**Silje steals the show – BBC Review**

**Silje Nergaard at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival**

**07 May 2004**

Norwegian jazz songstress Silje Nergaard and her band put on an awesome show at the 2004 Cheltenham International Jazz Festival.

For me, Silje Nergaard and her support band were undoubtedly one of the highlights of this year's jazz festival. Her graceful, captivating voice was silky in tone and perfectly suited to the mellow nature of her music.

There's an engaging quality to her on stage - you really get the sense that she loves every minute of her performance and it seems to be naturally portrayed in her voice.

Her songs are also well crafted and hugely enjoyable. She writes her own songs and performed some of them at the festival. Her compositions are excellent because she seems to have a complete understanding of her voice and what she can do with it.

Even her interpretations of other artists' work seen to have a unique feel to them. She sang a cover of Sting's 'If You Love Someone (Set Them Free)' and it was such an entertaining version that it had a life of its own.

I've heard her music before when I chanced upon one of her older albums. It was 'At First Light' (2001) and I was just listening to it out of curiosity. I found that I really enjoyed it. Musically, it was very appealing. The smooth, catchy jazz tunes were easy to like and it quickly became a favourite of mine.

In fact, she sang a song from that album called 'Japanese Blue' at the festival. It stood out as a silky smooth number with fantastically rich lyrics that, accompanied by some fine atmospheric jazz, was a delight to listen to.

Hearing Silje sing live, you can certainly say I'm a fan of her music! And after hearing the high praise from members of the audience on the way out, I somehow think I'm not the only one.

My review for the collective efforts of Silje and her band may seem high on the praise but it was one of the most sophisticated and accomplished performances I've witnessed in a long time. Her striking voice was accompanied by some truly marvellous jazz. For me, it was hands down the best concert I've attended at this year's festival.

It was Silje's very first appearance at the Cheltenham International Jazz Festival and I'm hoping she returns next year because her performance and that of the excellent musicians around her warrants it.

**The Cheltenham Jazz Festival**

**Musical Discoveries**

**4 May 2004**

This was a spellbinding, 90-minute performance. As Silje now performs on the jazz circuit--though in Norway and Germany particularly, she has a more mainstream audience--she performed here with her regular band of Norwegian musicians. These included the excellent Tord Gustavsen on piano, Fender Rhodes and melodica, plus upright bass and drums. Significantly, she also added the guitar of Hallgrim Bratberg, giving the band a more contemporary, crossover sound. These were jazz musicians, but with a level of versatility that allowed them to play jazz funk, or pop and folk, with great dexterity. However, it was in the late-night, sparse jazz vibe that the band truly excelled.

As for Silje herself, she delivered a note-perfect performance, laced with a halting charm that reminded us of Sylvia Erichsen of Norwegian progressive band White Willow. Her voice has certainly matured since 1990, though it is still not really a traditional jazz voice. Girlish, yet both beautiful and sexy, she has excellent phrasing, but refrains from vocal gymnastics, preferring to bring the melody of the song across as effectively as possible.

Unlike many jazz vocalists, she now avoids the "standards," choosing, instead, her own, excellent songs, plus a few well-chosen covers from the pop world, here represented by Sting's "If You Love Somebody Set Them Free" and the David Bowie/Pat Metheney song "This is not America" both given jazz arrangements. Of her own songs, highlights included the funky "Keep On Backing Losers," the perky "Take A Long, Long Walk," the smoky jazz of "Unbreakable Heart" and the hypnotic, folky "Borrowing Moons" as well as final encore, the lovely ballad Japanese Blue.

**Soho Jazz Club at Pizza Express, London,**

**Musical Discoveries**

**21 November 2004**

Having been introduced to the music of Silje six months ago, we were interest to see how easily her set transferred from a theatre setting to the more intimate confines of a small Central London. We need not have worried, as she showed herself equally adept at charming a live audience as she did in the larger, theatre setting of Cheltenham.

Knowledge of the material allowed concentration on the subtlety of the musicians, especially the amount of space they allow themselves during the lush ballads. This was supremely confident playing, most notably on the cover version of Sting’s “If you love somebody” where the piece built from a low, bluesy rumble to a full swing over its 5 minutes. Pianist Tord Gustavsen’s Fender Rhodes playing was particularly enjoyed, as well as his atmospheric, almost classical piano interlude later in the set. A new guitarist has added some gentle pedal steel to the arrangements; alongside some fluent jazz lead playing.

Set list: "Borrowing Moons," "How am I supposed to see the stars," "If you love Somebody," "This is not America," "Be Still My Heart," "Dance Me Love," "Tell me where you're going," "Keep on backing losers," "I don't want to see you cry," "Take a Long," "Long Walk." Encores: "Lullaby to Erle," "Japanese Blue."

Silje herself was typically delightful, elegantly waltzing through the evening with her perfect phrasing. She engaged the audience delightfully with her halting charm between songs, while she and her band, once again, demonstrated admirable versatility, especially during the up tempo, funky numbers. Overall, this was an excellent, relaxed evening from a jazz star in the making. Oh, and the pizza was good, too.

**Ronnie Scotts, London 2002**

**The Guardian**

Silje Nergaard, the Norwegian singer, had Pat Metheny on her side during the 1990s, which gave her career a useful boost. She still has some affinities with the open-handed and gracefully lyrical notion of jazz that Metheny espouses. But Nergaard is no clone of her influential supporter; she has steadily been accumulating plenty of musical credit of her own. Nine of the 12 tracks on her latest album are originals, and Nergaard's seven albums have made her something of a star in her homeland.

At Ronnie Scott's the singer has an impressive group of supporting musicians - also improvisers of character who get plenty of space to themselves. She avoids falling back on the straight-jazz singer's usual safe bets (scat-singing, blues inflections or much reference to standard songs), choosing instead to work over relaxed funk or minimalist slow-burn settings for ballads. She has a flexible and highly developed technique, with instrument-like qualities in her dynamic and tonal range. She is also more contemporary in her references than such comparably small-voiced female jazz vocal stars as Diana Krall and Stacey Kent. At times during this gig, Nergaard was more reminiscent of idiomatically experimental singers like the UK's Norma Winstone - though she rarely lets go of a groove.

Nergaard's palette of sounds veers from a nasal, oboe-like upper range to a cooler, more dispassionate version of a soul-singer's whooping and note-warping on single words. The textures, meanwhile, can shift from humane mellowness to a startling voice-synth tone, as if Nergaard had suddenly been abducted and a cyborg put in her place. The materials are almost all excellent - particularly her mesmerising hit song, the hymnal Be Still My Heart, in which her prayer-like variations were exquisitely and seamlessly picked up and developed by a fine trumpeter, Peter Asplund. Drummer Jarle Vespestad, a softly padding percussionist who rarely touches the snare, took the dynamic levels to extremes. And pianist Tord Gustavsen gave the hardcore jazzers enough uptempo post-bop finger-busting to break the silence with cheers. Only one track - presumably Nergaard's concession to working Ronnie Scott's, an initially funky swinger that turned into a straightforward How High the Moon - seemed anything less than all her own very promising work.