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## The best jazz clubs in Paris



Le Duc des Lombards jazz club in Paris. (Becky Dalzell/For The Washington Post)

**By Rebecca Dalzell March 5**

It was after midnight at Le Duc des Lombards, and the jam session was warming up. A just-assembled quartet toyed with the jazz standard “Cherokee,” volleying solos until the melody was barely discernable. Upstarts holding drumsticks and saxophone cases lined up on the stairs to rotate in.

In the back, European and American musicians kissed hello and slapped backs, the jam their unofficial rendezvous. French stars Jacky Terrasson and Stéphane Belmondo stopped by after their show at Sunside, while American bassist Burniss Travis stepped onstage for a song or two. In dim blue-black light, the audience was packed into banquettes and cafe tables, chatting throughout and applauding each solo. Outside, the streets of Chatelet were quiet and bistros locked up, but Le Duc des Lombards kept humming until 4 a.m.

For proof that Paris is a jazz town, come to the Duc on a Saturday night. But dispense with nostalgic notions of Montmartre cabarets or Louis Armstrong in “Paris Blues.” Sure, you can hear stylish chanteuses and big bands, but the city is also a hub for contemporary jazz. Over two weeks hitting the clubs last year, I heard just about everything in that category, from bebop at L’Improviste to avant-jazz at La Java to Brazilian at the Bab-Ilo. Gypsy jazz, France’s own contribution to the genre, thrives. Unlike Americans, who largely view jazz as

a relic, the French host countless festivals and are willing to shell out for tickets. The music is more popular here than in its homeland.

Listening to jazz in Paris isn't like ordering a Big Mac, or picking up some other American import. It's experiencing a century-old part of French culture. "For me, jazz is very much linked to France, and France is linked to jazz," says Lucie Buathier, who organizes concerts with Paris Jazz Club, a promotional group. Jazz is a vibrant part of the city's nightlife, evidenced by some 600 concerts each month, far more than anywhere besides New York.



Musicians at Le Duc des Lombards in Paris. Internationally known, Le Duc offers two concerts by the same artist: at 8 p.m. and 10 p.m., much like New York clubs. Jazz is hotter in Paris than it is in the States, after becoming linked to ideas of freedom and the resistance during World War II. (PARIS JAZZ CLUB)

## **In wartime**

Jazz arrived in France during World War I, when James Reese Europe led an army-band tour across the country, kicking off a dance-hall craze. In the 1920s, black artists migrated to Paris, gathering in Montmartre. Dancer Josephine Baker dazzled clubgoers in Pigalle; Langston Hughes worked as a busboy nearby. The soundtrack was jazz.

But it was around World War II that jazz became embedded in the French psyche. During the war, the Vichy government banned American music, but you could still hear jazz in Paris: Bands just translated titles into French. Jazz became associated with the United States, freedom and the resistance. In 1945, it was the sound of liberation.

As the bebop style emerged and jazz appreciation waned in the United States, the music took off in France. "After the war, I think people were rediscovering the beauty of life, just getting dizzy from it," says singer Laetitia Kaing. "Jazz symbolized that state of mind." It still strikes a chord with the French, she says, as a pure expression of freedom.

To black Americans, it was the city of Paris that equaled freedom. Finding it a welcoming refuge from the Civil Rights era, musicians such as Sidney Bechet and Bud Powell moved here. They mingled with existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre in the jazz caves of St. Germain-des-Pres. Miles Davis fell in love with Sartre's muse, Juliette Gréco, and wrote

the score for Louis Malle's film "Ascenseur pour l'échafaud." That heyday has passed, but its legacy endures.

### **Les caves**

Some of the storied "caves" are still around and are an atmospheric place to start a jazz tour. Just off the Seine in the Latin Quarter, the Caveau de la Huchette has hosted jazz since 1946. Push past the drunken crowds on the street and you'll enter a smoke-stained warren of vaulted arches and narrow stone stairways. The building, dating to the 16th century, has served as a meeting place to such secret orders as the Masons. In the 1950s and '60s, it was popular club for bebop, drawing Art Blakey and Lionel Hampton.

The music is no longer cutting-edge, with mostly classic swing and bop onstage, and the audience skews toward gray-haired tourists. But as you sit on one of the stone benches and admire the carved details on the wall, it's easy to imagine its beatnik incarnation, when Sorbonne philosophers huddled in corners and dancers spilled into the street. The epicenter of postwar Parisian nightlife, the caves symbolized youth, sex, freedom and the avant-garde.

Today's student crowd gathers at the livelier Cafe Universel, a 15-minute walk away on Rue Saint-Jacques. It's a cramped and collegial bar with walls covered in American license plates and dollar bills. Young unknowns play to a supportive audience of friends and regulars. The cafe specializes in vocal music, with a Tuesday-night jam session for singers. An occasional host of the session is Baltimore-born crooner Marvin Parks, who moved to Paris last year from New York.

Parks makes Paris sound like the promised land for an aspiring musician. The gigs pay better and people take him more seriously than they did in New York, he told me. I met a number of Americans who said the same thing. To them, moving here makes perfect sense: Concerts in Europe pay well, listeners are appreciative and life is comfortable. Drummer John Betsch has lived in Paris for over 25 years and likes being in a place with so much respect and support for the arts. "In the U.S., a Strauss waltz is used to sell dog food — that's the attitude," he told me. In Europe, he said, people value and appreciate culture.

That was a refrain I heard from other expats in Paris. "There's a demand, a hunger for new stuff, for culture," says Yaron Herman, a stellar Israeli pianist who settled here in 2002. He was living in New York when he had a layover in Paris and ended up staying. France had never been part of his plans, but when he met people in Paris he found that "jazz was still a living music for them ... it had this freshness and vitality." And the public is generally more interested in the music: Even cabs will keep the radio tuned to a jazz station.



## A few good places

When I ask about good places to hear jazz, Betsch and Herman both mention L'Improviste, a restaurant and music venue on a barge in the Seine. It's in the residential 13th arrondissement, near the Gare d'Austerlitz, and on the weeknight I visited, the streets and club were nearly empty. Rusty on the outside, L'Improviste is surprisingly sleek inside on the lower deck, with soft black armchairs, tea lights and a Yamaha grand. Portholes look out onto the river and the boat bobs slightly, making you wonder whether you've had too much to drink. The space is well-suited to chamber groups; I heard a bebop outfit, the Jon Urrutia Trio, playing standards and original tunes. There are three or four shows a week, and on weekends the place can get packed.



The Bab-Ilo jazz club in Paris. (Becky Dalzell/For The Washington Post)

Another local spot off the tourist radar is the Bab-Ilo, which several young French musicians recommended. A cozy pub at the foot of the Butte Montmartre, it's just the kind of place a music tourist hopes to discover. With art hanging on terra-cotta-colored walls, a dark wood bar and four beers on tap, it seems to be out of an old movie, sans the cigarette smoke. Scattered chairs make up the club downstairs, which puts on jazz, Caribbean or Brazilian bands nearly every night of the week. Like most of the venues in Paris, it's impossible to generalize about the program.

The most well-known jazz clubs are the three on the Rue des Lombards, near Les Halles: Sunset/Sunside, Le Baiser Sale and Le Duc des Lombards. Locals don't like the crowded, dingy area, but music fans invariably end up there because the bands are so good. All have been here since the 1980s and together formed Paris Jazz Club, which puts out a helpful monthly calendar of shows citywide, available online. It also organizes October's Jazz Sur Seine festival and once a month offers a single admission charge for all three clubs.



The Sunset/Sunside jazz club in Paris. (PARIS JAZZ CLUB)

Sunside books reliably strong French and international groups, with headliners such as Lou Donaldson or Franck Amsallem. The warmly lit club has exposed brick and wooden tables, but it gets uncomfortably packed despite a 25-euro cover. Like the equally knee-knocking Village Vanguard in New York, it seems to be a place hotel concierges recommend to guests, who come regardless of the band, but that is also respected among the jazz cognoscenti. Downstairs is its more relaxed sister club Sunset, with a cheaper cover charge and less established bands.

Next door is Le Baiser Sale, divey but nearly as expensive, with lower-tier bands than the street's other two clubs. Its program slants toward fusion and world music, especially from Africa. There's a large West African population in Paris, and its presence is one of the distinguishing factors of the city's jazz scene. You often see bands with Senegalese or Malian members, although the music doesn't necessarily sound African. (For that, check out the Sunday brunch at Le Comptoir General.)

Le Duc des Lombards has a sexier vibe than the other two and books top-flight musicians playing some dialect of bebop. It's a good place to get the pulse of the contemporary post-bop jazz scene, with established young players from both New York and Paris. As at Sunside, you should make a reservation in advance and arrive early. The Friday- and Saturday-night jam sessions are easier to get into. There's no cover charge or drink minimum, so it's a good choice for those unfamiliar with jazz and just looking to check out the scene. Many of the shows at the Duc are broadcast on TSF jazz radio, which has several podcasts and can be [streamed online](#).

## **Gypsy jazz**

Much of the music you hear at these clubs is rooted in American bebop or swing. But the French have their own contribution to jazz: manouche, or gypsy jazz.

In the 1920s, Roma guitarist Django Reinhardt fused gypsy and swing rhythms into a catchy original sound. He and violinist Stéphane Grapelli formed the Quintette du Hot Club de France, a hugely influential all-string group that popularized the style. Reinhardt grew up in a gypsy settlement outside of Paris, in Saint-Ouen, an area that's now a center of his music, which can be heard at La Choque des Puces or the June festival Jazz-Musette des Puces.

Americans might view gypsy jazz as old-fashioned, but it has a strong following here, with two or three shows a day. Atelier Charonne, near the Bastille, hosts some of the best guitarists nightly, with jam sessions Sunday. The catch is that for good seats you have to order a 35-euro prix-fixe dinner or come after 10, when diners thin out. I took a seat at the bar, craning my neck to see the Adrien Moignard Trio. A 29-year-old with dazzling finger work, Moignard is among a new generation of musicians who have taken up manouche.

Another night I heard the RP Quartet, a young group made up of two guitars, a violin and bass that played "60s jazz cooked in a Django sauce," according to the concert poster. They played at New Morning, a cavernous space in the 10th arrondissement that puts on rock and funk as well as jazz. Dressed in black suits and skinny ties, the men perched on stools and strummed charging melodies that got the crowd hooting.

Many of the tunes were familiar, like Thelonious Monk's "I Mean You," or Miles Davis's "So What," covered by jazz musicians everywhere. But the twangy, propulsive sound was distinctly French. The style was knowingly retro, as if winking to jazz history. See, it seemed to say: This music is really ours.

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