Swedish bass player Hans Backenroth. Two more bassists are next: Jesper Lundgaard (13 recordings), and Mattias Svensson (12). Jan did a total of nine sessions with Domnérus, another nine with the late vibes player Lars Erstrand, and eight with Alex Riel – which is slightly surprising, given that Alex and Jesper comprised two thirds of the Jan Lundgren Trio during much of the early and mid-2000s (or perhaps it just proves how essential a good bass player is).



Productivity rate: people talk in awed tones about jazz artists churning out three or four albums a year in the 1950s and '60s. Yet in the 24-year period covered by Gerard's disco, Jan appeared on no fewer than 126 albums for 46 different labels. So that's an average of more than *five* releases every year for almost a quarter of a century. On 48 of these 126 releases, Jan was either the leader (33) or co-leader (15). Some productivity rate, isn't it?



Being Jan Lundgren

A system for development

JLN 2 saw the start of a new series of articles in which Jan tells us what being a professional jazz musician involves on a day-to-day basis. Here's the second piece, where he talks to JLN about the important role still played by his teaching work.



“The only formal training I've ever had in life is as a piano teacher” laughs Jan. “Back in 1986 when I applied for university, that was effectively the only way anyone could study jazz.”

“Well, almost. The Malmö Academy of Music offered just one place a year on a course specifically designed for jazz musicians, but there was no way I was going to get on it. I had zero practical experience in jazz. Even if I had, the course carried absolutely no guarantee of a job after graduation, since there wasn't a teaching qualification involved. So that's why I took the Academy's music teaching programme.

“When I finished the course in 1990, the Academy asked me to stay on as a tutor. In fact, I had to fill in for my old piano teacher! I also got an offer to teach music at a Malmö high school, which I gladly accepted as well.

“So I was teaching full time, and playing whatever gigs I could get in the evenings. Basically, I worked like hell. But it was manageable, because most of the performances were local. I made my first record in 1990 as a sideman, and I gave up the high school job a couple of years later. I kept my part-time role at the Academy, though, and spent the rest of my days trying to earn a living as a professional musician.”

Was that easy? “No it wasn't” Jan says firmly. “But it sort of worked for me. When you graduate, you have just two options: play professionally or teach. If you choose only the former, you're not going to survive financially. I was lucky in being able to do both things.”

Jan still teaches at the Academy as an associate professor. It takes up around 10-15% of his time, and he does it for two reasons. “It's what I was trained to do. And I like it” he says simply.

“I get ideas from the best of my students. It's also really enjoyable to work with young talents – like Fanny Gunnarsson and John Venkiah, both of whom were my students at the Academy” Jan explains, referring to the albums he produced in 2013/2014 for Volenza (see pages 5-6 of JLN's March 2014 edition). “I have to work out what they need and then devise individual programmes for them.”

“How do I benefit from that? Because learning is all about having a process. The students and I have to figure out the best way – the most effective *system* – for development. And that strengthens my ability, since it improves the approach I take to my own system for developing in jazz.”



As you would expect, Jan's students all play the piano. But many of them have additional talents; Fanny Gunnarsson, for example, also sings and composes.

“I've noticed an interesting difference between my male and female students” observes Jan. “Once they've decided they want to concentrate on jazz, the men usually go for it 100%. The women, however, tend to keep their options open and are more willing to consider other musical genres. I have no idea why!”

What would Jan recommend to young people considering a career in jazz? “I'd say think about it very carefully – it's an incredibly tough road to follow. Someone did some research a while ago and estimated that there are only really about 20 professional jazz musicians in the whole of Sweden. By 'professional', I mean people who can earn a living solely from their music.”

That's why, concludes Jan, a teaching qualification is A Good Thing. “Look, if my career goes down the tubes tomorrow and people no longer want to see me perform or buy my albums, I'll at least have another profession I can fall back on. It's a very small part of why I teach, but I have to be realistic about how the music industry works.”

“After all, the history of jazz is littered with great talents who were on top one minute, and washing dishes the next. You're kidding yourself if you think it couldn't happen to you.”



Not quite by himself

*The challenge in dealing with such a prolific artist as Jan is that JLN tends to get overtaken by his prodigious output. For example, we had a conversation with him way back in spring 2014 about what to expect from his latest solo album, **All By Myself**, which he recorded in Los Angeles the previous January. So when the record was suddenly released last August, we hadn't written the piece. And that's a shame, because Jan told us some interesting things.*



All By Myself is the Jan Lundgren album that very nearly didn't happen. The story is in Doug Ramsey's outstanding, 5,000-word liner notes: Jan's frustration with his initial treatments of some of the tunes, and producer Dick Bank's decision to throw out a number of songs that Jan felt unable to shape to his satisfaction. It all came together successfully in the end, but it looked for a while like Jan and Dick might both have started something they couldn't happily finish. Why?

"I've worked with Dick at least 10 times in my career, but this was the toughest thing we've ever done together" says Jan. "He has incredibly high standards and insists on intensive preparation. There's no question when you're working with Dick of simply rolling up to the studio and 'seeing what happens'. He expects to know everything before we start recording. That means the precise song choices, style of playing, tempos – every last little detail."

"But I'm used to that. Unlike *Man In The Fog*, what made this album so challenging is that I was playing standards. I'm used to that as well, of course. It's the kind of jazz I started with when I first discovered the genre at 14 or 15, and it comes very naturally to me.

"It's always demanding to play solo because you're totally exposed artistically. The most difficult thing, though, was finding something that I could add to these standards. The songs we included on *All By Myself* are, for the most part, extremely well known.



"Was I able to say something about them musically that hadn't been said before?

"Dick was adamant that he wanted to include tunes without any regard to whether I'd recorded them in the past. 'I just want the best songs' he said. And that came as a relief to me, because it meant I didn't have to worry about how I might have approached them previously. It set me free to be as creative with the material as I wanted to be.

"The songs we picked are all very melodic. I needed to be true to those melodies, but it didn't mean I couldn't experiment. You have to be careful when you're improvising not to 'destroy' a song. Yet you also need to explore the tune in your own way, otherwise there's no point. Moreover, the song is not as important as the musicianship; it's what you do with it that counts."

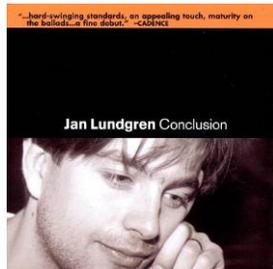
And what Jan actually did may well be on its way to becoming a little piece of jazz history. *All By Myself* has been given numerous four- and five-star reviews, as well as coming top of the critics' poll of the UK's Jazz Journal for the best new issue of 2014. Is Jan surprised?

"Well, I think 'gratified' is a better way of putting it. After all the effort – especially from Dick – that went into the album's preparation and recording, I'm extremely pleased and grateful to see the warm reception it's received."



So that's what it means...

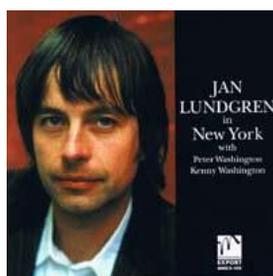
Ever wondered what those initials stand for in the titles of Jan's compositions? JLN has. So we asked him to let us in on their meaning.



Song: *PMS*

Album: *Conclusion* (1994)

Jan: "The initials stand for 'Pre-menstrual syndrome'. Not perhaps the most grown-up or sensitive of titles... but I was quite young when I wrote the song. My girlfriend at the time thought it was distinctly inappropriate, whereas I saw it as a kind of tribute to women. You won't be surprised to hear that our relationship ended a long time ago!"



Song: *MZ*

Albums: *In New York* (2005), *Lockrop* (2006)

Jan: "'MZ' is the great Monica Zetterlund. In May 2005 I was preparing to play some concerts with Swedish bass player Georg Riedel, for which I'd been developing this composition. Then we got the sad news that Zetterlund had died. It was just before the tour began, so I dedicated the song to Monica as a salute to her genius."



Song: *View of P*

Album: *Man In The Fog* (2013)

Jan: "It's 'Prokofiev'. Although the song is a semi-classical piece, it's not specifically about Prokofiev and it doesn't contain any musical allusions to his work. But this composer was on my mind while I was writing the piece – there's just something about the tune that made me think of him."



Song: *Jive master M*

Album: *I Love Jan Lundgren Trio* (2013)

Jan: "The M stands for Mattias – as in Mattias Svensson, JLT's long-time bassist. Ever noticed the way he dances around when he's performing? He can't keep still. It's a deliberately upbeat, cheerful song in celebration of Mattias enjoying himself. Was he offended by the title? Of course not. He thinks the whole thing is hugely funny!"

