

Fest Jazz 2023 in Brittany

A view from the Tenement Jazz Band 'The Auld Alliance' is alive and well!

Nestled discretely along the banks of the River Aulne, the picturesque village of Châteauneuf-du-Faou in central Brittany is a truly beautiful, if somewhat unexpected place, to find one of Europe's leading Trad Jazz focused music festivals.

The Tenement Jazz Band were extremely honoured to be first invited to Fest Jazz in 2020, and so, after a rather long journey from Edinburgh by train, boat and car, we arrived in a state of anticipation, excitement, and mild sleep deprivation to finally make our pre-pandemic booking for this July's gathering.

We were welcomed by a team of helpful festival volunteers drawn from the local community, whose participation and cheerful enthusiasm is obviously vital to the festival's smooth running and to making it such an enjoyable experience for audiences and artists alike. Around 5,000 people attend the festival every year and we were also struck by how many young people were involved: young organisers, young musicians, young spectators; very different from many UK jazz festivals.

Within fifteen minutes of arriving, we were being fed and watered in the artists' pavilion and mingling with fellow musicians and bands from far and wide. Fest Jazz's driving force, Trevor Stent, turned out to be a constant presence around the site; welcoming musicians, introducing bands to each other, and ensuring everyone is feeling as happy and included as possible.

Overlooked by the medieval churches of the old town, the main Fest Jazz site hosts four covered stages and a number of additional spaces dotted around where music can be encountered in a more relaxed and intimate setting. Free concerts also take place at the local chateau and in the streets and squares of the old town, all of which contributes to the valley's overall air of communal conviviality - aided by a few glasses or more of local red wines of course.

We saw many great acts over the weekend: Mama Shakers headlined on the Friday night - an unabashed party band who really know their jazz. The energy and joy they brought to the main stage was truly infectious, and yet even amid all the showmanship and razzamatazz they never compromised their musicality, always staying true to the roots of the tradition. We couldn't believe the breadth of their material, not to mention the sheer volume of the sound they managed to produce from their five-piece lineup.

With a well-deserved reputation for epitomising the spirit of early jazz, the Jungle Jazz Band from Berlin immediately hit the spot with their wonderful arrangements, their understated virtuosity, and their unique, but deeply respectful approach to traditional jazz styles. Probably one of the most innovative and



Jungle Jazz Band - Photo by Alain Epailard

creative bands you'll find working anywhere on any jazz scene today - if you get the chance, they are an absolute must-see for any UK jazz enthusiast.

France's own Louis Prima Forever, a nine-piece playing classic jive and swing, literally had us dancing in the aisles when they headlined the main stage on Saturday night. They held an audience of 1200+ captive for well over an hour-and-a-half with their wit, some fantastic repertoire, and superb stage show.

Other fabulous acts we saw included Lucie Guillem's Sextet (wonderful vocals from a young Parisian singer), Les Poisson Voyageurs, trumpet player extraordinaire Malo Mazurie, and pianist Jean-Baptiste Franc. All were amazing, and well worth your time looking up and enjoying.



Lucie Guillem - Photo by Alain Epailard

This year's expertly curated program, staggering performances and multiple appearances across the weekend, allowed audiences to move between stages and catch as much jazz as they could handle. Coupled with the extra performances across the town, it was also a great opportunity for us to sample some of the very best of what Europe has to offer.

The audience for our four concerts were amazing, and we were touched by the



genuine enthusiasm we received from concert-goers, musicians and dancers. The fact that Fest Jazz puts dedicated space aside for swing dancers is a real boon. It not only speaks to Trevor's ideas about the capacity of jazz to build a sense of community, but the dancers bring their own energy to the shows, which in turn inspire performers and enhance the experience of audiences. The open daily swing dance workshops give everyone the chance to get in on the act and it's great to see dancing across the site.

As performers we must say that the artists' pavilion, which offered catering and rehearsal space to all the musicians, gave us a unique social opportunity not often found at the similar events we've played at. Over the four days all the acts had the chance to meet, talk, eat, drink, share stories, forge friendships, and of course play music together - often long into the night.



Impromptu session - Photo by Marie-Noelle Salaun

Apparently, the brilliant late-night jam sessions are a bit of an institution, and they ran at least until sunrise each day!

Joining soprano sax legend Olivier Franc on the final after-hours jam session was a completely captivating musical treat for us. Passing around the selection of single malts we'd brought along while he ran through a seemingly endless repertoire of classic New Orleans numbers is one of those glorious memories which we're sure will stay with everyone present forever! And note that during his show at the festival he had Daniel Bechet, son of Sydney, on drums! (see front cover)

By the time we got to our final concert, we were so thoroughly filled with the spirit of jazz, we could have played all afternoon - and indeed we very nearly did! Sitting on the side of a sturdy French canal barge, playing the music we love to an audience lounging on the banks in the late afternoon sunshine, was an absolute pleasure and the perfect way to round off our first visit to Fest Jazz.

Perhaps it's a little curious that our festival experience, which started in such high excitement, should end in such a laidback atmosphere, but it's a testament



Olivier Franc - Photo by Michel Chouet

to the wide range of experiences and venues Fest Jazz has to offer. A wonderful weekend for us, and we can't wait to go back. ■

The Tenement Jazz Band

Trevor Stent writes: "I must add that the Tenement Jazz Band were tremendous ambassadors for British jazz. Musically superb, with great arrangements effortlessly performed, they entranced the French public with their wonderful mix of professionalism and charm. The 'Auld alliance' is alive and well!"

Fest Jazz 2024: - July 25 - 28

Information: - www.fest-jazz.com email: - contact@fest-jazz.com

Dear Just Jazz,

I'm so sorry to hear about the passing of Graham Read in the September edition of Just Jazz. I played with him on various concerts and gigs during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, most especially a long run with the Keith Nichols Ragtime Orchestra. I treasure a tape of a 1982, BBC radio broadcast by the Ragtime Orchestra. It contains us playing 'The Ragtime Bass Player', an obscure tune unearthed by Keith as a sousaphone feature for Graham. A difficult piece, impeccably played. A fine musician and a very nice chap.

Rest in peace, Graham.

Yours Sincerely

Richard Warner

Tunbridge Wells

Kent

