

MANSION
STRATHMORE

Music in the Mansion

TORD GUSTAVSEN TRIO

Tord Gustavsen, *piano & electronics*

Steinar Raknes, *bass & electronics*

Jarle Vespestad, *drums*

Lars Petter Kristiansen, *sound design*

Sunday, March 29, 2026, 4pm & 7pm



ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Writer Albert Murray often described the creative process of musicians as the act of taking things you love and extending, elaborating, and refining them into new work. This is what Tord Gustavsen and other leading European jazz musicians have done, adopting from the American masters the instrumentation of jazz, the idea of improvising on songs, the idea of talking to each other with their instruments during those improvisations, and applying them to the culture of their homeland. In this way, Europe has brought forth jazz as diverse as its cultures, sounding anew.

For Gustavsen, the musical culture of his Norwegian youth was comprised of singing in the Lutheran church, being surrounded by Scandinavian folk music, and studying classical music. From these sources he has created an altogether new, immediately identifiable sound, true to the American jazz credo—to be who you are and no one else.

As a recent reviewer put it, he “fills the void between clerical hymnology and secular chamber music.” He does not play church music, but his work feels spiritual. He does not play classical chamber music, but his work is sublime and sensitive. He often says his works are “wordless hymns.” But he grooves and dances, too.

Apart from his influences, some core artistic beliefs drive his sound. One is to cherish melody. “If you are to play a melody,” he says, “it has to sound like it is the most important thing in the world here and now.” Another is to have reverence for silence as much as for sound, to say only what needs to be said so as to leave space to savor it. This approach to sound and silence draws audiences into what Gustavsen calls “radical listening,” radical because it is so different from the casual and unfocused listening we so often accept.

His skill in improvisation can be traced to his father who sat his toddler son next to him on the piano bench and encouraged their four hands to play, both in the sense of striking the piano keys and of making up melodies and variations for fun. This ultimately developed into Gustavsen’s sense of variation both as an improviser and composer, but also as a musician who can be in dialogue with others in performance, a trait that is essential if a group aims to sound like a genuine musical unit.

One way this interaction manifests itself is in the flow of concert performances. When Gustavsen walks to the piano, he’s not sure how he will start. Neither do his bandmates. He takes a moment for the idea to come and begins. The others listen and, when it’s time, join in. The first theme will lead to another and then another in little suites on a musical journey that is different each night.

He has said that the trio is a paradox between a pop jazz group devoted to melody and a free jazz group interested in textures and soundscapes. It is how they navigate this duality that brings evenings of transcendent beauty.

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MEET THE ARTISTS

Born in Oslo the eldest of five children, **Tord Gustavsen** and his family moved to a village in rural Norway where he grew up. Playing the piano from age four, he began composing and improvising before learning to read classical pieces. Soon he played gospel in churches, jazz fusion on other stages, and used his classical training to write his own songs. At 19, he returned to Oslo to study sociology, psychology, and the history of religions at the University of Oslo; and met singer Kristin Asbjørnsen whose thoroughness and expressive powers have had a lasting effect on his artistic journey. In 1993, he was accepted to the Conservatory of Music in Trondheim, a place known to emphasize development of artistic identity. Having finished three years of training in jazz piano, jazz history, improvisational techniques, composition and analysis, he moved back to Oslo to pursue a career as a freelance musician and to commence a second wave of academic studies at the University of Oslo. Over the next three years, he obtained a graduate degree in musicology, specializing in the psychology and phenomenology of improvisation.

In 2003, he released his first album with his trio on ECM Records, *Changing Places*, which captured the imagination of listeners worldwide and launched Gustavsen on an international career. Two more trio albums followed, *The Ground* (2005) and *Being There* (2007) to complete a trilogy that was met with critical acclaim and took the trio to leading events in Europe—the UK, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, Greece; in Asia—Japan, South Korea, Azerbaijan, Turkey; in North America—Canada and the U.S.; and Australia.

In 2008, the Vossajazz Festival in Norway commissioned a work that brought a new Gustavsen ensemble to the stage with singer Kristin Asbjørnsen, actress Cecilie Jørstad, saxophonist Tore Brunborg and bassist Mats Eilertsen. In 2009, this commissioned work was arranged for quintet and became Gustavsen's fourth album for ECM, *Restored, Returned*, and gave rise to his new touring quartet with Brunborg, Eilertsen, and drummer Jarle Vespestad, who has played on all of Gustavsen's ECM albums. The quartet went on to complete a second trilogy with the acclaimed albums *The Well* (2012) and *Extended Circle* (2014), and added Portugal, Russia, Brazil, New Zealand, and South Africa to Gustavsen's touring history.

Inspired by his interest in Rumi whose poems he had set to music, Gustavsen created a new trio in 2016 with vocalist Simin Tander and drummer Jarle Vespestad. They performed Norwegian hymns sung in Pashto and poems of Rumi in English for the album *What Was Said*.

In 2018, his artistic journey came full circle with the return to the piano trio and the release of *The Other Side*. Having the melody wholly in his hands once again, Gustavsen's growth as an artist is evident in the album's sound, paradoxically deeper and darker yet more open. To his sound palette he added the subtle use of electronics. His ninth and tenth albums for ECM Records, *Opening* (2022) and *Seeing* (2024) were again devoted to the piano trio.

Before starting his solo career, Gustavsen had already been a vital part of the Norwegian jazz scene for some years. His playing was a cornerstone in projects that featured some of Norway's finest singers, including Solveig Slettahjell, Silje Nergaard, Siri Gjære, and Kristin Asbjørnsen.

Among those who have commissioned him to compose works are the Vossajazz Festival (Norway), Cheltenham Jazz Festival (UK), and the Oslo International Church Music Festival. His ongoing collaborators include singer Solveig Slettahjell with whom he has created new versions of Christmas hymns, singer Mahsa Vahdat with whom he has interpreted Persian repertoire, singer Simin Tander, and saxophonists Tore Brunborg and Trygve Seim. In 2017, he became cantor and jazz pianist for Tanum Church in Bærum, Norway. His awards include the Norwegian Grammy, the *Spellemannsprisen*, for the album *Restored, Returned*. The album *What Was Said* was awarded the *Jahrespreis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik* as one of the ten best albums in any genre in 2016 by music critics in Germany. In its 71st year of making awards, the Académie du Jazz of France selected Gustavsen for its 2024 *Prix du musicien européen* (*European Musician Prize*).

www.tordgustavsen.com

A Norwegian bassist, vocalist, and songwriter with his roots in jazz, **Steinar Raknes** has toured most corners of the world, collaborating with musicians from many styles of music. Recognized for his work as composer and musician in the award-winning jazz trio Urban Connection, he has also collaborated with artists such as Chick Corea, Michael Brecker, Bobby McFerrin, and Ola Kvernberg. After completing a Master of Arts at NTNU in 2001, he played in a large number of ensembles including The Core, Ola Kvernberg Trio, Skáidi, Kirsti Huke Quartet, and the Trondheim Jazz Orchestra. Raknes is a double bass virtuoso, playing both pizzicato and arco and known for his big tone as well as his work with alternative pizzicato styles inspired by African Kora and American fingerpicking. He also extends the sound of the double bass and his voice by using guitar pedals and loopers. The name of Raknes's vocal project is STILLHOUSE, for which he has written songs and lyrics in an Americana style, mixing jazz, blues, and more. He has also worked with the Sámi music *yoik*, beginning with a collaboration with the great yoiker Inga Juuso. With her successor, Sara Marielle Gaup, he is now performing with the duo Arvvas.

Born in Kirkenes, Norway, **Jarle Vespestad** turned his attention to music in high school, graduating from Toneheim Folk High School and then taking up jazz studies at Trondheim Musikkonservatorium where he became the driving force behind many successful bands to emerge from Trondheim. Among them was Vesletrekk, which became the band Supersilent, Farmers Market, and the Maria Kannegaard Trio. Vespestad joined the Tord Gustavsen Trio for its debut recording, *Changing Places*, released on ECM Records in 2003, and has remained Gustavsen's creative partner for the nine albums that followed including the most recent entitled *Seeing*. The kind of sublime minimalism, married to a distinct sense of groove, that Vespestad stands for has very few, if any, parallels in the world of drummers. His lyrical emphasis and the highly responsive interplay developed between Gustavsen and himself over the years are essential elements of the band's musical texture. If you hear someone singing when the band plays live, it's probably Vespestad.