



Tord Gustavsen Trio: "Being There"

Tord Gustavsen piano
Harald Johnsen double-bass
Jarle Vespestad drums

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Norwegian pianist Tord Gustavsen views "Being There" as the third instalment of a trilogy that began with "Changing Places" (recorded 2001 and 2002) and continued with "The Ground" (recorded 2004). On "Being There" the music's priorities are maintained. The album's title is borrowed from a tune on "The Ground", intentionally stressing the continuity of the music, and also underlining its working concept, characterized by Gustavsen as "being acutely present, aware and focused in the fullness of the moment. The group has a definite direction or sound, but there are still many nuances to explore."

Gustavsen's clearly-delineated melodies define a large part of the group's sonic identity, but so does the manner in which the trio approaches them. Technical flamboyance has almost no role to play in Gustavsen's sound-world: restraint is one of the music's hallmarks.

"On the one hand", he notes, "this is a matter of discipline, but it's a discipline inspired by a love of spaces, not by some anorectic minimalist ideology. It's about 'loving every note' – to phrase it as a

slogan – or about trying to play what you'd actually like to hear rather than what you think you ought to play." This 'holding back' allows room for other musical developments to flower naturally, one of which has been the drifting of Jarle Vespestad's drums towards the centre of the sound: the drums are, as Gustavsen says, a crucial component of the music. If this has been a tendency of performances in the live setting almost from the beginning, it is especially evident on "Being There".

Track by track:

At Home was written shortly after the release of "The Ground" and has been a staple of the group's performances for almost three years. Lyrical, "almost romantic", yet "still offering intriguing spaces of rhythmic and tonal possibility" it opens the landscape of the album, a function it has often performed in concert.

Vicar Street is named for an address and a venue in Dublin where the piece was first performed. The piece found a new direction in the studio (Oslo's Rainbow, with Manfred Eicher producing).

"It begins more abstractly and the melody comes in toward the end. It's a simple melody, and the fact that it has some kind of pastoral implication is not without significance."

Draw Near is the first of several wordless hymns on the disc. "A cluster-like chord at the start gives a sense of tonal ambiguity but it ends in a very down-home gospel major feel. To play it is to strike a balance between openness and fundamental rootedness. That's true of a number of pieces on this disc."

Gustavsen describes *Blessed Feet* as a "soft-spoken but dancing piece". Inspired by and dedicated to Gustavsen's young nephew ("the folk-like, playful melody is based on the syllables of something he said one day"), the piece also acknowledges a debt to Keith Jarrett and the "Belonging" quartet and to Jon Christensen's wry drum patterns. It is a piece that seems predestined for much radio play.

Sani, like *Vicar Street*, is also named for the place where it was premiered. "The Sani Festival is held by the sea outside Thessaloniki. We were there last summer, playing up on a majestic cliff looking down at steep hills plunging right into the sea." The piece is done as duo with piano and drums, "performed very rubato, and quite freely improvised", but interjecting fragments of the melody into the improvised flow.

The *Interlude*, with Gustavsen alone, follows directly, "in the same spirit as *Sani*, but without any clear melody from pre-composed material. But it's a rigorously composed-in-the-moment tune, I would say. I perform pieces like this often in concert – to make transitions between the tunes."

Karmosin written by bassist Harald Johnsen is the only non-Gustavsen tune in the album's programme, "a beautiful, almost tango-like piece that is crying out for a film director to adopt it as a theme tune. In this version we have rearranged it. Starting with the drum solo, and with the bass phrasing differently, the piece takes itself in other directions".

Still There is a slow gospel tune in 6/8 with Gustavsen's characteristic blend of "radical simplicity and tonal ambiguity" rendering a key-change midway almost imperceptible. It is one of several pieces of hymnic character on the disc. "Having the hymns spread out has the function of binding the album together formally."

Where We Went, with its Phrygian mode and 'Spanish' feel seems like a departure for the group. "It is in the way it builds", Gustavsen agrees, "but not so much in its essence. It starts out with a definite uptempo feel, where the trio more often starts out slowly to have all rhythmic options open gradually, but also here there is a lot of space in our way of approaching it. It combines inspiration from East Coast cool jazz –

of which Lennie Tristano would be a prime example – with a more down-home and space-oriented whole. I don't know quite where the Spanish influence comes from. We've never set out to play either Spanish or Caribbean-influenced music...."

As its title implies, *Cocoon* is about change and transformation. "This a piece that plays with form, making small twists in familiar forms. 'Cocoon' has, in itself, a more suite like form than some of our pieces – a rubato part, a section with a slow gospel feel that progresses toward a bass solo – a different way of controlling the materials."

Around You is a romantic ballad which recalls the piece "Your Eyes" on the trio's ECM debut "Changing Places" in its chordal construction, with A and B sections in different keys, and the modulation "like something happening in the undercurrent of the melodic development."

Vesper is a piece that has already been used as prelude at evensong services at a church in Norway. A literal hymn, supremely calm, a bold statement in its simplicity. "Our music draws just as much from hymns and gospels as it does from contemporary jazz or contemporary classical music."

The connection to "wordless hymns and open-minded spirituality" is important for Gustavsen who grew up playing in churches and today attends "a very liberal branch of the church in Norway. This bears a lot of significance for me in my life but the music is in no way intended to convey a 'message' in that sense." The music is strictly nondenominational, but the trio is encouraged by the response of listeners around the world who claim to have found solace in it. "It's fulfilling, and humbling, to realize that the music can actually mean something to people in their lives. And this is a lot more important to me, actually, than trying to demonstrate how much technique you have, or how fashionable you can be, or how accurately you can match the tastes of influential critics."

The album closes with *Wide Open*, a last hymn – in this programme – "connecting groundedness and openness. A good tune, I think, with a strong and simple melody that I can really come home to."

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"Being There" is launched with a concert at Oslo's Cosmopolite on April 14. The Tord Gustavsen Trio is on tour in Europe in May with concerts in Germany, Norway, and the UK. An extensive British tour will follow in October. A US tour with dates including the San Francisco Jazz Festival in November is currently being finalized. Festival appearances summer 2007 will also include Canada, Italy, Norway, Belgium and the UK.



The press on "Changing Places" and "The Ground":

"This group has probed into the very heart of musical meaning. .. There really is not a piano trio in the whole of jazz that sounds like Gustavsen." (**Jazzwise**, UK)

".. a pianist of poetic cast, an exceptionally lucid player with a sure sense of melodic structure and an often astonishing lyrical imagination. Spellbinding stuff." (**The Observer**, UK)

"12 beautifully crafted piano meditations" (**Dagbladet**, No)

"Douze pièces comme autant d'hymnes à la lenteur, qui vous laissent dans un état d'abandon troublant. De réceptivité, aussi. .. L'art consommé du 'less is more'." (**Jazzman**, Fr. – choc critical award)

"The Ground is uniformly beautiful, and the trio's rigorously restrained playing is a complete marvel. I've already saved space at the top of my 2005 list for The Ground." (**JazzTimes**, USA)

"The music shimmers." (**Village Voice**, New York, USA)

"Soulfully hip. Haunting, hook-based themes delivered as a close three-way embrace. .. Gustavsen may not play many notes, but he does make them all count, and Vespestad's patient, multi-textured drumming is hypnotic listening." (**The Guardian** - UK)

"The most enthralling pianist/composer and trio to emerge for an age ... follow up the sensational Changing Places with a second set of pellucid ballads, ghostly tangos and gently twinkling ice-funk. Slightly freer than before, but no less stately, The Ground is reverie music of the highest order. ... In short, this album will make your life better." (**The Independent On Sunday** - UK)

"With his very first record as a leader, Tord Gustavsen has created an instant classic... Gustavsen is a master of pianistic control and restraint... This is the least grandstanding great jazz album I have heard since Miles Davis's 'Kind of Blue'." (**Stereophile**, USA)

"*Changing Places* is a beauty ... but soaked in a hushed, delicate romanticism that's hard to resist. Most of the record is pitched at a whisper, with the spaces between the notes easily as significant as the notes themselves. ...A truly beautiful record that (if there's any justice) will find a place as one of ECM's finest releases of the last few years, and probably a place in your heart too. Gorgeous." (**BBC Online**, UK)

"The magic of music has rarely been in better hands than on this beautiful debut album by the trio of pianist Tord Gustavsen... It's the seamless, melodic interplay of the trio that catches the ear. ... This is Norwegian jazz - soulful, yet cool, brooding, pensive. The music flows with subtle finesse...". (**The Australian**, Australia)

"Jazz is seldom this strong. Gustavsen's compositions are musical medicine for your ears. They unite melodic immediacy with atmospheric strength. But also with intriguing improvisations in top trio interaction. Their beauty is not just tender, it is also full of intensity." (**Abendzeitung München**, Germany)

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