

## **Ken Thomson & Slow / Fast**

### ***It Would Be Easier If***

Ken Thomson: bcl / as / Russ Johnson: tp / Nir Felder: g / Adam Armstrong: b / Fred Kennedy: dr, electr / Melanie T. Sehman: glockenspiel (4)

5 Tracks

Aufnahme: Juni 2009, Acoustic Rec. Studios, Brooklyn, NYC

Produzent: Ken Thomson

Spieldauer: 48:41

Intuition / Sunny Moon

★★★★

Als Co-Leader von Gutbucket drängt der Holzbläser Ken Thomson gewaltig und schweißtreibend nach vorn. Bei seinem ganz eigenen Projekt Slow / Fast lässt er sich zwar auch nicht abhängen, aber nun kommen seine Kompositionen origineller, schwingt er sich mit fünf Kollegen in andere, ganz eigene Dimension. Die kommen dem näher, was er als Auftragsarbeiten für das American Composers Orchestra oder Bang on a Can schreibt: hochkonzentrierter, verdichteter Kammerjazz.

Kongeniale Partner fand der Bassklarinetist und Altsaxofonist in den Mitspielern Russ Johnson, der junge Trompeter spielte bereits mit Ribot, Frisell und Lou Reed; Gitarrist Nir Felder arbeitete für Cindy »Santana« Blackman und Dave Douglas, und Drummer Fred Kennedy liefert bei David Krakauer und einigen Indierockbands den passenden Groove. Dieser musikalisch vielfältige Hintergrund half sicherlich den Musikern, Thomsons komplexe und lange Kompositionen – die versiert allerlei Spielarten des Jazz, der World Music und Klassik einbeziehen – adäquat umzusetzen und dazu eigene Improvisationen zu addieren. Ken Thomson selbst bezeichnet seine Musik selbstbewusst, aber sehr passend als »21st Century Third Stream Musik«.

*Olaf Maikopf*

## JAZZ & KLASSIK

Intakt Records, das vitale, immer Neues suchende, kompromisslose Label aus Zürich, bereitet das Jubiläum seines 25-jährigen Bestehens vor. Sehr genau weiß man auch in der Schweiz, dass Innovationen umso faszinierender geraten, kann man sich bei der immanenten Suche auf Nestoren verlassen, die ihre Erfahrungen einspeisen und dabei in den Diskurs mit den nachfolgenden Generationen treten. Schlagzeuger Pierre Favre (Jahrgang 1937), einer der weltweit wirklichen Individualisten auf diesem Instrumentarium, hat solche Dialoge immer wieder befördert. Die mit dem Posaunisten Samuel Blaser begannen in Dürrenmatts Wohnhaus in Neuchâtel. Museal gerieten sie deswegen nicht, allein schon weil man sich ungeschwätzig und sehr differenziert etwas zu sagen hat. *uste*

**Pierre Favre-Samuel Blaser: Vol À Voile** (Intakt)

Was man nach den fulminanten Gutbucket-Alben schon ahnen konnte, wird hier auf geradezu sensationelle Weise bestätigt: Ken Thomson, Boss dieser atemberaubenden Punk-Jazz-Band, ist ein Komponist und Arrangeur von Gnaden. Slow/Fast, seine neue Band, erzeugt eine berückende Faszination in vielfältig schillernden Klangfarben und Stimmungen. Ein überlegtes Album, das die Spontaneität nicht vergisst. Ein reifes, originelles und vielseitiges Opus, das doch aus einem Guss ist. Scheinbar als klassisches Quintett besetzt, schwingt (und swingt) sich das ein in eine neue Dimension und wird zu einem nachhaltigen Signal, Ken Thomson endlich nicht mehr als Geheimtipp zu handeln. *uste*

**Ken Thomson and Slow/Fast: It Would Be Easier If** (Intuition/SunnyMoon)

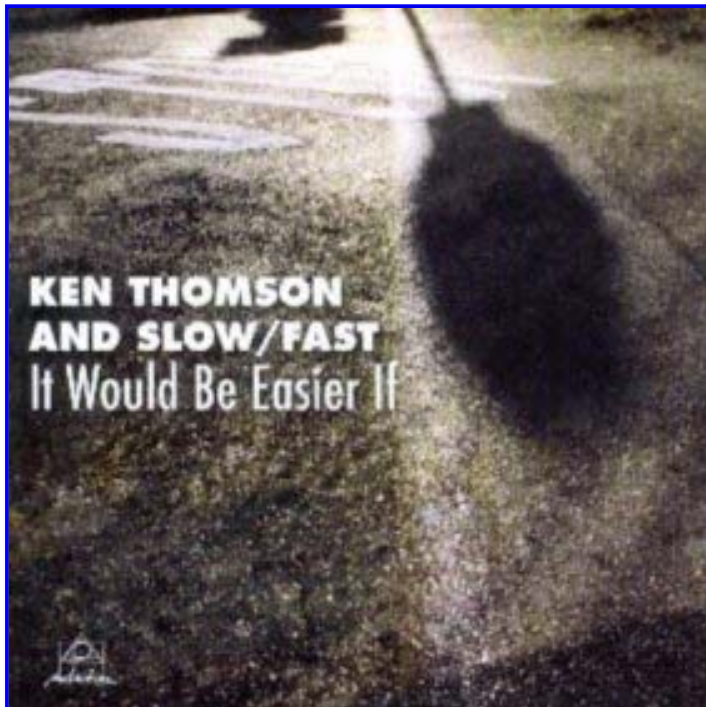


# You're So Post-Post-Rock Right Now

[◀ Manifesto by Dan Berg and The Gestalt: An Album Review](#)

## November 10, 2010 It Would Be Easier If by Ken Thomson and Slow/Fast: An Album Review

I continue my exploration of “jazz” music that inhabits a genre best described as “other” with *It Would Be Easier If*, a new album released in the United States on November 9 by Ken Thomson and the ensemble Slow/Fast. Ken Thomson is a Brooklyn-based composer, clarinetist, and saxophonist who writes fully-formed and notated jazz compositions that are then fleshed out by Slow/Fast—trumpeter Russ Johnson, bassist Adam Armstrong, guitarist Nir Felder, and drummer Fred Kennedy.



Generally speaking, I think that once the genre has been identified, in order to introduce the listener to the music itself, it's best to leave genre classifications far behind and simply enjoy the well-crafted music or what it is, irrespective of what label someone attaches to it.

And so we have the highly provocative *It Would Be Easier If*, by Ken Thomson and Slow/Fast, an album comprised of five tracks, nearly all of them at least 9 minutes long.

“Kleine Helmet” features a ruminative melody in the trumpet and bass clarinet, which proves to be an inspired timbre combination. The texture and overall mood here is illuminated by the inclusion of Nir Felder's electric guitar, with chords that waft in the air like some welcome and lingering fragrance. Interestingly, as the opening track, “Kleine Helmet” acts as a palette cleanser of sorts, alleviating the

effects of whatever other music you were just listening to, or whatever other activity you were engage in prior to this.

After the almost meditative nature of the opener, the listener previously uninitiated in the work of Ken Thomson may find “Goddamn You, Ice Cream Truck” a real shock. The immediate auditory assault of distorted guitar more commonly found in alternative rock and certain derivations of hardcore is quickly joined by the twin riffs of trumpet and clarinet, first in unison with one another. But then the instruments diverge, both rhythmically and melodically, as chromaticism creeps in to add further tension. I’m not sure that I’ve ever consciously thought of jazz as aggressive music (and certainly not angst-ridden), but while listening to “Goddamn You,” that’s exactly what I thought. The brilliance of the rhythmic precision here cannot be overstated. Thomson sees the congruities of jazz and hard rock, in both the licks and the rhythms they employ, and perhaps more importantly the emotions both musics can embody.

Throughout, the drums are an indispensable constant, but with all the activity in the sonic foreground, the brilliance of Fred Kennedy on this song may go unnoticed at first. An extended improvised guitar solo from Nir Felder allows the listener to focus solely on the melody and the groove in which it nestles, at least temporarily.

Again in “Goddamn You, Ice Cream Truck,” Thomson’s intuition and compositional prowess comes to the fore—his uncanny sense of musical architecture, pacing, and interestingly, portion size. By this I mean that Thomson seems to understand that there is only so much the human ear can pick up on and latch onto at any given time, and with this in mind, presents his musical ideas succinctly and in digestible amounts. There is never “too much” sound, too much to listen to at any one time, and he never lingers on a particular theme longer than is prudent.

The song “No, no, no” begins with drummer Kennedy painting a decidedly more ambient and abstract landscape for the first 82 seconds of the song, before trumpet and clarinet chime in with harmonic drones that wash over the ear in ways that can be soothing one moment, slightly apprehension-building the next. The guitar rounds out the textural and timbre-related imbalances that come with the absence of palpable low-voice presence. A shorter drum solo interjects itself into the drone, and the full force of the drone dissipates, only slightly, to make room for a tasty sax outro. “No, no, no” is a striking composition worth poring over, beautiful and grating all at once. And as the median track on the album, it serves as the influential force of balance tying the other four pieces together.

“Wanderangst” sounds like the title suggests. The track starts off much like any other “standard” contemporary jazz piece, plus the petite twinkling of a glockenspiel. But these elements only lull the listener into a false sense of security. Any perceived meandering gets obliterated with frenzied licks that will cause severe melodic dizziness, even while the players articulate the notes with pinpoint accuracy and unmitigated intensity. Any further verbal explanation would not do this piece justice.

“It Would Be Easier If” is a perfectly acceptable closing track, but after four consecutive edge-of-your-seat musical microcosms, a first listen to this final song found it somehow lacking when compared to the dynamism of the others. That being said, the song ends in an unexpected place, and the result is a satisfying one that rewards repeat listens.

*It Would Be Easier If* is a crazily engaging set of musical compositions that demand equally engaged listening. Thomson takes his listeners on a sonic joyride that proves as meticulous and well-crafted as it is raucous and unpredictable. The lines between jazz, prog-rock, and hardcore/metal elements were never smeared with such blessed creativity as they are here. Thomson has a real knack for creating music that has momentum, a clear arc that communicates to the listener, “We’re going somewhere, and it’s going to be intriguing.”

# Ken Thomson Turns His Reed Work to Chamber Jazz

- Posted on Nov 4th 2010 4:30PM by [Tad Hendrickson](#)



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Improvisation is a big, if not the biggest, pillar of jazz music. For many, it's what gives the music its unique identity, separating it from pop and the rest. Musicians wax poetic about the experience of playing that way, and I've written extensively about it through the years, particularly applauding those groups that practice free playing in which little if anything is written out or composed ahead of time.

But in recent years I've become more patient with jazz musicians who emphasize the art of crafting great tunes. Nothing is more annoying than listening to a talented but unrehearsed band play a set where the formula strictly adheres to the head/melody – lead solo – secondary solo(s) – back to the head for the conclusion. Obviously, this works for the music's roots as a style refined during jam sessions, but this unswerving formula can get quite tedious when it's applied song after song.

Reedist [Ken Thomson](#) is never boring. He's a bouncing, twirling loose cannon when he plays live with the long-running band [Gutbucket](#), which has four albums out and a fifth coming in January. He also is the co-leader of Bang on a Can's postmodern 12-piece marching band [Asphalt Orchestra](#), which plays everything from Mingus to classical avant-gardist Conlon Nancarrow to metal's [Meshuggah as it marches](#), jumps and dances.

Thomson now returns with '[Things Would be Easier If](#),' a toned-down and thoughtful effort with Slow/Fast (Thomson, trumpeter Russ [Johnson](#), guitarist [Nir Felder](#), bassist Adam Armstrong and drummer Fred Kennedy). Like much of his work, the album is a combination of rock, jazz and modern chamber music, but whereas Asphalt defies easy categorization and Gutbucket is overtly punk jazz, Slow/Fast leans towards composition-heavy chamber jazz.

"The idea was to do five 10-minute songs and to only have improvisation when it was absolutely necessary," Thomson explains. "I was using improvisation to inform the composition, which is different than the standard jazz model where you have your head and you have your vehicle for improvisation. For me, I wanted to have the improvisation be a vehicle for the composition."

The music has a energetic playfulness to it that runs counter to the Thomson's somewhat academic description of the album – most rambunctious is the shredding, odd-metered 'Goddamn You Ice Cream Truck,' which was

inspired by the music emanating from a Mister Softee truck that sat outside his Brooklyn, N.Y. apartment.

According to Thomson, "The question I hear is that whether I incorporated the [truck's] jingle in the song and the answer is no. The title was actually done before the song was done. The windows of my apartment would be open because it's hot and I often write from my head to paper, and it happened a few times where I was working something and then this jingle would come in and I would suddenly lose everything I was working on. It was the aural equivalent of my computer crashing."

Humor is an ongoing element in Thomson's music, but there is nothing funny about the elegant 'No No No.' This 11-minute gem is imbued with long tones that blend together like different colors on a painter's palette. Unlike Gutbucket's material, which tends toward spasmodic and to-the-point, 'Slow/Fast' methodically brings the song to a boil and then dissolves it into a Thomson solo that eventually fades out. While there is very little movement, Thomson and Co. create a taut piece that holds the listener's attention throughout.

Driven by the long dual horn lines of Thomson on alto saxophone and Johnson, 'Wanderangst' is probably the jazziest-sounding tune of the five. Again time signatures, melodies, moods and lead instrument shift from section to section in a way that suggests some heavy-duty arranging.

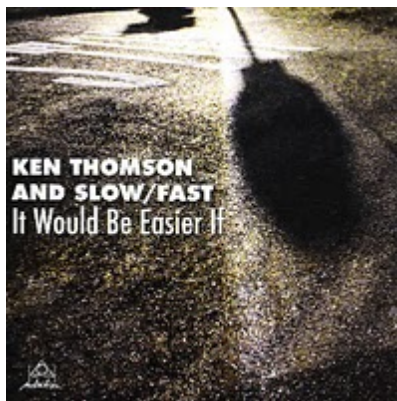
"I often feel disappointed when I hear a record where it seems like the guys just walked into the studio one day and recorded it," Thomson points out. "To me if I feel like I'm going more and more towards composition it's because I'm putting a lot of effort into my compositions because it really illustrates who I am and what I want it to be."

Thomson spends a fair amount of time arranging for different groups and commissions, as well – including a new Asphalt Orchestra track with [David Byrne](#) and [St. Vincent](#). He also plays in about eight other bands and is on the faculty for Bang on a Can's Summer Festival, so it's safe to say that Ken Thomson is working at full capacity these days.

"I don't know what else I could add right now," he says as he runs down his schedule, which includes live dates with Slow/Fast. "I'm maxed, for sure, but it's a good kind of maxed. It's maxed with the kind of stuff that I want to be doing, and I'm pretty happy about that."

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2010

## Ken Thomson: It Would Be Easier If



**Ken Thomson** (bass clarinet, alto sax)  
***It Would Be Easier If*** (Intuition Records)  
Russ Johnson (trumpet)  
Nir Felder (guitar)  
Adam Armstrong (bass)  
Fred Kennedy (drums)

***It Would Be Easier If*** is a clear, inventive yet diverse record from a mainstay on the New York scene, Ken Thomson. A co-founder of the avant garde jazz/rock band Gutbucket and collaborator with the versatile Bang On A Can, Thomson present an incredible debut as leader with elements of classical, free jazz and rock even paced throughout *It Would Be Easier If*.

This is an album that I think a lot of people will find different parts to like. There are moments of Gutbucket, Praxis, John Zorn's Painkiller that make for electrifying listening. But then just as firecracker of this music ignites you get a taste of Thomson's excellent jazz and chamber music arrangements.

Opening with the bewitchingly intricate "Kleine Helmet", with some outstanding delivery from Russ Johnson on trumpet and Thomson on bass clarinet. "Kleine Helmet" is beautiful example of the album as a whole. It is gentle throughout but encases some extraordinary arrangements that swing both in the direction of small group classical settings and free floating jazz conceptual thought.

"Goddamn You Ice Cream Truck" cuts against the grain of the *It Would Be Easier If* with Thomson bringing his Gutbucket inspirations into the proceedings. "Goddamn You Ice Cream Truck" is a fun and boisterous experience with Nir Felder's fiery, improvised chord changes augmented by the bombastic interplay between the rest of the members of the quintet--sonic bliss indeed.

With "Goddamn..." being the propulsive center point, the rest of the session is a more introspective and balance affair. "No, No, No" is the album's warmest moment. Led by some beautiful drumless electronic work from Fred Kennedy and fuzzy atmospheric guitar on the part of Felder this piece transforms into a wonderful meditative statement.

"No, No, No" then opens up to "Wanderangst" which finds its rhythm midway through and the sizzling syncopation that the quintet performs especially Thomson on clarinet is absolutely phenomenal. The compositional elements on "Wanderangst" are extremely refreshing.

The album closes with the title track, a slow progression but bold in nature. It again features some stellar interplay between Johnson and Thomson.

*It Would Be Easier If* is fantastic combination of **Ken Thomson** well structured chamber arrangements and superior improvisation on the part of each member of the ensemble. It's great to see Thomson finally put all his thoughts and influences into one place and no better way than on his debut. *It Would Be Easier If* is an impressive work for an artist and composer that I hope will record more as leader and someone you should most certainly check out. I really love this record.