Ljubljana Jazz Festival 1960–2009

In the Archives and in Living Memory
Rehearsal/jam session at the 2nd Bled Jazz Festival that took place between 8 and 11 June 1961.

The golden jubilee of the Bled and Ljubljana jazz festivals takes me back under a large fir tree in the Ljubljana Tivoli Park. It was there that in May or the beginning of June 1945 Bojan Adamič was auditioning and enlisting members of a dance band in the making. We especially took pleasure in the sheet music by the American big bands, i.e. compositions by Goodman, Ellington, Miller, Artie Shaw, the Dorsey Brothers and Count Basie, brought by Mario Rijavec as courtesy of the American Library in Belgrade.

In the beginning of November we were invited to Belgrade, where we were supposed to perform in two concerts. We were accompanied by Soviet singer Tatiana Okuniewska, who sang Russian chansons and war songs. (...) At the end, we played Beat by Boogie by the legendary trumpeter Harry James, featuring a prolonged and effective trumpet solo. The audience went mad. They chanted Harry James, Harry James...

During the night, it backfired: Adamič and Novak were summoned to report to the Communist Party Central Committee. (...) Bojan was sent to Albania to teach the piano and we were through with jazz for a few years.

In 1959, during the Pop Song Festival in Opatija, where we played in backup bands, jazzmen gathered at the city café and decided to launch the first jazz festival following year, in 1960. The proposal was supported by the Yugoslav RTV, the Ljubljana Jazz Musicians’ Association, the Light Music Artists’ Association Zagreb and Serbian Jazz Musicians’ Association.

When asked to organise the festival, the Tourist Association Bled gladly accepted. Bled offered Yugoslav jazz musicians a wonderful setting and sundry opportunities for socialising. Predominantly international, in 1966 the festival was held in Bled for the last time.

Urban Koder, PhD.

The First Ten Years
With the onset of free jazz in the Seventies, many jazz lovers and connoisseurs recognised it as a new sonic opportunity. The innovative and impassioned style practised by Ornette Coleman, characterised by broken rhythms, atonal harmonies, and improvised melody, was overtly inspiring. While Cecil Taylor with his avant-garde music, an organic fusion of the highly advanced harmonic structures of classical music and free improvisation, evoked an enthusiastic response from the more knowledgeable jazz audiences.

During this period, Slovenian jazz music lovers had the rare opportunity to listen to such music firsthand, and the Ljubljana jazz festival, also steering this course, had annually been meeting new, higher expectations.

As with most previous Ljubljana jazz festivals, the Seventies did not bring any explicit change in programme. The festival regularly featured all three most important Yugoslav big bands – Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade – as well as some smaller Yugoslav ensembles.

In 1973, Ljubljana first offered a better insight into Scandinavian jazz, which instilled this genre with elegant spatial sonority, and a stylistically looser formal composition, from which slowly, but with subtle energy there emerged the unique “Nordic” soundscapes, so uncharacteristic of the American jazz.

In 1976, the Ljubljana Jazz Festival cooperated with the European Broadcasting Union EBU, and under its auspices as many as nine, mostly North European, ensembles appeared.

In 1978, the Ljubljana Jazz Festival was special for me, as I wasn’t only a spectator but as member of Sončna pot (Sunny Road) also one of the featured artists. This appearance helped the band receive numerous invitations to perform and also make a record.

Running for five days, the festival’s programme was overambitious, and even scheduled to conclude at 11.30 pm, which made many artists finish off their gig beforehand for fear of being cut short by power disconnection.

In 1979, the Ljubljana Jazz Festival celebrated its 20th anniversary. It again wisely downsized to manageable four days and three to mostly four bands or performers per night. More homogenous, its concept was fairly progressive.
At the beginning of the 1970s, the Ljubljana International jazz festival had already experienced a successful first decade. Its programme had been more or less established resounded continually also outside Yugoslavia. Apart from blues, gospel, Dixieland, a capella singing and other precious jazz traditions, it featured jazz by Eastern Europeans from the friendly Socialist countries as well as its “capitalist” neighbours. The rare but treasured American appearances, brought over to Slovenia by various friends in terms of packets of humanitarian aid, were combined with concerts by Austrian, Italian and German artists. Although they nicely fitted the mainstream policy adopted by the festival’s programme, the East Europeans would astound with their progressive sound.

What was especially noteworthy about the Ljubljana festival was the already mentioned rich picking of the East European artists and consequentially the rare opportunity of first-hand interaction between artists from the East and the West.

Subsequently, this concept proved rather unconvincing and the wideness of its range more or less fictitious and unexploited. To put it blandly: it was put to use only bit by bit, compromisingly and belatedly. Thus, the Festival entered jazz history as late as... in the beginning of the 1980s.

To illustrate these findings one has to make an overview of its programme.

In 1980s the Ljubljana jazz festival still featured a rather inconstant concept.

Contemporary versions of jazz or jazz blended with other music genres became a noticeable, but too faint a mainstay at the Križanke open-air theatre, which was designed by the famed Slovenian architect Jože Plečnik. It was only that the programme was selected too compromisingly, with not enough attention devoted to groundbreaking artists. The selection was limited by a certain judgement, based on the arbitrary belief what jazz actually was.

The conflict between the “old” and the “young” jazzmen was in the air, manifesting itself in the critical reviews of jazz events and controversies flared up in the media. Almost fortuitously, the festival was then “taken over”; the cultural policy entrusted it to Cankarjev dom, then still in its initial stage of activity. Thus the festival gained an additional repute as an outstanding event in the interest of the general public, and had to be managed accordingly. (…) The programme and organisational boards were set up, and first programme selectors engaged.

A real, radical breakthrough in programming came about in 1982.

For the first time in the history of the festival one night was dedicated to a single artist; nevertheless the Križanke venue had never been thus elated; filled with audiences, emotions, rapture, and unforgettable music.

The milestone concert was well received. Perhaps also because the younger concertgoers were thirsty for new, different things.

In 1983 two new things were introduced. The accompanying programme, which featured a musical workshop, and the so-called “punk jazz” assailing the sacred stage of Križanke. Who knows, perhaps also because of the “desecrated” Križanke, but also for other reasons, organisation of the festival was assumed by Cankarjev dom the following year. It was the Orwellian year, the move was not welcomed gladly, and the programme resumed the previous years’ concept, although being somewhat relented owing to the previous year’s protests.

After the festival in 1984 there began a gradual break-up of the festival’s programme team. But the jazz festival’s programme was still compelling, variegated and featured artists of various nationalities.

In 1986 the programme concept remained almost unchanged, with other performers only. It still embraced some European artists, a few natives, and a good measure of well-known although increasingly less radical Americans.

It was then that it happened. The thing some people justifiably warned us about. The enthusiasm for America brought about the uncalled-for limiting of the programme’s orientation. In 1987 the festival invited only the Americans. Although most excellent, even stellar, and featuring diverse genres, the programme was nonetheless unadventurous, entirely predictable. Something was lacking, the unknown, the undiscovered, and the audacious.

The trend then continued for the next two years, only to embrace two native artists and some lesser-known Americans.

Thus the festival’s 1980s could be summed up as a certain programming hotchpotch.

During the disintegration of Yugoslavia, it for the last time encompassed various republics’
With a combination of rapid changes, “a story of success” and feeling at ease owing to ostensibly distant manslaughter happening “somewhere else”, the 1990s provide quite compelling material. We will address it from the standpoint of jazz, its esteemed festival, its parallels and offshoots.

Glaringly obvious is the basic paradox, to a certain degree connected to the often mysterious, unjust and winding history of jazz as such: in a decade when the privatisation of public property was a major issue, when free trade was vigorously asserted, the Ljubljana Jazz Festival continued to be organised by a public institute. No matter how you put it and no matter how much it resembles stateism, it is indisputable that it was advantageous for the festival to be established and asserted under the auspices of Cankarjev dom, whoever its selector. Besides the interest exhibited by the national radio and television, professional associations, societies and eager individuals, for decades having an insatiable appetite for the Jazz festival, it was the performers who were also interested in a monopoly, if not performance as such. The first festival decades concluded; it was a time when the national RTV played a crucial role in the enthusiastic initial organisation, by prioritising its own orchestra, permanently employing highly educated musicians, by engaging pan-Yugoslav orchestras, as well as regularly recording all concerts.

A disappointing recapitulation was made precisely in the 1990s when many an archive this side of the former iron curtain was lost. For instance the formerly plentiful Soviet archives were then sold to the West for a song, while owing to a lack of magnetic tapes some crucial Ljubljana Jazz Festival performances were erased – all in vain I endeavoured repeatedly to recover a great rarity: a TV-recording of the outstanding performance by Cecil Taylor Quintet (Križanke, 1976).

As at Cankarjev dom the core organisational board had been instituted, the lines of force were then re-established. Thenceforth, the problems were also somewhat different. When one turns back to the period following the Slovenian independence, things were difficult even for the highly skilled administration. Switzerland, for example, even in mid-Nineties refused to rent cars to Slovenia-bound travellers, claiming it was situated in a “war zone”. At times it seemed that the accounting procedures, border regulations, taxation policy, visas and temporary labour status of foreign performers in Slovenia altered overnight. There are certain things in culture which are manageable only by a large public institute or a subculture, both of which extreme cultural manifestations, where the former is strong and the latter eager to acquire knowledge and combat obstacles. Any other organiser of such large-scale jazz event would have had his nerves frayed once and for all by the then occurring rapid changes.

Miha Zadnikar

Chaotic “Transition” for the Future, for the Present

Anthony Braxton (photo: Žiga Koritnik, 2000)
As far as competitiveness was concerned, the programming was easier then, as the festival euphoria did not appear until later. Jazz in other respects did not offer any radicalisations or conceptualisations, as was customary before and after. What should be complimented on is the acting in the nick of time (i.e. concerts by Miles Davis and Nusret Fateh Ali Khan) as well as ultimate assertion of the Latin, Brazilian and Afro-Cuban »subgenres«. Although the Ljubljana Jazz Festival was one of the very few organisers of large-scale concerts, besides the Druga Godba International Festival, everything fell into place - we wanted for nothing and no one.

Many a thing was gone, and a decisive jazz blow at the turn of the century was only implied. The chaotic situation even had its bright side, as the organiser here and there even gave an impression of a regular concert promoter by moving the Festival from Križanke to the Slovenia’s “central cultural centre”. The attendance fluctuated dramatically, since each year during the festival it tended to rain at least once, yet the event was relentless in its course. At the end of the decade Druga godba and Jazz Festival again merged (which is quite appropriate as regards the nature of music they promote), while in Ljubljana new festival niches opened. The war was over, and one could indulge in jazz by travelling to Zagreb, Pula or Sarajevo aside from our closest Saalfeld. Ljubljana especially bonded with Skopje – the Skopje and Ljubljana festivals are still closely related as regards their philosophy, staff, duration as well as concept.

In concluding, let me cite an example: towards the end of the 1990s, when our daily newspapers again featured a letter by the eternally indignant reader, complaining about the oddness of jazz played at Križanke, the Musical Youth in Vienna included jazz in its regular programme. And not any jazz but the one inspired by the Jazz Forefathers, whereby it refrained from mythicising them in any way – but questioned the past and, when taking heed of the time-honoured teachings, was oriented towards the sky and spiced up things in its own way. Of course, Ljubljana witnessed such occurrences also in the chaotic 1990s. Namely, jazz simply loves a bit of confusion, but not too much.
As a central jazz concert platform, the Ljubljana Jazz Festival’s programme embraces various aesthetics, which had in the previous century emerged from jazz; from the precious products of the early tradition, the radical avant-garde, the search for individual statements and various departures from the African American tradition (from free improvisation to introduction of elements of various music traditions), to tinges of contemporary classical music and toying with various forms of popular music (from rock, funk, to up-to-date electronic dance music, hip hop, etc.) as well as search for common ground, the various jazz sprouts. In these challenging circumstances the festival has been more or less successfully treading the path and inviting legendary and foremost performers, celebrities who are to thank for the “success” of the festival, the up-and-coming singers (Slovenian or international) and celebrated, prominent figures of marginal practices. The last named give shape to the critical axis of the festival, which manifests the daring of its programming policy, and ultimately carry the greatest responsibility for the controversies aroused in the public arena. Thereby, the festival’s concept follows the example of the established contemporary festivals, combining well-known names – the festival’s main attractions – with lesser-known performers at its central venue at Križanke, while the more radical artists, experimenting with sound or expression, perform at more intimate concert venues, as a sort of additional programme. Speaking from the viewpoint of the Slovenian music arena, the festival has commendably become established at the CD Club, which has become a central venue for contemporary jazz in Slovenia, while the programme directors have been responsive enough to include some venues (e.g. Gromka Club on Metelkova) that have for the last few years greatly contributed to the soundscape of the Slovenian capital in terms of jazz and its various facets. Thus, the festival has broadened its horizons and shaken off the image of a supercilious, introverted, self-sufficient event, while at the same time the festival’s sound and venue may leave a lasting impression, an event to resound also during its suspended activity.

Luka Zagoričnik
Looking for a Common Sound