

JazzAscona, "The Cannes of classic jazz" - June 24 to July 3, 2005

Posted: 2005-05-11

"The Cannes of classic jazz", "The most important swing & mainstream event in Europe". Vastly updated last year by its new 33-year-old Artistic Director Nicolas Gilliet, Jazz Ascona New Orleans and Classics 2005 (Ascona, Lago Maggiore, Switzerland) will start right off with a bang. Gilliet's 2004 innovations made a hit: more 'black music'; opening up the program to big name USA 'mainstream' players, and a wider billboard reflecting a wise balance between respect-for and reform-of the great jazz tradition. As a result, interest in Jazz Ascona -- scheduled for June 24 to July 3 2005 -- is greater than ever.

The new festival director has undertaken the task of strengthening Ascona Festival's image. How? Gilliet explains: "A festival like Jazz Ascona, centered around historic forms of jazz, must avoid falling into the nostalgia trap of presenting only dixieland bands. That would be good for attracting tourists but doesn't have a lot of cultural validity. The jazz scene today is fertile ground; many musicians have in one way or another re-worked the traditional styles, adapting them to modern taste and techniques of execution. As we see it, it's about giving more weight to this new perspective, bringing into a modern context the great traditions of jazz in their various historic forms. We do so keeping in mind jazz's evolution through time, by offering a wide panorama of classic jazz as played today in various countries and by different generations of musicians; and always focusing on the quality of the proposed acts. Clearly, a major goal is to fulfill the tastes and needs of a public (80 thousand present last year) that is heterogeneous in Ascona, comprising lovers of traditional jazz, lovers of jazz in the wider sense, young and not-so-young, and a huge number drawn to popular styles like blues and gospel."

And what about the 2005 edition? With its 10 days of music, 200 concerts, 250 participating musicians, renowned jam sessions, special events and affiliate programs, JazzAscona appears at the starting line replete with promise. The practice of choosing a theme or significant anniversary for the festival began in 2000, with Louis Armstrong's 100th birthday. This year, the program offers a wider and well-defined theme. The title of the 2005 edition is "That's Jazz!", a motto that is, in itself, a programmatic statement. The artistic director's intention is to capture a kind of instant photo shot of today's traditional and classic jazz, while clearing a path that leads listeners, via the 10 theme-based evenings, through the extraordinary wealth of jazz in its many facades, moving from the influences of Creole music to the role of the bass fiddle in jazz history; from New Orleans Jazz to Soul music; from Big Band to Gospel; and from remembering the great players of the past like Tommy Dorsey and Eddie Condon, to paying homage to influential composers like Harold Arlen and Jerome Kern.

The 2005 edition stands out for its large number of participating American artists. Among them are many of the finest from the New Orleans scene, in some cases still little-known in Europe, such as drummer Shannon Powell (outstanding for his energy, inventiveness and precision). Then there's Jason Marsalis, youngest [and some say the most gifted] of the renowned Marsalis Brothers, appearing here in his European debut on vibes! Other big names: singer Linda Hopkins, a true focal point for many jazz/blues singers, celebrating her 80th birthday at Ascona. Freddy Cole, brother of Nat, already recognized as a singer and vocal interpreter of outstanding gifts, with his own repertoire and his own unique artistic personality.

Among the high caliber performers we also find the band of Duffy Jackson, U.S. drummer with an extraordinary career (he played with Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald and others); and guest artists like shining star Houston Person, long-time musical partner of the late Etta Jones. There are "Mainstream" groups such as Dado Moroni's trio with Lewis Nash and Peter Washington, both formerly with the late Tommy Flanagan's trio; organist Rhoda Scott's duo; and the quartet of the great trumpeter Warren Vache', to mention just a few. Of great interest is singer Roy Bennett's JAB (Just Another Band). This group, in their European debut, will present, in a jazz idiom, black music from R&B to Soul to Funk. Then, there's the surprising Yaloppin' Hounds, Joey Cavaseno's eclectic ensemble, unique in the world for their way of combining pure swing with the urban rhythms and phrasing of Hip Hop. **Too, the Roo's Blues band of singer/guitarist Walter Wolfman Washington, star of New Orleans Blues.** On the traditional jazz front, there are the Original Liberty Jazz Band of New Orleans directed by Dr. Michael White; the Marty Grosz group; great New Orleans trumpeter Wendell Brunious, Britisher Keith Smith's All Stars. And last but not least, the young musicians of the Hot Club of New Orleans who, with their violin, 2 guitars, freshness and sound reminiscent of Django, stand to be one of the loveliest discoveries of the 2005 Edition of JazzAscona!