



# Sunna Gunnlaugs



— Concerto, Austria

**T**he Washington Post described her music as possessing “such timeless virtues as lyricism and grace... elegantly bridges soul-searching passages with uncluttered swing.” Pianist Sunna Gunnlaugs reaffirms that assessment on her latest CD, *Cielito Lindo*, the third consecutive album in the space of five years from Icelandic pianist Sunna Gunnlaugs featuring her trio with bassist Þorgrímur Jónsson and drummer Scott McLemore. It inhabits a similar aesthetic as

Concerto in Austria gave it 5 stars. And it made the top 10 lists of bloggers near and far.

In 2013 the trio was named the Official Band of the city of Reykjavik. Distilled was released and the reviews were no less flattering. London Jazz News called it “a fresh and impeccably presented album from a strongly bonded trio brim-full of ideas.” All About Jazz put it on its list of the top 12 albums of 2013, Rhapsody chose it as one of the

Reykjavik she began taking lessons on the organ at the urging of her mother. “The idea of playing the piano didn’t appeal to me as a kid. I associated it with classical pianists who seemed to have no fun. But on the organ you could play anything, the Beatles, polkas, Strauss and that seemed like more fun.” By her teens, having realized that you could in fact play a variety of music on the piano, it was the gift of a Bill Evans trio record (appropriately named “You’re Gonna Hear From Me”) that sold her on modern jazz.

## “Gunnlaugs proves that jazz can have a wider appeal without losing integrity.”

– All About Jazz

their previous albums, which embraces the open of the Icelandic horizon but doesn’t ignore the blues.

The release of *Long Pair Bond* in 2011 opened many doors for the trio. They were invited to perform on jazz festivals in Europe and America, and were featured performers at JazzAhead in Bremen and at the Kennedy Center as part of their Nordic Cool festival. They also embarked on a two week bi-coastal North American tour in June 2012, during which two concerts were recorded for radio broadcasts.

Glowing reviews for *Long Pair Bond* came pouring in from all over the world. In Japan it was chosen as Album of the Month by critic Hiroki Sugita. In the Belgian jazz magazine *Jazzmozaiek* it was the editor’s pick.

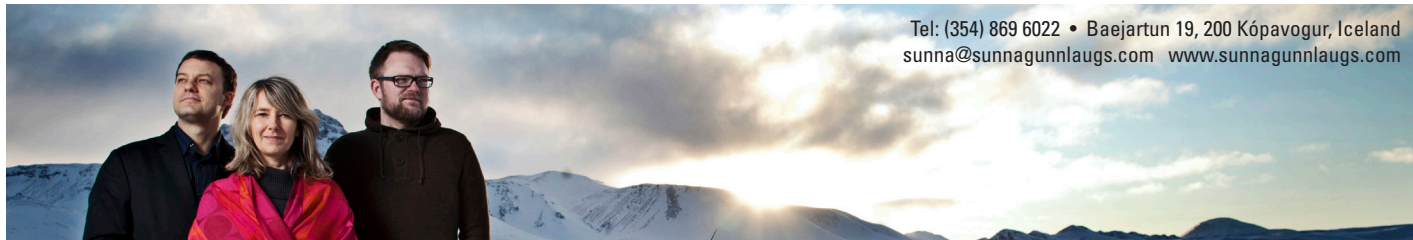
top 10 jazz releases of September, and the New York-based blog *JazzWrap* chose it as Album of the Year.

Tours to support *Distilled* took the trio to Denmark, Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, the United States and Canada. The trio released *Cielito Lindo* on the 2015 Reykjavik Jazz Festival and performed on the Culturescapes Festival in Switzerland as part of a European tour. Of course, there will be more tours and traveling for the trio with the release of this new album, but for Gunnlaugs, the path to this point has been one of searching for her own unique voice, finding the right collaborators, and never forgetting her Icelandic provenience.

As a child growing up on a small peninsula called Seltjarnarnes not far from

In 1993 she made her way to the US as a student at William Paterson College and began to hone her own distinct musical voice both as an improviser and a composer while immersing herself in the standards and studying the





masters. Just a 15 minute drive from Manhattan, inspiration was not hard to find. "Suddenly being able to go to the Village Vanguard or Bradley's any night of the week and hear amazing pianists was an incredible experience. It was such a stimulating environment," and one that Gunnlaugs had no intention of leaving after graduating in 1996. She moved to Brooklyn and made her debut recording "Far Far Away" with her trio: bassist Dan Fabricatore and drummer (and future husband), Scott McLemore.

## "an appetite to explore the inner soul."

– Jazzwise, UK

In New York her focus shifted decidedly to performing her own music. She began appearing at listening rooms such as Cornelia Street Cafe and the Knitting Factory, and rave reviews followed. Gunnlaugs was proclaimed an "impressive newcomer" by the Village Voice. She called upon saxophonist Tony Malaby and bassist Drew Gress. "I was familiar with Tony from his own bands and was stunned by how expressive he was. Drew, I knew from his work with Fred Hersch and Dave Douglas. He always added such a bounce to my tunes, while keeping it really open." In 1999, along with McLemore, the quartet recorded *Mindful* and, with time left over on the same day *Songs from Iceland* which was released in 2009.

*Mindful* was chosen as one of the top 10 CDs of the year by the *Virginian Pilot*, and from the opening flurry of notes in duet with Malaby the listener knows something special is coming. There is at once a joyful buoyancy and ethereal melancholy which envelops the listener from start to finish. That ambience continues on "Songs from Iceland" and the relationship with the material, five Icelandic folk-songs that Gunnlaugs grew up with, is just as personal. "These were tunes that we were playing on concerts, and when we felt *Mindful* was complete I suggest-

ed we record these for posterity. I wasn't really sure what I would do with them, but it seemed important to document." Almost a decade later "Songs from Iceland" was released, adding more weight to a recommendation from *Jazziz Magazine* that her "unique blend of jazz piano and Icelandic folk music" is a "great listen."

In the meantime Sunna released 2 albums, the first was 2002's "Fagra Veröld" (music written to Icelandic

poetry), featuring Gress and McLemore as well as the voice of Kristjana Stefánsdóttir and saxophonist Sigurdur Flosason. The 2nd was 2003's high-energy "Live in Europe" which rode the jazz charts into the top 10 in both the US and Canada. It was recorded in Prague in the middle of a three-week tour of Europe with saxophonist Ohad Talmor and bassist Matt Pavolka.

In 2005 she and McLemore relocated to Iceland. They returned to the US for a tour in 2009 and recorded "The Dream" with alto saxophonist Loren Stillman and Norwegian bassist Eivind Opsvik. On its release the album jumped straight to #2 on the Canadian jazz charts and to #20 on US CMJ charts...adding new perspective to Time Out New York's statement that Gunnlaugs is "proof that jazz is as much a part of the picture as the pop of Björk or SigurRos."

## "such timeless virtues as lyricism and grace..."

– Washington Post

Gunnlaugs has also worked in duo settings lately with German pianist Julia Hülsmann and with Dutch bass clarinetist Maarten Ornstein. Ornstein and her released the album *Unspoken* in January 2016.

### More press quotes:

4 stars \*\*\*\* "another young European jazz piano trio currently standing out from the crowd."  
— Selwyn Harris, [Jazzwise UK](#)

"...you're deeply moved when you listen to her music."  
— Hiroki Sugita, [Jazz Japan Magazine](#), Japan

"Notwithstanding the crowded piano trio landscape, *Cielito Lindo* is a very beautiful, melodic, contemplative piece of Iceland by an outstandingly democratic trio, you discover more riches in it every time you listen." — Mary Leamington, [London Jazz News](#), UK

"lilting and beautiful enough to have an almost hypnotic effect" — [All About Jazz](#)

"...erschafft sie vollkommen kitschfreie und harmonisch wie melodisch eigenständige Klaviertrio-Musik," — [Concerto](#), Austria

"Wow, wow, WOW! So damn pretty. This song [Long Pair Bond] has the restrained ambience of a typical ECM-label piano trio, but with the buoyant soulfulness that makes Keith Jarrett's 70's American Quartet such a joy to listen to. Highly recommended." — [All About Jazz](#)

"a style that conjures up the advanced artistry of both Bobo Stenson and Keith Jarrett."  
— [Something Else](#), USA

"Ein herausgerandes album" — [Jazz Podium](#), Germany