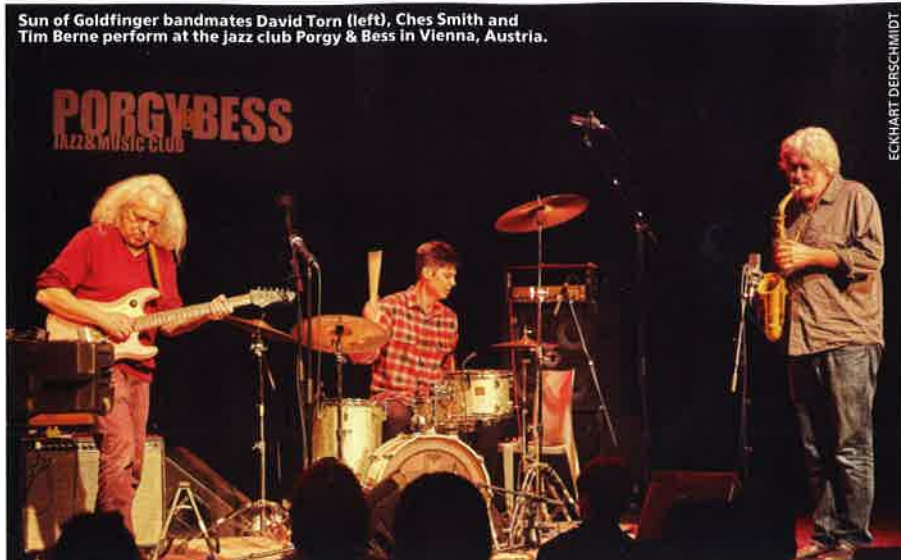


Sun of Goldfinger bandmates David Torn (left), Ches Smith and Tim Berne perform at the jazz club Porgy & Bess in Vienna, Austria.



## Jazz Thrives in Vienna

**IN TERMS OF MUSIC HISTORY, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE** to understate the importance of Vienna. Its storied history includes the groundbreaking work of Haydn in the late 18th century; Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert in the early 19th century; the populist superstars of the Johann Strauss clan (Jr. and Sr.), waltz-royalty in the late 19th century; Mahler in the romantic-cum-modern era; and the revolutionary “Second Viennese” school of 12-tone architect Arnold Schönberg and protégés Alban Berg and Anton Webern in the 20th century.

Lesser known is the city’s vitality as a center of jazz activity and support systems. Within the past half century, two primary jazz clubs—the city’s oldest continuous venue, the more traditional-oriented Jazzland (founded in 1972) and the world-renowned, programmatically adventurous Porgy & Bess (established 1993)—have been significant club hubs, featuring musicians from the States, Europe and elsewhere, while numerous other clubs, such as the Blue Tomato, keep the scene buzzing. Meanwhile, the Vienna Jazz Festival is a draw for artists and fans from around the world.

Jazzland’s founding director, Axel Melhardt, noted that in Vienna, “the jazz audience is better than ever. Besides the Porgy and Jazzland, there are about eight to 10 other venues with jazz and surrounding types of music.”

But the jazz-club pulse here was not always thus. As Melhardt explained, when Jazzland opened its doors in ’72, the jazz club options were limited, with the Storyville Club offering trad jazz and early swing, after the closure of other venues.

Porgy & Bess co-founder Christoph Huber commented that “of course, Vienna is associated with Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, Schönberg, etc., but we also had a saxophone titan named Hans Koller.”

At the inception of Jazzland, Melhardt said, “I was mainly in traditional jazz but with at least a small inclination toward Charlie Parker, Dizzy, Adderley and early Coltrane—they were the avant-garde in those days. [Musicians] tried to find a new place to perform and they looked for someone who would be able to bring old and new jazz together, and they found me.” Early bookings included Ben Webster and Albert Nicholas.

As Melhardt admitted, “since my personal taste begins with country blues and ends with Coltrane’s *Blue Trane*, the program of Jazzland is more ’20s to ’50s than recent styles.” He recognized that, across town, Porgy & Bess is “a very good avant-garde club.”

As a recent example of the avant-garde component of Porgy’s program, last November’s calendar featured John Zorn, whose appearances there included a marathon of his epic “Bagatelles” project in 2016.

As Huber noted, the 400-capacity club is “officially called ‘Jazz & Music,’ [which] means that jazz is in the center, but there are also a lot of concerts in the category ‘& Music,’ which can be electronic, contemporary serious music, singer/songwriter, etc. We program traditional Americans, [such as] Benny Golson, Ron Carter and Houston Person, avant-garde veterans like Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp or Pharoah Sanders, straightahead players like Joshua Redman and Branford Marsalis or modern players like Steve Lehman and Rudresh Mahanthappa.”

A few layers of Viennese history are entrenched in Porgy & Bess’ history. Its origin story, starting in 1993, goes back to when the famously multi-tasking Swiss-turned-Viennese musician Mathias Rüegg, the mastermind and leader of the venturesome big band known as the Vienna Art Orchestra, launched the venue in what was formerly known as the “Fledermaus Bar,” dat-

ing back to Johann Strauss II’s operetta classic. At the time, the notion and gumption of bringing international jazz musicians through Vienna was a unique enterprise, apart from Jazzland’s efforts in that direction. The current location of Porgy & Bess, as of 2000, involves rooms dating back to mid-19th century theater groups.

“Porgy & Bess is my favorite club in Europe,” said reedist Dave Liebman, one notable American musician who has played the venue many times. “The reasons are simple, but not so easily attainable, unless there is a care and concern that things are done correctly. Porgy is run like a business with excellent backline equipment, a great piano and even good food. The Vienna audience is one of the most sophisticated in the world. Do you think it is because Vienna was the center of Western music for years?”

Liebman added that, as a passionate founder and emotionally invested owner, Huber “takes care of business and respects the musicians and the music. You really get a true feeling of interest in what you are playing. The Porgy schedule reflects our present period of musical eclecticism with featured projects from all over the world.”

Liebman has played with many Viennese musicians over the years, including a decades-deep relationship with drummer Wolfgang Reisinger. He said that “the level of musicianship is beyond the norm, and again, with such a rich tradition and concerts all over Vienna, seemingly on a daily level, it couldn’t but be that way in this historical cultural center.”

Porgy & Bess, which celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2018, also gains traction and networking power through working closely with a circuit of other major clubs in Europe, through its connection with the European Jazz Network (EJN). A “member card” system, launched in 1994, enables holders to gain access to other clubs, such as the Jazzhouse in Copenhagen, Denmark; Stadtgarten in Cologne, Germany; Bimhuis in Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Moods in Zurich, Switzerland; and Unterfahrt in Munich, Germany.

One of the city’s most celebrated artists—the late Joe Zawinul (of Weather Report fame)—got into the Vienna jazz club scene late in life with his venue Birdland (2004–2008), named after his famed tune and running until shortly after his death. As Huber said, “For me, it was very important that he play Porgy & Bess before opening Birdland, which he did in 2003—three nights—after nearly 50 years after playing with [Austrian pianist] Friedrich Gulda.

“In the opening week of Birdland, we had Pharoah Sanders scheduled at P&B. After the Sanders concert, we went with him to Birdland, where he joined Joey DeFrancesco. That was our gesture. Vice versa, Zawinul showed up at P&B regularly when he was in town. He was a great musician and a great human being.”

—Josef Woodard