



Ernie Watts is one of the hundreds of jazz musicians who have played The Jazzkeller over the decades.

COURTESY THE JAZZKELLER

JAZZKELLER: EUROPE'S OLDEST

The Jazzkeller is the last jazz club standing in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and most likely the oldest one in Europe. Its history is one of survival—and one that draws several parallels with that of post-World War II Germany.

The club was founded in 1952 by trumpet player Carlo Bohländer, who discovered in the still-damaged city center the ideal cellar to open a venue inspired by the French Existentialists, which he ended up calling *Le Domicile du Jazz* (or Jazz House). Early on, it thrived on the heavy presence of American soldiers, including members of the U.S. Army Big Band located in nearby Wiesbaden. Saxophonists Leo Wright, Joe Henderson and Don Menza, bassist David Friesen and French horn player David Amram were among those who frequented the club and rubbed shoulders with locals during the 1950s and '60s.

When the bulk of U.S. troops departed, *Le Domicile du Jazz*—which had by then become the Jazzkeller—maintained its wonderful

ambiance but offered jazz more sporadically. In 1977, with the Mangelsdorff brothers (legendary trombonist Albert and saxophonist Emil) at its helm, the club regained some of its jazz luster. But it was in 1986 that it changed ownership one last time to become the Jazzkeller we know today.

"I was living in Berlin at the time and could not find an investor there to open a jazz club," said Eugen Hahn, the current and enthusiastic owner. "My friend at Timeless Records in Holland—and others who knew that I was looking for a place—brought that location to my attention." Hahn hailed from East Germany, where he was known as a jazz and rock bass player as well as a music promoter.

When Hahn took over, the Jazzkeller began offering music almost every night—in an area not known for nightlife. "Frankfurt is not a town full of tourists—it's a business city," said Kerry Johnson, Hahn's wife, an American who helps him run the venue. "With its skyscrapers,

people believe it's like New York, but the city is usually pretty empty after 7:30 p.m."

Like many clubs around the world, the Jazzkeller is not impervious to changing tastes and the need to be profitable. The main focus is still on the bebop tradition, but the schedule has over the years become increasingly inclusive and now offers blues, as well as Latin and Brazilian music. In addition, Fridays are devoted to DJ sets. "I call it 'dancing for adults,'" said Hahn. "The place is always packed."

The owners have reasons to be hopeful. "We have been able to attract a younger audience in recent years," said Johnson. "We benefit from several music conservatories within the larger metropolitan area. We have the HR Radio Big Band and Jazz Band, as well."

In a town dominated by high finance, Hahn and Johnson's sense of community makes the Jazzkeller a refreshing oasis. Patrons can order food from Bidlabu, a restaurant located next door that emphasizes regional ingredients.

Plus, musicians are deeply fond of the basement venue's atmosphere. "Eugen Hahn's love and dedication to the music is rare," said saxophonist Rick Margitza. "He treats the artist with respect and makes us feel completely welcome. Hanging with him after the gig over a whiskey or two is one of the things I always look forward to, [mainly] because of the amazing stories he tells."
—Alain Drouot