

## ILHAN ERSAHIN

### Saxophonist Turned Club Entrepreneur

You can easily pass 62 Avenue C. That's the address for Nublu, one of the hottest new clubs in New York's underground electronica and jazz scene. It's a quaint, unassuming place with no marquee or marking.

Nevertheless, just inside Nublu's white doors is a chic wonderland. Modern furniture, a well-stocked bar and a modest DJ booth decorate the cozy club, which has a small performance space right in front of an enclosed garden patio. Open seven days a week, the lounge plays host to the likes of Butch Morris, Jason Lindner and Graham Haynes.

The place serves as a new destination for established, cutting-edge musicians and an incubator for new talent. The funky art-electronica group Brazilian Girls got its start here, as did the jazz-electronica outfit Wax Poetic.

Nublu's slightly "under the radar" charisma serves as an ideal analogy for the career of its 39-year-old founder Ilhan Ersahin, a gifted tenor saxophonist-turned-entrepreneur and global impresario who seems at once ubiquitous and anonymous—at least when it comes to the mainstream jazz scene in the United States. In countries such as Turkey, England, France and Brazil, he's treated like a rock star.

At the beginning of the year, Ersahin took his current ensemble, Love Trio (with drummer Kenny Wollesen and bassist Jesse Murphy), along with drummer Aaron Johnson (of Brazilian Girls), Jesse Harris and rappers Dionysos and Stimulus, to Brazil. The crew rented a big villa and threw parties for two months through a partnership Ersahin forged with a Brazilian radio station.

A decade ago, Ersahin was a promising post-bopper trying to find his way in New York's crowded straight-ahead jazz scene. With a dark tone that at times recalled Joe Henderson, his playing was steeped in the "young lions" esthetic of the mid '90s, even though his first Golden Horn discs, *Home* (1997) and *Our Song* (1998), were composed of all originals.

Having studied at Berklee College of Music from 1986-'88, Ersahin arrived in New York a few years later, where he forged a barter deal with Joe Lovano—he would bring Lovano exquisite cymbals from Turkey in exchange for saxophone lessons. But in New York, Ersahin's starry eyes got blurred by commercial realities. The pressure of emulating yesteryear's hard-bop began weighing heavily on his creative spirit. "It felt strange to keep playing other people's music," he said. "If I played a Wayne Shorter song, I started sounding like Wayne Shorter."

Born to a Turkish father and a Swedish mother, Ersahin grew up in Stockholm, where he first picked up the saxophone. As a teenager, Ersahin would go to Turkey every summer and spend three months at the beach town of Bodrum, where he claims that his music career started. Still, he had his eyes set on New York City.

"I dreamt about playing tenor with Art Blakey," he said. "But when I arrived, the scene was already decided upon. It was either the John Zorn scene or the white beboppers or the black beboppers.

"Then I started listening to Massive Attack, Portishead, Tricky and Everything But The Girl," he continued. "I got absorbed by the British trip-hop scene. Those guys were hearing the music the same way I was hearing it."

His interests in fusing cosmopolitan jazz with electronica and soul



JACK VARTOGGIAN

were apparent on Wax Poetic's 1999 debut, issued on Atlantic. At that time, the group featured a then-unknown Norah Jones. But before Wax Poetic could pick up any commercial or critical steam, Atlantic shut down the department to which the band was signed. Distraught, Ersahin wrote Atlantic, requesting the masters of Wax Poetic's sessions. Remarkably, the company granted his request.

"We were fusing a lot of different types of music, but in an organic way, not just putting Indian flute on drum-'n'-bass," Ersahin said. "We wanted to evoke the feeling of living in Manhattan, where there are so many different people and cultures."

Since Wax Poetic's disastrous debut release, it has gone on to become an underground jazztronica sensation. Its 2003 disc, *Nublu Sessions*, found Jones making a cameo appearance as well as vocalist N'Dea Davenport and spoken-word artist Saul Williams. The group has also traded in the volatile drum-'n'-bass rhythms and angst-ridden gloom of trip-hop for a more silken, polyglot sound—one that Ersahin claims to have provided the impetus for Nublu. "We had a unique sound, but I needed a home for it," he said. "Nublu started slow and then my friends and I started playing there. Now, there's this whole new scene coming out of Nublu."

In addition to building the club's reputation, Ersahin recently launched Nublu Records, releasing CDs and 12" vinyl singles from Wax Poetic, Love Trio, his new band Kudu and Brazilian percussionist Mauro Refosco. He also has collaborative projects with trumpeter Erik Truffaz, reggae producer U-Roy and electronica maverick Charles Stella slated for summer release.

And in keeping in step with Ersahin's globetrotting lifestyle, he's entertaining the idea of going to Istanbul this summer to launch Nublu East. "I feel a need to be here in New York," he said. "But a summer in Istanbul could help raise Nublu to another level." —John Murph