



MASTERS OF JAZZ VIOLIN
Mads Tolling
(Madsman Records)

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Mads Tolling honors past jazz-violin legends

By Greg Cahill

A former member of Turtle Island Quartet and Stanley Clarke's band, Mads Tolling has earned two Grammy Awards for Best Classical Crossover Album and established his place among an elite cadre of contemporary jazz violinists. On *Masters of Jazz Violin*, he pays tribute to such forerunners as fellow Dane and mentor Svend Asmussen (who donated dozens of his charts to Tolling before his death at age 100), Stéphane Grappelli, Jean-Luc Ponty, Stuff Smith, and others.

Tolling is joined by Danish acoustic guitarist Jacob Fischer, who played for 20 years in Asmussen's quartet, as well as Danish double-bassist Matthias Petri. The album spans a range of styles, from the upbeat swing of the Django Reinhardt–Grappelli signature duet “Swing 39” and Grappelli's own romantic ballad “Souvenir de Villingen” to the Latin vibe of Chick Corea's “Armando's Rhumba” and the playful but tender “Sermon for Stuff.” Tolling applies the same heartfelt



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bowed-and-plucked violin to such chestnuts as Hoagy Carmichael's “Stardust,” Joseph Kosma's “Autumn Leaves,” and George Gershwin's “Embraceable You.” Throughout, there's an alluring sweetness to Tolling's tone, as he honors diverse jazz traditions and applies his talent to some of the greatest melodies in the jazz songbook. *Masters of Jazz Violin* presents a rich sonic pallet and an intimate, live-in-the-studio feel, thanks to the extensive use of a single mic.

What was your goal going into this recording project?

We had a pretty loose idea of what we wanted to do when we first started recording in 2019. We had two programs we wanted to record: one was *The Danish-American Songbook* and one was *Masters of Jazz Violin*. We thought it would be interesting recording-wise to take a sort of bluegrass-style approach, where you adapt your volume and playing style, using essentially

one mic. Another challenge: We tried to play some of Joe Venuti's music, specifically the early recordings with Eddie Lang. Wow, *that* stuff is tricky—almost through-composed ragtime. At the time we weren't really able to do it justice, so we had to save it for another time.

Had you all played together prior to the recording session?

We had played the material for several concerts and tours around Scandinavia with more or less the same group. My collaboration with Jacob Fischer started in connection with the celebration of Svend Asmussen's centennial. Jacob had been an integral part of Svend's group for 20 years, and so we decided it made sense to play some of Svend's music, since he had stopped touring around 2012. We played well over 150 concerts together with a few different rhythm sections and toured Scandinavia and Germany between 2014–24. *Masters of*

Jazz Violin became a natural continuation of the material we already loved of Svend's music, and we added selections by Danish violinist Finn Ziegler; the two Frenchmen, Jean-Luc Ponty and Stephane Grappelli; and the American jazz violinist Stuff Smith. Bassist Matthias Petri joined the Danish version of Mads Tolling Quartet in 2017, and he is featured on *Masters of Jazz Violin* as well. We did not include drummer Andreas Svendsen, because drums would have been too difficult to record with our minimalist setup.

I love the chemistry between you and Jacob. How far back do you guys go?

I had never met Jacob before we communicated via email in 2013. I had heard him for the first time in concert when I was 14, at a concert with Svend Asmussen. Svend and Jacob had left a big impression on me. He often played and recorded with my first jazz-violin teacher, Kristian Jørgensen, who is no longer with us.

You and Jacob share equal roles in the recording. Why do you guys mesh so well?

Yeah, I think it comes from playing for so long and sharing similar ideals of treating the music as both jazz and chamber music. There are times to groove and swing, but then there are times to leave space and not force things. Most of the arrangements were figured out on the spot, and then we just played them several times on tour. We had the luxury of having played tons of gigs before recording. Most recording sessions happen first and then the tour, which in some ways isn't as ideal.

Tell me more about your own affiliation with Asmussen.

After that first concert with Svend, at age 14, I was truly inspired, so I looked him up in the phone book. When I called, I asked, "Is this jazz violinist Svend Asmussen?" And, sure enough, it was! I asked if I could take some lessons with him. He told me that he did not teach, but advised me to listen to Stuff Smith, which I did. Years went by, and around the time of my studies at Berklee College of Music, I got an invitation from fellow jazz violinist Bjarke Falgren. He invited me to brunch at Svend's house. Svend was not in a good mood, because he had lost his

wife after 50 years of marriage, and by the end of our time together, he gave away much of his sheet music to Bjarke and me. At the age of 85, he did not intend to play violin anymore. Miraculously, just two years later, Svend met another lady, got remarried, and started to record and tour again. He played all the way till age 95, when he had a series of strokes, and he lived to be 100 years old.

Did you use any of Svend's charts in the new recording?

Yes, specifically the use of "Embraceable You" is an interesting story. Svend had made a number of solo arrangements of

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standards, mostly. These are very intricate and complex versions and are through-composed with many double-stops and harmonics. Part of his donation to Bjarke and me were these solo tunes. Given that he never had recorded these, the originals were very valuable. Eventually, a book was made of these arrangements and a recording made by the well-known Danish violinist Kim Sjøgren. I was glad to make my own version of this tune.

The album honors a range of jazz giants. How did you select these particular tunes?

Jacob and I sought tunes that had special meaning. I always loved "Armando's Rhumba," the tune that Jean-Luc Ponty had originally recorded with Chick Corea and the tune I had jammed on with Jean-Luc, when

he gave a master class at Berklee College of Music in 2001. "Souvenir de Villingen" is a beautiful tune that Grappelli wrote by himself, a rare find given that he co-wrote most of his music with Django Reinhardt. The piece is a bit overlooked, in my opinion, and one of the most beautiful examples of Grappelli's emotional playing. It ended up working out well for us to play. Finn Ziegler was a beloved Danish jazz violinist, very different from Svend, but great in his own way. He always had a cigar in the side of his mouth, ran a jazz club, and had this raw way of swinging. And then there are the standards.

Why was it important to celebrate those particular players and composers?

All of these players had a profound impact on me and my development as a jazz musician. My first time really starting to figure out jazz was listening and learning note-by-note Grappelli's "It's Only a Paper Moon." Then I tried Stuff Smith's version of "Mack the Knife" and then Asmussen's "A Night in Tunisia." Finn Ziegler was significant, because his music led to my first real paid gig, acting in the Danish TV Series *The Spider*, where I, playing in a 1930s jazz ensemble, had to learn his improvised solos note for note.

Are there tracks that especially touched you?

Yes, certainly "Sermon for Stuff" is very moving. It's a tune Asmussen wrote for Stuff Smith after his death in 1967. Stuff was buried in Denmark. "Souvenir de Villingen" is a beautiful track that turned out well. And then there is "Dan," a fun-loving, feel-good samba that was written for Danish writer Dan Turèll.

Were you satisfied with the results?

I am pretty satisfied. There are always things that you don't necessarily love, but that is part of the process of playing jazz. You take the mistakes with the magical moments, and the one-mic recording technique kept things pretty honest. The bass sound was challenging to mix and deal with, but the circumstances of this having almost the feel of a home recording makes all of the technicalities and imperfections kind of insignificant. I like to feel this way, because the perfectionistic way will drive you crazy. ■