

History of the San Sebastian Jazz Festival

The San Sebastian Jazz Festival (today called Heineken Jazzaldia) began on September 10th, 1966, and is, today, the oldest jazz festival in Spain and one of the oldest in all Europe. In over fifty years, all the great international jazz musicians have passed through this Festival.

The Festival has earned several very important awards in recognition of its activity in the domain of the development of culture; the Premio a la Difusión de la Música (*Music diffusion Award*), at the XII edition of the Fundación SGAE Music Awards; the Premio Euskadi de Turismo a la Competitividad (*award for competitiveness*), in 2015, granted by the Basque Government; the Fine Arts Medal of Merit, in the person of the Director of the Festival, Miguel Martín, ordained by the Spanish Government at the Cabinet Meeting of December 23rd, 2016, in which it was declared that *The San Sebastian Jazz Festival, which is half a century old this year, has brought to us the most important artists of this genre and has become an international reference.*

The specialised press continues, today, to speak in glowing terms about the festival's programming and the aura Jazzaldia brings to the city. Thanks to the free concerts the Festival offers, over 150,000 people go every year to the different venues across the city where festival events take place. In 2016, to go no further, as many as 175,000 people attended the festival.

The initial idea behind the festival came from Imanol Olaizola, Head of the Music Commission at the Centro de Atracción y Turismo (CAT, Tourist Office). In May 1964, he attended a Count Basie concert, with his Big Band, at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. Seeing the enthusiasm of the crowd, he thought that kind of music had to be brought to San Sebastian. He mentioned it to Ramón Peironcely, President of the Permanent Commission of CAT. The latter decided to include a jazz festival project among the activities to be proposed for 1965.

At that time, the jazz festivals of reference in Europe were the Antibes Juan-les-Pins festival in France, which is still going, with its 57th edition scheduled for 2017, and the Comblain-la-Tour festival, in Belgium, a longish hiatus between 1967 and 2009 notwithstanding.

There was some opposition to the initiative at the beginning, which led to the festival not being held in 1965. In 1966, circumstances were more favourable and dates and venues were sought. The initial idea was for it to take place in August, but with an already heavily packed programme of activities for that tourist month par excellence, it was decided that the weekend coinciding with the second day of the fishing boat rowing race at La Concha bay would be the time. It is the only time the Festival has ever been held in September. Since then, it has always been in July.

With regard to finding a venue for the Festival, the organisers had a great idea: Plaza de la Trinidad, built in 1963, to commemorate the centenary of the breaking down of the walls of the city, following the project by architect Peña Ganchegui. The square is in the heart of the Old Quarter and there is a special air to the place, lying as it does between a renaissance building (San Telmo) the Basilica of Santa María, an XVIII century edifice, the shoulders of Mount Urgull, and the charming houses and buildings of the Old Quarter.

Plaza de la Trinidad has, over the years, embodied the essence of Jazzaldia. Musicians, without exception, praise the venue, truly singular in Europe, as well as the proximity it allows between stage and audience.

For many people, especially the young, the birth of the Festival represented a breath of freedom. Those were the Franco years, times of censorship and zero enthusiasm for music such as jazz, coming out of the Anglo Saxon world. It was also the era of the "cold war", the confrontation between eastern and western Europe. For that reason, the Festival was a great opportunity to get together to show alternative culture and demonstrate that the Polish, Hungarian and Czech musicians who came to perform in San Sebastian were just as European as we were, if not more.

The paucity of economic means at our disposal at the beginning meant we couldn't bring the great figures. Thought was given to the idea of inviting Ella Fitzgerald, but the cost of doing so, 900,000 pesetas at the time, tripled the budget, so we had to wait till 1975, by which time the Festival was firmly launched and consolidated, before San Sebastian could see her live.

It was then decided to make a firm bet for the *Concurso de Aficionados* (*Amateurs' contest*). It took three years for the festival to become famous across Europe: in the fourth edition (1969), 28 groups from nine countries performed. There came a point when selection was not easy, with over one hundred bands wanting to participate.

The present director of Heineken Jazzaldia, Miguel Martín, became a member of the Organising Committee in 1978. By then, the great figures had started coming, so we had to start thinking of venues bigger than Plaza de la Trinidad. The Festival was shifted to the Sports Complex, then the Velodrome, before eventually returning to its original headquarters, at the beginning of the 1990s.

Since then, greater and greater emphasis has been placed on making Heineken Jazzaldia a more festive event, bringing jazz even closer to people. To that end, in addition to making the most of Plaza de la Trinidad again, taking advantage of the magnificent acoustics of the Kursaal Auditorium and enjoying the charm of the recently restored Victoria Eugenia Theatre, many free concerts are also programmed at places that are ideal for people to enjoy such events, such as the Kursaal Terraces, Zurriola Beach and the Nautic Club. Over twenty of the city's most emblematic places have hosted Festival events at some time or other, among them the San Telmo Museum, the Plenary Sessions Hall of the City Council, the Paseo Nuevo, Chillida-Leku, The Basque Culinary Center, El Peine del Viento (*Comb of the Winds*) and the Eureka! Zientzia Museoa.

By clearly vouching for the democratization of music, attendance figures for some Festival events have been truly remarkable: 50,000 people to see Jamie Cullum (2013), 45,000 for Gloria Gaynor (2016), 41,000 for B.B. King (2011), 20,000 for Patti Smith (2010), 18,000 for Bobby McFerrin with the Orfeón Donostiarra (2008). Before that, the record had been held by Chick Corea, who brought 14,000 people to the Velodrome in 1981.

In 1994 the Festival introduced the Donostiako Jazzaldia Award, to pay tribute to one of the historical figures coming to perform every year. The list of winners of that prize, beginning with Doc Cheatham in 1994, with Charles

Lloyd, slated for 2017, as the latest, is indeed a most impressive run-down of the greatest jazz talents.