

Woodism

“Alternate Reality” (Nwog Records 2021)

It is a rare stroke of luck when a completely new piece of music triggers the spontaneous impression that one has known it for decades. This is undoubtedly true of *Alternate Reality*, the third album by the Swiss band Woodism, based on trombonist Florian Weiss. The ten tracks, recorded with trombone, saxophone, double bass and drums – and with flute and glockenspiel at selected moments – seem as familiar as a warm coat in a snowstorm. Everything is brand new and exciting, and yet instantly becomes music that’s deeply ingrained in the body.

Florian Weiss takes his compositions from the thick of life. Almost in passing he finds tiny ideas, which he enriches with his very own mixture of curiosity, world view and life experience so that complete narrative strands emerge from them. He doesn’t need a concept for this, but can trust his impulses and instincts. If he feels the need to hear something in particular, he can rely on others feeling the same way – it only has to be put into practice. Woodism translates this relaxed necessity into music – reflecting the band’s unmistakable signature. *“I don’t even have to consciously incorporate extra-musical aspects into my music,”* says Weiss, *“because that happens all by itself when I develop a piece. I stick to moods, seasons, places, smells, colors, situations or the weather. Still images emerge in my mind – sometimes clearer, sometimes less so – and provide me with the parameters of a piece.”*

Just so there are no misunderstandings: Florian Weiss doesn’t write program music and he doesn’t compose bouquets of flowers or glasses of water. Rather what he knows and has absorbed through his life flow into his songs. He is a warm-hearted storyteller, but he leaves it up to his listeners to find the individual narrative for his fables. The music is fascinatingly simple – which is the key to accessing it – and yet it never becomes arbitrary. On the contrary, voice and signature can be recognized, which is an indispensable feature of the album. This makes the music seductively approachable and is based, among other things, on the deliberate omission of a harmony instrument.

Florian Weiss may be the leader of Woodism, but the interplay of all four voices is founded on absolute equality. Since he was a student, he has been working closely with alto saxophonist Linus Amstad, bassist Valentin von Fischer and drummer Philipp Leibundgut: years in which they were able to roll out a common philosophy, in which everyone has played an equal part: with what he can do and with what makes him unique. Each voice is exactly what it is – together they give rise to something complete, which makes everything additional not only superfluous, but in this context absolutely unthinkable. The collective tonal spectrum of the band is reminiscent of the palette of a painter who can get everything out of the available colors that he needs for a painting or a whole sequence of paintings.

This certainty in accessing the necessary means in each case expresses itself not least in Weiss’ own trombone playing. He understands the limitations of his instrument and does not even try to imitate how agile and flexible other wind instruments can be played. Instead, he is able to breathe on the trombone and to convey the pulse of life in a similarly undisguised way as Albert Mangelsdorff or Grachan Moncur III did before him. Respect for tradition is part of the idiom of Woodism, without them copying it at any point. And when saxophonist Linus Amstad takes up the flute in “Wabi-Sabi” or drummer Philipp Leibundgut dances on a glockenspiel in “Valse Des Papillons De Nuit,” they conceal timidly, but no less consciously, that they are opening their own world to new possibilities.

Empathy and humanity do not have to be written on banners in order to live them out passionately in art. Florian Weiss, Linus Amstad, Valentin von Fischer and Philipp Leibundgut succeed in creating places of retreat in their pieces, where one can stay and not be afraid to accept well-being as a personal gain. “This is certainly related to a basic attitude that the positive prevails,” Weiss surmises. “It doesn't have to be all cheerful, but warmth and colorfulness are more important to me than distance.” In this sense, in times of inner and outer alienation, *Alternate Reality* unmistakably signifies confidence and an open approach to one another that – and there is no doubt about this – will radiate long beyond the immediate present.

Wolf Kampmann