

JAZZ PUBLICATION OF THE YEAR

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Jazzwise

Karma Chameleon

Tommy Smith

From Zero To Hero

"I'm still playing that old blues st"**

Miles Davis

Tutu 25 years on
THE LOST INTERVIEW

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BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

With a remarkable almost missionary-like motivation TOMMY SMITH has single-handedly created a dynamic new jazz scene in Scotland with a variety of musical and educational projects he has been involved with. His latest initiative is to form a new group called Karma which mines new fertile jazz-rock and folk territory for the enterprising saxophonist. STUART NICHOLSON talks to Smith about his thinking behind the new band and how he sees the way ahead for jazz in his homeland

It's hard to say whether saxophonist, composer and arranger Tommy Smith is on a spiritual journey. If he is he's not prepared to talk about it, but his thirst for knowledge has led him to confronting what he calls "the big ideas." What he means is his curiosity about the religions of the world and man's attempts to rationalise his destiny through religious enquiry. While he says he does not believe in God, he also adds that he does not entirely rule him out either, telling *The Scottish Herald*, "I have a spiritual curiosity about everything. People need faith and society needs faith." It was this curiosity that provided the inspiration behind some of his most powerful music in recent years. His *World of the Gods*, written for the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra and the Mugenkyo Taiko Drummers, is a ten piece suite inspired by the Shinto gods while *Torah*, released on his own Spartacus label in 2010 and also written for the SNJO, is inspired by the five books of the "Jewish Bible." So it is perhaps unsurprising that his latest album – his first in seven years with his own small group – is called *Karma* because another "big idea" underpins its inspiration. Karma, according to the dictionary definition, is the Buddhist belief that future existence is determined by the cumulative consequence of a person's acts in one stage of his or her existence as controlling his or her destiny in the next.

Recorded in August last year and mixed by the legendary sound engineer Jan Erik Konshaug in the Rainbow Studios in Oslo, Smith is joined by an all-Scots line-up of Steve Hamilton on piano and synthesisers and Alyn Cosker drums plus newcomer Kevin Glasgow on electric bass on what is his most exciting album to date. "I was offered an opportunity to play a festival with my own group," explains Smith, relaxing in the comfortable surroundings of a Heathrow hotel lounge. "But I didn't have a group because I never play in the festivals in Scotland with my own bands, never have done for years and years, because I always give it to the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra and if I play with them I couldn't do my own thing, so I ended up giving the gigs away. So when I got the opportunity to do it, I thought this is a good opportunity to write some music, play with some people I admire and take some of experiences I had touring plus some of the things which I actually like such as heavy metal and Garbarek and all

these things, and just make some music with four people who are virtuosos and could play it without too much hardship. And it ended up being a very fulfilling project, it was difficult making, sure, but fulfilling."

The result, by Smith's own admission, took him out of his comfort zone. "It was different for me because I have never used an electric bass player in my life, never was interested, I was the purist," he says with a smile. Although all the pieces were written by Smith, he says some compositions he was not totally at home with, yet the result has an edginess and sense of discovery that retains its freshness after repeated listening. "I don't know what kind of music you'd call it," he smiles, "the musicians involved in *Karma* – the drummer especially – his own preferences in music are all embodied in that performance and the same with the pianist and the same with the bassist and for me. You get a group of people together and use their strengths, using what they can do and what they love best, and that's kind of how things evolved here."

Although Smith has consistently incorporated aspects of Scottish folkloric melodies in his music since 1985's *Progressions* when he included the track 'Folk Tones', it is fair to say that it has never been central to his style, which has broadly favoured greater harmonic complexity and dense, fast moving lines in solo. *Karma* marks a departure in his approach, exploring folkloric influences in greater detail than any of his previous recordings by reflecting influences from his homeland or collected during his wide ranging touring schedule: "After touring with Arild Andersen for so many years and working on different folk music from Norway, Scotland and Ireland and Japan and India and this Arabic stuff we try and do provided a real catalyst for the compositions," he says.

Smith's association with the Norwegian bassist Arild Andersen began in 2009 and can be heard on the ECM album, *Live at Belleville*. It's a still ongoing process of musical discovery since Andersen has been working at ways of incorporating Norwegian folkloric influences in his music since the 1980s. A member of the highly influential band Masqualero and its ipso facto leader, he moved the band's post-Miles Davis repertoire to originals derived from folkloric influences, while under his own name

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on albums such as *Clouds In My Head*, *Shimri* and *Green Shading Into Blue* this process can be followed in greater detail. In 1993, on the album *Arv* he took a series of old Norwegian folk tunes and with folk singer Kristen Braten Berg and a band that including then young rising stars of the Norwegian jazz firmament including Bugge Wesseltoft, Eivind Aarset and Bendik Hofseth gave these essentially simple folkloric melodies a uniquely modern feel.

"Simple music is more difficult to perform, especially if you are a jazz musician," says Smith. "That's one thing I learned, and I only learned that through playing with Arild, a lot of the music he would present is very simple, a lot of triads, none of these extensions, and you had to play melodically and you had to leave a lot of space, the concert started with nothing, just slowly building using pure melody, but without that experience with Arild I wouldn't be able to incorporate the folksongs into *Karma* because of the simplicity it takes to play them – if you have A major a bebop

player will play many notes, post-bop will add more chromaticisms and the contemporary players will superimpose everything on top of everything, but at its root, to play A major is the most challenging thing for a jazz musician, to keep that simplicity, the sound and the space and the intonation and you have to experience that and work it out for yourself."

One of the most interesting performances on the album is 'Star', clearly folk-influenced, where Smith allows his love of Jan Garbarek's tone and expressivity to show through, despite the brisk underlying tempo. "'Star' is based on the Irish melody 'The Star of County Down,' which is played very fast and in 4/4," explains Smith. "I saw the melody had the potential to be a bit more sentimental, I am a big fan of Irish music and I knew that Arild Andersen would like it, because I presented it to him first a long time ago when I started working with him in 2009, and he plays it quite differently, his version is fantastic, the way he uses these pedals and drones and he plays all by himself, and he has been playing it ever since, he loves it, just because of its power."

Smith draws on his experiences of the Middle East on 'Tomorrow', while 'Projection' is derived from a folkloric piece from Yemen, where he toured in 2003. "The most popular song there is something like 'Projection' – everyone is able to sing it, 90 million Yemenis know that song, and we performed it all over Yemen, which was a really fascinating and

interesting and dangerous trip. Once the audience hears this music they go crazy – the joy a simple song which is very repetitive gives to so many people and when you see thousands of people clapping on the beat it is very uplifting."

The original, 'Body or Soul', although sounding like an original Scottish folk song, was actually written by Smith himself. "I originally wrote it in celebration of my wedding," he says. "The boat we were married

above the Wester Hailes housing scheme in Edinburgh, where he says there were no books in the house because none of his family could read. But it was hearing a recording by Coleman Hawkins that provided him with his route into jazz. Encouraged by his school teachers to develop what was already clearly a precocious talent, by his early teens he was playing Edinburgh pub gigs. In 1981 he won best soloist and best band award at the Edinburgh Jazz Festival, and at the age of 16

with two albums, several radio broadcasts, a TV appearance with Niels Henning Ørsted Pedersen and tours of Germany, Ireland, Belgium and Luxembourg under his belt, he left Scotland with financial assistance from his local community to study at Berklee College of Music.

The importance of financial assistance from his local community – in effect a massive fund raising effort which began in the local community and spread further afield – had a life changing – and Karmic – effect on Smith. He departed with the knowledge that if he returned a failure, the respect he enjoyed would

be lost and his ambition shattered. He had to make his country and its people proud of him. He didn't let them down. He was recruited by vibist Gary Burton for his own band while still in college (an association that continues to this day with a tour embracing several European festivals last year). Career triumph followed career triumph – his return home coincided with the British jazz boom that saw the emergence of Courtney Pine, Loose Tubes, Andy Sheppard et al and he became the first artist to sign to the newly constituted Blue Note International label, the first Scots musician to become composer in residence at the Glasgow International Jazz Festival in 1993, while a period of study embracing classical music culminated in his critically acclaimed 'Sonata for Piano and Saxophone' premiered at the Glasgow International Festival.

As his list of achievements mounted, so too did his Karmic desire to repay those who had supported him. In the 1990s his commitment to Scottish jazz began to make itself felt with the formation of the Scottish Jazz Composers Ensemble and the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra. "I'm a small group guy and not a big band sort of chap," he says. "In college at Berklee I did play in various college big bands, we had a Buddy Rich big band, and we had a recording band that played Mike Gibbs' music and we had an Ellington big band and various other big

bands, but it wasn't something I loved or desired to do, or wanted to pursue a career doing. But when I came back to Scotland there were definitely missing links – we didn't have a school, we didn't have a big band, we didn't have any youth orchestra, there were lots of musicians doing different things but there was no pathway, no infrastructure in Scotland, so I formed a jazz orchestra with a bunch of musicians and nobody got paid any money to begin with, we were just rehearsing and we got our first gig and it went on from there."

For the first 13 years, Smith did everything, applied for funding, booked the musicians and guests, set up the PA, drove the van, commissioned the music, paid the musicians, designed the advertisements and programmes, booked the venues and just about everything else needed to get the project underway. In addition to running the SNJO, which later absorbed the Scottish Jazz Composers Ensemble, he was simultaneously working to establish a jazz course at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow. That took him 12 years to achieve, and is now two years old. "I think someone like me who has spent a lot of time investing in things other than self, people might say, 'You look like you are paying back for the generosity from your childhood.' When I was a kid I came from nothing and the people of my community helped pay and generate a perfect situation where I could go to America when I was 16 and it would never have happened if it wasn't for the community. Coming back to the country I felt indebted a great deal of the time, so that's what I focussed on. I feel it's important for somebody to do it because there has not been much legacy of people doing this in music, people usually do things for themselves, they don't do them for other people. The karmic idea is all about a situation where you think you have done a lot of good deeds, obviously you don't expect to get good deeds back because it's not like an account where you do a lot of good and you expect that to be reciprocated, you have to be patient, and it may never come but the bad deeds that you do are not cancelled out by the good deeds, you just have bad deeds and you'll get bad karma back."

Today, Smith can see the emergence of

good karma from his commitment to Scottish jazz. "What I've seen over the years I have been involved with the SNJO is the level of musicianship has really taken off. We've got some really great players, as good as anywhere like Steve Hamilton, Alyn Cosker and Kevin Glasgow in my band Karma. We have some wonderful students currently going through the Academy, it's been 11, 12 years to get this going. It only came to fruition in 2009, it took a long time, because we didn't have a place where young Scottish jazz musicians could go to. There was no choice, they had to leave, but now they have a choice. What I have seen is there is now a jazz community in Glasgow because we have 12 students, two groups, and they are playing everywhere, they go and get trio gigs in this bar, and sextet gigs there, they're playing everywhere, and its creating a little scene for them and when its 24 there will be even more work for them, because there is plenty of work there and they are all encouraged to go out and get the work, and they do, and it's a healthy jazz scene just because of the students playing all the time, that's what you do as a young jazz musician, you play 24/7 – you just don't stop."

Clearly, Smith's commitment to Scottish jazz has in many ways deflected his own career. "I have been offered a lot of work," he says frankly. "I could easily tour 200 days of the year if I wanted to, but it would not serve the purpose that I have for our little country." What is rare in today's consumer orientated society is that Smith does not talk in terms of money, but of fulfilment. In the Karmic sense, he really is enjoying payback time. "What I love is to watch people grow and develop. I have never had that opportunity before, because I

have given a lesson here and a lesson there I've never watched someone evolve through a course." Yet, with the SNJO and jazz course firmly established, his new album represents an opportunity for Smith to do more of what he has always loved from the very beginning, playing before an audience with his own band. "I want to play in front of people, because that interaction between the player and the music is where I thrive," he says. "I don't thrive on money, if I wanted to make money I would do another job, what makes me happy is that interaction [with the public] and it's the same with many artists I'm sure. I loved making *Karma* but in today's world it's an expensive business card, it's not a way to earn money, the last thing I would think of is earning any money back on a record, but that is what I wanted to do and I invested in it and hopefully we'll be able to do some concerts from it. I'm not saying that's what every jazz musician wants to do, but that's what I want to do. A CD today is used to navigate your way to the concert platform or play clubs. I want to see how the band makes people react, it's the same with every other artist, that's all they're doing, getting in front of an audience and doing what they love." ■

Karma plays the Pizza Express Jazz Club in London on 28 April and the Glasgow Jazz Festival in June

