AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MUSIC SCENE IN BERGEN
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Although being a reasonably small city (approx. 270 000 inhabitants), Bergen has a famous and proud musical history. In fact, Norway’s second largest city has at times overshadowed both Oslo and the rest of the country in terms of spawning new talent.

Hit lists, radio playlists and music sections in the papers have frequently been dominated by Bergen-based artists throughout the years, and the ‘Bergen scene’ has been the home of more international success than any other scene in the country.

‘Bergensbølgen’ (The Bergen wave) is an expression often used by Norwegian media, illustrating a period in time when a new generation of artists from Bergen is ‘taking over’ the musical landscape in Norway. The expression was initially used in the early nineties then re-emerged several times throughout the 2000s. ‘The Bergen wave’ is most definitely a name coined by mass media (the artists themselves are normally not too fond of the term, as it has become somewhat of a cliché) but at least the frequent use of the expression during the last 20+ years says something about the strength of the music scene in the city.

One might ask how a small city in a small country, crammed between a deserted mountain landscape to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the west, is able to give birth to such a vibrant music scene; a scene that has spawned an array of internationally famous artists within genres like metal, electronica, pop and folk, as well as some of the biggest domestic stars. Röyksopp, Kings Of Convenience, Sondre Lerche, Enslaved, Immortal, Annie, Bjørn Torske and Kakkmaddafakka are some of the Bergen-based names that have had or currently have successful international careers, while other artists such as Lars Vaular, Razika, John Olav Nilsen & Gjengen and Fjorden Baby! are big names on the domestic pop map.
Truth is, there isn’t really an easy answer to this question. Different theories such as the rainy climate or the big percentage of young students in the downtown area might have something to them. However the most plausible explanation is probably that Bergen is a nice city to hang out in, its music scene is famous and has long traditions, and artists across different genres have a tradition of supporting and helping each other. This continuously inspires new generations of talented musicians to move downtown and see what’s going on. And then nice things start happening. Now, let’s take a closer look at the scene, the history behind it, who’s who, and where to go.

HISTORY
Bergen has had a vital music scene for centuries, however here we will concentrate on the most recent decades. In the early nineties, Bergen was considered the ‘pop city’ of Norway, while its rival Oslo was the ‘rock city’. This is obviously a generalization, but there is some truth to it as well. Many of the leading pop groups in Norway came from Bergen during this period. Among them where Pogo Pops and Chocolate Overdose, whose members are still active in the local scene in different ways. These bands were critically acclaimed and experienced notable domestic success. These bands also had followings abroad, notably in Japan, however big international breakthroughs never did see the light of day.

Of course, things were happening before the nineties as well. During the beginning of the eighties for example, when punk and new wave reached Norway, some of the most important bands came from Bergen. Among them were The Aller Værste and Elektrisk Regn, whose records are enjoying a notable cult following today.

Then there was the metal scene. Boosted in the international music press (and to a certain extent the tabloid press) as a result of some rather nasty non-musical events in the first half of the nineties, the metal scene - and especially the black metal scene – quickly gained a huge cult status and received global recognition. Despite its bad reputation in the mass media, it eventually became clear to even the doubters that the majority of those involved in the scene were serious and hard-working musicians, and a lot of the music that was recorded during this period is globally recognized today as some of the finest and most groundbreaking recordings within its genre. Bands like black metal pioneers Immortal and viking/extreme metallers Enslaved are still around, and are considered among the biggest international names in their respective scenes.

Towards the end of the nineties, another crucial thing happened in Bergen. The small indie label Tellé Records and its sub-labels started releasing singles by then-unknown artists like Röyksopp, Annie, Ralph Myerz & the Jack Herren Band, Erot and Kings of Convenience. Intriguingly, a majority of the singles were picked up by music press and bigger labels abroad, and within a couple of years all of the names mentioned above were international stars on the underground scene. Röyksopp and Kings of Convenience even broke through into the mainstream. Suddenly the ‘Bergen scene’ was a recognized term among music lovers all over the world. Throughout the noughties, most of these artists continued their successful careers, but another important thing happened too: the success of these artists gave the whole scene a huge confidence boost and as a result, a new wave of great artists and labels quickly emerged. There are so many names all of them can’t be mentioned here but artists and bands like Sondre Lerche, Datarock, Magnet, Ane Brun (who relocated to Sweden early in her career)
and eventually Casiokids, Matias Tellez and Ungdomskulen all represented ‘the second wave’ of talent from this small scene.

In a period that lasted from approximately 1999 to 2002/03, Bergen was considered as one of the most important music cities in mainland Europe. Journalists and magazines came from all over the world in order to figure out what was happening.

Then, towards the end of the noughties, another quite different but equally interesting thing happened. While Bergen-based artists traditionally have been writing lyrics in English (as many non-English speaking artists around the world tend to do...), a new generation of young artists started singing in their native language, not caring too much about international careers and attention. While singing in Norwegian arguably would have been considered a bit lame and uncool less than ten years earlier, these artists proved that doing so made perfect sense after all. Some of the bands like Razika, John Olav Nilsen & Gjengen and Fjorden Baby! eventually became among the biggest domestic pop stars in Norway around 2010, proving that language doesn’t matter that much as long as the lyrics and tunes are good enough.

Although many participants in this ‘new generation’ of artists sang in Norwegian there were also those sticking to English. Bands like Kakkmaddafakka, Young Dreams and Put Your Hands Up For Neo-Tokyo all came from the scene around the now defunct venue Vamoose; an important hangout-spot for young musicians during the second half of the noughties. The same can be said about the bar Victoria, which is still going strong. Many of the successful Norwegian-singing artists like John Olav Nilsen & Gjengen and Fjorden Baby! played some of their first shows here.

John Olav Nilsen og Gjengen på Morellfestivalen, foto: Jarle H. Moe
As for hip-hop, Oslo pretty much dominated throughout the nineties and the first half of the noughties. Then it all changed as Bergen-based names like Lars Vaular, A-laget, Store P and Jonas V – all of them rapping in Norwegian – became some of the biggest names on the Norwegian hip-hop scene. Vaular didn’t even stop there; today he is one of the biggest mainstream pop stars in the country, still managing to maintain his credibility as a standout rapper and lyricist. Also worth mentioning is the new generation of successful hip hop producers; look out for names like Hkon, Ciscoe and Drippin’.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that Bergen has provided some of the best and most successful music to come out of this small country. And this might just be the beginning as the scene here is continuously evolving, with exciting new artists popping up each year.

Let’s take a closer look at the different genres within this relatively small scene:

POP/ROCK/METAL
Admittedly, Oslo has traditionally provided more successful rock bands than its ‘rival’ on the west coast. That being said, the rock scene in Bergen is as alive and kicking as ever, and acclaimed bands within sub-genres like indie, hardcore and folk are entering the city’s stages on a regular basis. At the time of writing, names like Real Ones, Sergeant Petter, Herr Nilsson, and Hjerteslag (to mention a few) have a solid fanbase both in Bergen and elsewhere in the country, while Blood Command, The Megaphonic Thrift and Young Dreams are among those who have an international following as well.
As for the above-mentioned metal scene, famous black/extreme metal bands like Immortal, Burzum, Gorgoroth, Taake and Enslaved have all been Bergen-based, and most of them have recorded their albums at the equally famous (and now defunct) Grieghallen lydstudio. In fact, the metal traditions in Bergen are so strong that tourists – so-called ‘black packers’ – travel here from all over the world to experience the city and attractions like the above-mentioned studio, bars, concert venues and record shops that are associated with the black metal scene.

**Where to go?**

There are a couple of rock/metal clubs in downtown Bergen. **Garage** is the longest running and has traditionally been the home of beer-loving metal fans. The club has a stage, which has been visited by then-unknown bands like Coldplay and Muse, as well as hundreds of Norwegian and international rock and metal bands of different sizes.

**Inside Rock Café** is a newer addition to the rock club scene in Bergen and has a more distinct hard rock/metal profile (while Garage recently has moved in the direction of a “normal” club) hosting regular concerts with various rock/metal bands from Norway and abroad.

The student venues **Hulen** (which is one of Europe’s longest running rock clubs) and **Kvarteret** should also be mentioned as they present concerts in different genres (but with a focus on rock and its sub-genres) on a weekly basis. **Chagall** is a relatively new addition to the live venue flora in Bergen, primarily hosting concerts within the indie-related genre as well as club events within several genres.

**Festivals**

There are several rock festivals in Bergen. The legendary **Hole In The Sky Festival** was considered one of Europe’s most important metal festivals until they called it quits a couple of years ago. A new metal festival – **Blastfest** – is slightly smaller (although growing!) but still attracts metal fans from all corners of the world. Another popular metal festival is the **Beyond The Gates-festival**, which takes place each autumn.

**Phonofestivalen** is the Student Radio’s annual city festival, specializing in international indie-rock and local artists.

**Bergenfest** is Bergen’s largest outdoor festival and gathers tens of thousands of ticket buyers every June. The festival’s main focus has traditionally been rock (primarily addressed to a slightly older audience) however the festival has recently started booking artists from a bigger variety of genres such as hip hop, metal and pop to reach out to an even bigger audience.

**Koengen** is Bergen’s main outdoor venue with a capacity of approximately 20,000 people. They have all played there: Springsteen, Metallica, Iron Maiden, Foo Fighters, The Rolling Stones...you name it. While the big artists previously went solely to Oslo (if they had Norway on their schedule at all), Bergen has during the last ten years built up a status as an equally important concert city thanks to Koengen and Bergen Live, who promote most of the concerts there.
ELECTRONIC/DANCE MUSIC
Music nerds in Bergen like to think of their city as the electronica capital of Norway. And that might actually be very true. Since the latter half of the nineties a majority of notable artists within the genre are, or have been, based in Bergen. In all honesty, we’ll admit that Oslo has lately come up with some strong competition in names like Lindstrøm and Todd Terje but Röyksopp, Annie, Casiokids, Bjørn Torske, Erot, Ralph Myerz & The Jack Herren Band, Kahuun and Skatebård (all of them linked to the famous Tellé label) did all launch their careers in the narrow streets of Bergen before heading abroad and playing at stages all over the world. One should also mention Ugress, who had huge domestic success some years ago, as well as the aspiring artists connected to the current important club music labels like Maksimal and Ploink.

Where to go?
There is a big variety of clubs in Bergen, possibly as a result of the above mentioned vibrant electronic scene. Østre is a venue dedicated to new and exciting music, mostly within the electronic genre, and hosts club nights almost every weekend. The same goes for Landmark, which has hosted an enormous amount of electronic concerts and DJ-events since the start in 2002. Café Opera is the veteran in the game; a restaurant in the daytime and pulsating club in the nighttime that has been running for centuries.

Other venues come and go, and currently places like Lysverket, Vaskeriet, Klubb Kok and Strædet are among those worth checking out.
As for festivals, the **Ekko Festival** is a festival dedicated to electronic music and takes place every autumn at Østre. It is currently Norway’s biggest and most important festival dedicated to electronic music.

**OTHER SCENES**

**Contemporary art and music:**
The **Borealis** festival for contemporary music takes place each spring at different venues in the city, including Landmark. One can also visit **Lydgalleriet** (the sound gallery) which hosts several audio-related events and exhibitions throughout the year.

**Hip Hop:**
**Klubb Kok** hosts various live and DJ-events within hip-hop and urban club music every weekend. **No Stress** and **Vaskeriet** are a bit smaller and more intimate venues with similar urban profiles.

**World Music:**
**Fensal** is a venue run by **BIKS** (Bergen International Centre of Culture). The complex has five different rooms. The biggest room hosts a large amount of events representing different cultures from around the world. Fensal is also the main venue for **Bergen International Music Festival**, which is a world music festival taking place each October.

**Jazz:**
**Bergen Jazzforum** hosts concerts with high-end musicians from Norway and abroad. It all goes down at **USF Verftet**, which is also the venue for **Nattjazz**: Norway’s longest running (10 days each May) jazz festival. There are also smaller jazz happenings at various clubs/bars like **Dyvekes**, **Madam Felle** and **Landmark**.

**Misc music-related venues:**

**KVARTERET:** Originally opened in 1995, Kvarteret quickly established itself as one of the main hangouts for Bergen’s young students. After being shut down for a couple of years due to rebuilding, Kvarteret re-opened in February 2010 offering nine stages as well as eight bars. Booking-wise, Kvarteret mainly uses on small to mid-sized international acts and mid to big-sized Norwegian acts.

**OLE BULL SCENE:** Ole Bull Scene is one of the city’s key venues. It primarily hosts theatre plays and cabarets but it is also used as a concert venue. Numerous popular acts – domestic and international – have performed here, representing every genre from blues to hip-hop.

**GRIEGHALLEN:** Grieghallen is Bergen’s main concert hall and is where the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra calls home. The main room – with approximately 1500 seats – serves as a venue for both classical concerts as well as other events such as opera and ballet performances. In addition to the main hall Grieghallen has a slightly smaller room, Peer Gynt Salen. With its 1500 (standing) person capacity, the hall has traditionally been used for bigger concert events.

**LOGEN TEATER:** After its opening back in 1883(!), Logen Teater has hosted performances by everyone from Edvard Grieg to Marianne Faithful. Today, the building is used as a concert hall that presents all
kinds of music as well as theatre plays, cabarets and private events. The group Voksne Herrers Orkester (Grown-up Gentlemen’s Orchestra) has been playing here every Monday for decades and are still extremely popular.

**USF VERFTET:** Since its opening in 1993 USF Verftet has grown to be one of Bergen’s major institutions in the field of music, arts and culture. An old sardine factory, the complex holds five different stages and venues. The main stage – Røkeriet – is one of Bergen’s biggest and most important concert venues. In addition to the stages, USF also hosts a gallery, café, cinema, numerous rehearsal rooms, studios and culture-related offices that are run by external organizations and companies.

**VICTORIA:** This cozy bar hosts different club events within genres like soul, reggae, hip-hop and garage rock. As a live venue, Victoria is recognized for helping new and promising local artists break new ground. Many bands and artists in town name Victoria as one of their favorite hangout spots.

**1880:** This is downtown Bergen’s no.1 youth house. With a concert hall and a café as well as rehearsal rooms and offices 1880 is a great venue for under-age kids who want to get involved in different cultural projects. In addition, the main hall frequently presents concerts by known and unknown artists.

**NHH:** The Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration (NHH) is a huge complex about 10 minute drive from downtown Bergen. Every second year, NHH holds the big UKEN-festival, which is the second biggest culture festival on the west coast of Norway in terms of attendees (after Bergen International Festival). Uken has a tradition of presenting big names like The White Stripes, 50 Cent and Primal Scream in addition to numerous other concerts, cabarets and cultural events.

**BERGEN KJØTT:** Opened in 2010, Bergen Kjøtt is a 2000 square meter previous industrial complex that now functions as a base for over 340 musicians, producers and other artists from the Bergen music scene. Many of Bergen’s most profiled musicians have Bergen Kjøtt as their current ‘home’. The venue also hosts several concerts with national and international artists, as well as art exhibitions, art book fairs, dance performances and other events.

**APOLLON:** Apollon has been THE record shop of choice in Bergen since 1976. Being the original independent specialist shop in town, Apollon has a wide selection of vinyl CDs and DVDs. Although you can find most genres here, Apollon’s specialities are considered indie, metal, classic and psychedelic rock. Some years ago, the shop expanded into being a bar and small covert venue, often hosting release parties and other in-store gigs.

**ROBOT BUTIKKEN:** This is a nice shop and gallery that specializes in music, literature, gadgets and curiosities that you probably won’t find anywhere else in Bergen. It is the place to go if you want to discover an obscure vinyl record from the fifties or a fanzine made by local artists. The shop also hosts various smaller concerts and club events.

**STRÆDET PUB:** This venue has seen different owners and concepts come and go for decades. Nowadays, it hosts popular club events as well as small gigs with everything from local punk bands to Canadian indie bands.
HULEN: This venue is legendary among hard working musicians who have toured around Europe during the last 40 years. Why? Probably because the venue is an old bomb shelter inside the mountain, something which creates a pretty special vibe during concerts. Every Norwegian band with a fan base consisting of more than 50 people has most likely played here and a decent amount of international underground or mid-sized acts have rocked out inside the cave as well.

MADAM FELLE: This bar is situated in the historical Bryggen area. It is an especially popular spot among the 30+ audience. The venue showcases a large amount of concerts within genres stretching from blues and folk to jazz and traditional rock.

RICK’S: This is a complex with seven different departments; its main hall is a popular concert venue. With the age limit set to 24 years (20 years at concerts); Rick’s primarily reaches out to an audience that is a bit older. Then again, Rick’s is considered one of the most popular and crowded spots in Bergen among people above student age.

KLUBB KOK: This is a new club that hosts DJ- and live events, primarily within genres like hip-hop, reggae, electronica and other sorts of urban music. Situated in a room that previously has been the home of several legendary nightclubs, Klubb Kok has now become a very popular venue in Bergen. http://klubbkok.no/

OTHER CLUBS AND BARS CURRENTLY HOSTING SMALLER LIVE EVENTS:

- Nobel Bopel
- Ujevnt
- Bar Barista
- Café Legal
- Klubb Fantoft
- Scruffy Murphy’s
- Dr. Wiesener
- Bastant
- Kronbar
- Grand Bergen

THE MUSIC BUSINESS
Here we will look at some of the participants in the current music industry in Bergen. The industry side of the music scene here has increased during the last ten to fifteen years and while one earlier needed to go to Oslo or abroad (preferably London) there is now a wide selection of labels and booking agents etc. The local industry is continuously being more and more professionalized and it all helps to make Bergen a significant music city in Scandinavia.
Labels: At the beginning of the noughties, there was a saying that ‘Bergen had three indie labels per inhabitant’. A joke obviously, however it is a fact that there is a jungle of labels in this town and all of them are independent (the majors are still situated in Oslo). We cannot mention all of them here but among the key participants are:

- **Maksimal**: A new label dedicated to house and techno.
- **Nabovarsel**: One of the key pop labels. They promote concerts and electronic club nights as well.
- **Tellé Records**: A veteran on the scene. They released early classic singles by Röyksopp and many other famous artists.
- **Ploink**: A new techno label run by DJ veteran Thomas ‘Urv’ Paulsen.
- **Klangkollektivet**: A new and aspiring label dedicated to emerging local talent within the genres of indie, pop and experimental/psychedelic rock.
- **Untz Untz**: Partly based in Berlin, this label focuses – as the name implies – on techno and associated music.
- **Brilliance**: A relatively new indie label and publishing agency that also includes a PR Company (On It) and a singles club (Diamond club).
- **+3db**: A label that mostly releases experimental and contemporary music.
- **Young Aspiring Professionals**: Run by the members of the group Datarock, the label releases everything from pop and electronica to noise rock.
• **NMG/G-Huset**: This label is the home of many of the city’s hip hop artists, including Lars Vaular and A-laget. The also promote concerts and parties.

• **Karisma/Dark Essence**: This is mainly a metal and prog label, although a sporadic indie-pop release happens as well.

• **Eget Selskap**: A new indie label with a continuously expanding roster, they are currently the home of some of the most promising new artists from Bergen.

• **Apollon Records**: An indie label run by the people who run the record shop/music bar with the same name.

• **Still a Virgin Records**: These guys release local bands within the indie and pop-genre.

• **Goodbye Records**: A label run by the local artist Heidi Goodbye, which releases both her own music as well as others’.

**Other places and companies of interest:**

**Musikkbiblioteket (The Music Library)**: The Music Library is part of the Bergen Public Library. In addition to the massive collection of CDs and vinyl, it also offers a large assortment of music magazines, books, and DVDs covering every musical genre. In addition, the library has free internet access, listening posts and access to note sheets. Musikkbiblioteket hosts occasional small live events as well as other cultural happenings.

**MADE Management**: There are several managements in Bergen and we can’t mention all of them here, however MADE should be mentioned as they are the biggest one, working with some of the biggest names from the city and elsewhere. MADE also handle booking (handled by Standing Ovation - see below) and publishing for some of the artists they work with.

**Bergen Live**: An event agency that does most of the big stadium/arena gigs in Bergen, as well as smaller club gigs with domestic and international artists. They are also the ones behind the above-mentioned Bergenfest.

**The Student Radio**: The student radio in Bergen is – like most student radios – an important distributor of local music. They also host several events, most importantly their own festival Phonofestivalen (mentioned earlier), which offers lots of exciting domestic and international acts each autumn.

**Festspillene (Bergen International Festival)**: This is a huge city festival for music, literature, theatre, dance, opera and visual art. The events take place in Grieghallen, Logen Teater and other places.

**Perfect Sounds Forever**: This is a promoter specializing in indie-rock and similar genres. In recent years, they have brought some of the biggest international names in the genre to the city.

**Bergen Underground Armada**: As the name somewhat implies, these guys do techno- and rave parties the old school way. Contact them, and you’ll know where the next party is gonna take place.

**STUDIOS**: There are many professional recording studios in the city and **Duper Studio** is arguably the most famous having recorded, produced and mixed many of Norway’s most important groups and artists throughout the years. Kings Of Convenience, Enslaved and Jaga Jazzist are among them. **Lydriket** is
another important studio, having recorded several popular artists from Norway and abroad. Also worth mentioning is Skogen Studio, which records a lot of the local indie- and similar bands.

BOOKING:
There is a variety of big and small booking agencies in Bergen. Some of those worth mentioning are: Stageway, which books many big domestic artists (as well as internationally famous comedy group YLVIS); Standing Ovation, which books some of the bigger groups like Real Ones, Datarock and Ralph Myerz & The Jack Herren Band, and Kalleklev Agency, which books some of the country’s biggest jazz names.

About this Guide
This guide is written by Ketil Mosnes on behalf of Brak.

About Brak
Brak is a non-profit artist & music business development center aiming to support musicians, bands, venues, promoters and other music business on the westcoast of Norway. The organization is government funded but independently run, and both membership and all of our seminars, workshops and guidance is free of charge.

Visit www.brak.no for more information.