



Astrid 2nd from left and Grooving Vibe

Astrid Hepner: still finding her grooving vibe

As long as she can remember Astrid Oelerich, now Astrid Hepner, was playing some kind of an instrument in her native city of Cologne Germany. For years it was the accordion but coming into her teens Astrid decided the squeeze box was decidedly uncool and she took up the saxophone. Even that was a bit of an unusual choice of an instrument—at least in Germany; but Astrid persevered; studying jazz performance and composition and always being challenged to take risks by her mother—a teacher. “I’m a very adventurous person and my mother encouraged that.” “It was the sax solo on Supertramp’s ‘Breakfast in America’ that got me involved with the saxophone,” Astrid recalls, “that solo was so wonderful. It was the first time that I consciously heard the tenor sax, and I was totally intrigued by its sound.”

It may have been rock that got Astrid into the saxophone but it was jazz that kept her there. “I was a jazz snob,” she admitted. Still the money was in pop and Astrid joined a leather-clad, all-girl band called the Grooving Vibes. Before you knew it the women were playing a mixture of funk, dance/pop music with jazz elements all around Germany and getting some interest from record companies like BMG. “We were in particular demand in gay and lesbian establishments,” Astrid recalls. In Cologne, during Astrid’s formative years, the city was a jazz hotbed with such initiatives as “Kölner Jazz Haus” (Cologne Jazz House), from which projects such as the Kölner Saxophon Mafia (Cologne Saxophone Mafia) emerged. While keeping up with the band, Astrid continued to study and to teach at the Jazz House School, which is something

of a model for the “An Instrument for Every Child” program that Astrid now runs in Hamilton, which brings musical instruments and training to inner city school children. “The work I do now perfectly combines all of my former experiences as a teacher, performer and music industry executive,” says Astrid recalling her earlier teaching and learning experiences.

From the beginning Astrid’s mission in life was to be part of the New York City music scene. Some of her musical contemporaries had gone to New York, and even though they would often return to Cologne broke, “they were somehow transformed,” says Astrid. As fate would have it, her entrée to the Big Apple came via Canada, and the man who became Astrid’s future husband, Darcy Hepner; who she met when Astrid won a musical scholarship to the

Banff School of fine Arts, which then was operated by Darcy’s aunt and uncle. Something clicked between the young couple. “I was always pretty private about my personal life,” said Astrid, “but I sent my mother a postcard from Banff and said ‘I’ve met the guy I’m going to marry.’” They were married in Cologne in 1996. It happened that Darcy had been awarded a one-year sabbatical from a music program in Nelson BC, which meant the couple could pool their resources and move to New York.

“It was the best time of my life up to then,” Astrid recalls. “We found the tiniest apartment in Greenwich Village, and I started playing at the Knitting Factory (a music club then in the East Village) in a band called Astrid Hepner and Funkmeister.” In forming Funkmeister Astrid somehow managed to attract musicians like drummer



Janfelix Vista photography



Astrid on a stage in Bonn



Astrid (centre, back) and her new passion: An Instrument for Every Child



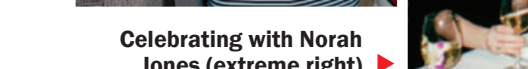
Astrid with Funkmeister. Drummer Keith Carlock (lower right)



With Blue Note President Ian Ralfini (l) and producer Arif Mardin



Astrid playing with Latin greats Tito Puente and Celia Cruz



Celebrating with Norah Jones (extreme right) ▶

Keith Carlock. Carlock has recorded and/or toured with Wayne Krantz, Sting, Steely Dan, James Taylor, Donald Fagen, Walter Becker, Diana Ross, Faith Hill, The Blues Brothers Band, Paula Abdul, and Grover Washington, Jr. Carlock was the exclusive drummer for every track on Steely Dan’s Everything Must Go album. Meanwhile Darcy, also a saxophonist was touring with Blood Sweat and Tears. As exhilarating as it was gigging in New York music clubs, Astrid was also drawn to the business side of music, in part because performing was becoming a chore. “I’m not a night person,” Astrid said, “in the club, the first show would start at 10 pm and the second show began at midnight.” She started looking for opportunities in

the recording industry.

Through a contact she made while stringing for a German magazine called Focus, Astrid heard about a job at BMG in New York and a new career was begun. Starting out as a junior Marketing Assistant, Astrid rose to become International Marketing Manager. The job lasted 5 years but there was constant turnover in management at BMG and Astrid, “saw the handwriting on the wall” and moved over to Blue Note records which was part of the EMI recording colossus. On the surface the job was a step down from management—she was executive assistant to head honcho Bruce Lundvall. But working for Mr. Lundvall turned out to have a profound impact on her personal and professionally. In

a career spanning half a century, Bruce Lundvall had signed artists, including Willie Nelson, Herbie Hancock, Dexter Gordon, Woody Shaw, James Taylor, Stan Getz, Wynton Marsalis, Dianne Reeves, Natalie Cole, Cassandra Wilson, Anita Baker, and Norah Jones. “Bruce was a wonderful man,” recalls Astrid, “he was very well respected in the industry, and one of the few who came out of the payola scandals untouched. He was a true mentor to me.” The job had some exciting moments, like telling husband Darcy on the phone, “I have Steve Miller on the other line, I have to go.” The job involved a lot of parties and receptions and other opportunities for rubbing elbows with the diverse likes of Stevie Wonder, Isabella Rosselini, Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and the late ABC anchor Peter Jennings. “One of the wonderful perks of my job was that I got to attend so many great concerts,” said Astrid. I saw operas at the Met, Sir Simon Rattle and Sting at Carnegie Hall, Wynton Marsalis at Lincoln Center, Norah Jones at the ‘Living Room’ before she became a ‘star’ and not to mention all the amazing jazz concerts in the clubs involving many of our Blue Note artists.” Astrid was in the studio when legendary producer Arif Mardin first recorded Norah Jones whose sales really made Blue Note Records. Mardin had recorded them all - The Rascals, Carly Simon, Petula Clark, Bette Midler, Barbra Streisand, the Bee Gees, Diana Ross, Queen, Patti Labelle, Aretha Franklin, Lulu, Anita Baker, Judy Collins, Phil Collins, Culture Club, Roberta Flack, Average White Band, Hall & Oates, Donny Hathaway, Jeffrey Osborne and many more. “It was a time of over-produced music,” recalls Astrid. Norah Jones had already done an expensive \$30,000 session which label boss Lundvall

refused to put out because it was ‘crap’. It was a bold move to take with a new artist but producer Mardin took a much simpler, sophisticated approach in working with Jones and the subsequent success of the album bolstered EMI’s fortunes. Things were going swimmingly in New York for Astrid and Darcy, a couple of hot young musicians living the dream; but then came September 11, 2001. By then the couple had moved to the gentrifying Park Slope district of Brooklyn. “I was on the ‘F’ train coming to work when the first tower was hit,” Astrid remembers. “By the time I got to the office in Chelsea I was able to look right down Park Avenue and see the destruction.” Because the subway system was shut down after the attack, Astrid had to walk back to Brooklyn that night. “We walked over the Williamsburg Bridge, and I remember being nervous that it might get attacked. That changed things for me. I never felt safe again. I was kind of freaked out.” That and the fact that by 2003 the Hepners now had a young daughter, Camilla. “That changed everything for us. I started to think more about having a house and family,” Astrid said. That is where Hamilton loomed into the picture. Darcy’s father Lee Hepner had been the conductor for the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra and his mother, Patricia Rolston, was an internationally acclaimed pianist, choral conductor, and teacher who until 1989 had been the founding chair of the Mohawk College music program. There was a vacancy to run the department and Darcy won the job. Moving to Hamilton in 2005 Astrid became a stay-at-home mom for a couple of years. “I loved the space—there was room for Camilla and most of all there was a PARKING SPOT!” Astrid said, only half-joking

as she recalled the parking nightmares in Brooklyn. After a couple of years at home it was time to get back into music again. Astrid formed the Hamilton Music Collective—a not-for-profit that produced concert series like Jazz at the Corktown and since 2014 Jazz at the Gasworks. Later the Collective staged Jazz in the Hubs which became the launching pad for Astrid’s current passion—An Instrument For Every Child. The unique program is aimed at inner city public school students. The children enter the program at age 6 and receive a new instrument and then are given weekly music instruction. “The purpose of the program is not necessarily to create musicians, it is to give them the benefits of music,” said Astrid. “It makes them feel proud and accomplished. They get the discipline of practicing,” adding, “the product (music) is so pleasant. It’s not math. It’s more fun to master a song than to master an equation.” The wheel has come full circle for Astrid—the concept of An Instrument For Every Child takes Astrid back to her school days in Cologne and her training in music and arts management. “Music has been a big part of my life since I was young...it has taken me places that I would never have imagined,” Astrid said. “It has connected me with incredibly inspiring and interesting people and has broadened my horizon in many ways. But most importantly, music—playing it, hearing it, studying it - has always given me a tremendous amount of joy and has kept me centered in difficult times. I hope that through initiatives like the An Instrument for Every Child program, I am able to share some of these experiences by introducing our children and youth, who otherwise might not have the opportunity, to the magical power of music.”



Astrid as a Grooving Vibe



With Anita Baker



With legendary producer Arif Mardin and some solid gold

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