

JON-ERIK KELLOSO: EarRegularly Yours

By Michael Steinman

ON SUNDAY NIGHTS, LOCALS AND visitors wiser than the guidebooks head to 326 Spring Street, Soho, New York, for rare musical pleasures. The Ear Inn is a historic landmark, but the main attraction is the expertly passionate band of improvisers, The EarRegulars, led by trumpeter **Jon-Erik Kellso**, who play from 8-11:15p.m., 50 Sundays a year. They began in summer, 2007. In a city where gigs and clubs vanish inexplicably, a “steady” of 16 years is stunning.

The EarRegulars begin the evening as a quartet — Jon-Erik, a gently amplified guitarist, an acoustic bassist, and a second horn — but musician friends drop by and may be invited to sit in. Once, a rendition of “Tiger Rag” included 13 players, with an ecstatic closing ensemble. It is the closest thing to the mythic 52nd Street of the 1940s. “As a little kid, I dreamed of being in the Harlem Globetrotters — not the most realistic goal, I know! — and this must be what it’s like to be in the midst of that kind of playfully dazzling teamwork,” Jon-Erik says. “This kind of fun is contagious, and even folks who thought they didn’t like ‘jazz’ have become dedicated fans.”

Jon-Erik’s longtime colleague and band co-founder is guitarist/singer Matt Munisteri. A performance by The EarRegulars may embrace Armstrong, Basie, Ellington and Parker. Astute listeners can also hear nods to Coltrane, Motown and 70s pop, everything seamlessly melodic, swinging and surprising. Those who need musical antecedents can think of the recordings Django Reinhardt made with Ellingtonians, the Bechet-Spanier Hot Four, Basie and Ellington small groups, the Buck Clayton Jam Sessions. Many young musicians make pilgrimages to see and perhaps sit in with the band from as far away as Tasmania.

There’s no room for a drum set, but Chuck Redd and others have played wire brushes on the paper tablecloth; and singers Tamar Korn, Catherine Russell and Albanie Falletta — singing acoustically, without a microphone — are welcomed to the corner next to a telephone booth, the Ear Inn “bandstand.” The result is timeless mainstream, echoing Basie and Ellington small groups without being a history lesson.

Jon-Erik prefers lyrical sound-painting

to brass exhibitionism, and he is as comfortable with Don Cherry as with Nick LaRocca. Like his hero Ruby Braff, he is a great subversive, digging inside the music to find what others have missed. And he is a model bandleader/on-the-spot arranger, adding intuitive telepathy to any ensemble. He’s also the “hot man” on trumpet with Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks, Monday nights at Birdland Theater. His singular individuality has made him admired worldwide.

Until this year, the Sunday night sessions at The Ear were documented only through amateur videos on YouTube, but we now have recordings for posterity. The results arrived recently on Arbors Records, the label Jon-Erik first recorded for in 1990. He says, “I’ve often fantasized about making a live recording there that captures the musical magic that we manifest. This residency features a killer rotating cast of the baddest badasses, surprise guests, free-wheeling improvised interplay, and in-the-moment solos with an enthusiastic audience of fans from all over the world, as well as pleasantly surprised folks who just showed up because it’s one of the oldest (and coolest) bars in town.”

The disc is *Jon-Erik Kellso and The EarRegulars Live at the Ear Inn* (Arbors Records ARCD 19488). It features seven extended, rollicking performances: “Sleep,” “I’m Comin’ Virginia,” “No One Else But You,” “Indian Summer,” “Vignette,” “I Double Dare You,” and “Back O’Town Blues.” The collective cast of characters in addition to Jon-Erik and Matt is John Allred, trombone; Scott Robinson, tenor saxophone, taragoto and Normaphone; Neal Miner, double bass; Chris Flory, guitar; Pat O’Leary, double bass; Jay Rattman, alto saxophone; Evan

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