

■ INTERVIEW

Continental shifts

Jazz saxophonist **ANGELIKA NIESCIER** talks to Chris Searle about how her global travels influence her music

POLISH-BORN Angelika Niescier is the Cologne-based saxophonist whose recent albums *NYC Five* and *The Berlin Concert* won a lot of critical acclaim.

Influenced by music of many genres, from Chopin and Stravinsky to Parker, Coltrane and Shorter, she has travelled the continents with her innovative sounds, but the unlikely jazz venue where she found the response of the people most deeply affecting was a concert in Gaza.

She was there on a Goethe Institute tour with the German Women's Jazz Orchestra as composer and conductor and, she tells me, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet the people "using one of the most universal of languages – music."

The audience of mostly young people was "incredibly enthusiastic," she says.

Equal parts male and female, there were huge groups of families with children and friends. "They enjoyed every piece of music and weren't shy to express it after every tune," she recalls. "That was truly moving, plus two Gaza

rappers sat in for one tune.

"They kind of jammed with me, sound-painting the horns. And rap is not forbidden there, but it is not seen as friendly by the authorities."

The audience was celebrating the fact that they could listen to music that evening and liked the tunes anyway, but it wouldn't have mattered whether it was jazz or something different. "What was important was that the music was live and had the clear character of interaction, which the audience honoured after the musicians took solos," Niescier says.

"I found it very refreshing that our audience was more interested in art and sound and energy, rather than putting labels on the music. They felt the experience deeply."

But living in Gaza is "truly like living in wastelands and also living within boundaries in so many ways, just by the fact of being born in that part of the world," she stresses.

"Yet they still try to live their lives as well as they can, having strong ties to family, trying to get by every day without losing their kindness, their joy of life and their need to grow as human beings."

She recalls the "heart-wrenching" experience after the performance, as she walked around and tried to talk to as many people as she could, many of whom asked: "Has the world outside forgotten us?"

Two of the tunes she played that night feature on her *NYC Five* album and she remembers that her composition *The Barn Thing* really

connected with her Gaza listeners.

It's a rocking, fast-moving track with Niescier's alto saxophone alongside Florian Weber's piano and Ralph Alessi's breathy trumpet.

The other Gaza tune is a Wagner inspiration, the beautifully balladic *Parsifal*, where the horns echo with each other empathy and closeness.

A sense of the live excitement so engaging for her Gaza listeners is there on *The Berlin Concert* album, whose opener *Kundry* makes a profoundly infectious sonic impact, while the track *Like Sheep Looking Up* is perhaps a reference to the powerful of the world, ignoring and compounding the harsh realities of life in places besieged by oppression like Gaza.

Its haunting harmonies and the lingering loneliness of its notes encapsulate human sorrow, as well as Niescier's consciousness of Gaza's tenacity in fanning the flame of human love and resistance.

The concert won the major German jazz award the Albert Mangelsdorff prize and the citation praised her internationalist projects as "always a very special inspiration for the regions in which she travels."

"She connects with fellow artists living in these places, but also engages with the living conditions affecting the population at large."

Long may she continue to do so.

■ *NYC Five* and *The Berlin Concert* are available on Intakt Records, intaktrec.ch

