

## Brussels Jazz Marathon 2014: A Serendipitous Street Party

By Marian Calabro

Sitting in the Mappa Mundo café on a mild Sunday afternoon in May 2014, we raised our steins of Trappistes Rochefort Ale and smiled at the folks we'd been chatting with at our shared table. "To hear big names, go to Gent Jazz," said one of them, referring to an annual festival in Northwest Belgium. "But if you want to hear solid European players for free, you're in the right place. The Brussels Jazz Marathon is really more of a street party than a festival."

He was right. Throughout the Marathon weekend, my husband and I wandered in and out of that street party. If we didn't care for one act, we'd simply head to another venue a few blocks away. The Jazz Marathon wasn't the only thing that drew us to Brussels, but it sealed the deal. We enjoy a certain sort of European vacation: pick a city we've never visited, unpack once, see a lot of art, hear as much music as possible (jazz, world, classical), try different ethnic restaurants, and do everything by foot or public transportation. The primary draw was the fairly new Magritte Museum, part of a national arts complex that rivals the Metropolitan Museum in size. We adore Magritte's art, and we also love Belgian beer. The 19th annual Jazz Marathon, featuring 400 artists in 125 free concerts, put the head on the brew, so to speak.

As a world citizen of jazz, Belgium punches above its weight. Native sons include Django Reinhardt, Toots Thielemans, and Adolphe Sax. The latter actually invented dozens of instruments, as we learned at Brussels's very cool Musical Instrument Museum. The city boasts a number of clubs, the most venerable of which is L'Archiduc, which since its opening in 1937 has presented such legends as Nat Cole, Miles Davis and Mal Waldron.

Some Jazz Marathon performances took place in those clubs, which waived their cover charges on those nights. There were 80 venues in all, including four big outdoor stages. Performers are chosen by a network of jazz organizations and are paid. The program listed the offerings by category: traditional, modern, blues/rock, funk/world/



Bassist Tony Overwater and pianist Rembrandt Frerichs perform at the 2014 Brussels Jazz Marathon. Photo by Marian Calabro.

Afro, and Latino/World. Kudos to the programmers for including daytime events for families with children. Funding comes from city and regional governments as well as corporate sponsors — ah, public support of the arts!

Dutch pianist Rembrandt Frerichs and his trio opened the event on Friday. They entertained a good-sized crowd in the city's signature plaza, a medieval gem called the Grand Place or Grote Markt. (Brussels is a multilingual city; everyone speaks French, Flemish, and usually English as well.) Frerichs got hooked on jazz at age 15 when he heard Herbie Hancock, and the influence was evident. His trio played mainly their own compositions, plus some Radiohead. We stuck around for singer Chrystel Wautier and her quartet, but their soft jazz, a la SiriusXM's Watercolors, accelerated our jet lag and sent us back to our bed.

We returned to the Grand Place on Saturday evening for the European Jazz Unit, led by Danish vibraphonist Christopher Dell. Restaurants encircle the plaza, and we booked at the only one recommended by our innkeeper. "Too bad

we couldn't get a window seat" was our first reaction, but when the Unit started playing, we were happy to be as far away as possible. The brass-heavy septet embarked on a subgenre of jazz I call "horns that echo the sound of dying hyenas." Okay, at a free festival you get what you pay for. The food made up for the cacophony. We hightailed it to The Music Village, a premier club, and managed to snag a stand-up spot at the bar for "The Swingmasters and Elaine McKeown present The Great American Songbook." They drew a huge crowd. British singer McKeown and her Dutch sextet swung so hard on tunes like "Blue Moon" and "Lady Be Good" that the walls of the modest-sized club started to vibrate. (I know, because I was leaning against one.) McKeown has a curious voice, half Betty Boop and half Billie Holiday. Oddly, this was the Marathon's only act to focus specifically on American tunes. But it is a European showcase.

Sunday afternoon brought us to the aforementioned Mappa Mundo and, for me, the Marathon's high point. Vocalist Kim Vesteynen and guitarist Tim Finoulst are a low-key duo, perfect for the small space.

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The audience consisted of us, a few fellow jazz fans from south of Brussels, and an array of folks sitting and drinking outside, where there was competition from noisy bars across the street. Vesteynen and Finoulst (“It’s a mouthful, but we can’t call ourselves Kim and Tim”) opened with standards like “Beautiful Love” and a number of originals by Kim. Her English is charming, her sense of humor mordant, typical of most of the Belgians we met. I like her lyrics: “Strolling round in a dream / We make a team” and “It seems that the road keeps on turning / And all I can do is keep on learning.” One of her songs is called “Bruxism” — it means grinding one’s teeth — and another is “The Puzzle of Hearts.”

At the break we chatted with Tim, Kim, and her husband, jazz pianist Arne Van Coillie. They told us that despite widespread support for jazz, few Belgian musicians can survive on performance alone — most teach or work day jobs. In the second set, the eclectic Kim and Tim did lovely interpretations of “Autumn Leaves,” “Send in the Clowns,” and “Walk on By.” The latter was so interesting that it made me wonder why the songs of Burt Bacharach and Hal David aren’t covered more often by jazz musicians.

Back at the big stage, a brass-heavy quartet featuring trumpeter Jean-Paul Estievenart overwhelmed us. That abruptly ended our Jazz Marathon experience, but not our club-going. At The Music Village a few nights later, we grooved to the flamenco guitarist

Myrddin (he uses only one name), with vocalist José Liger and dancer Ana Llanes. They brought a lot of sizzle to a damp, chilly day. The whole evening, including cover charge, dinner and wine, cost only about 60 Euro total (\$85). Later I described my Salad Hawaii, basically a green salad with a few pieces of canned pineapples, to our innkeeper. With classically droll Belgian humor, he retorted, “Yes, that’s Hawaii in Belgium.”

Our final musical stop of the week was Le Cercle des Voyageurs, a restaurant with an adjacent cultural center. Woo-hoo! The post-dinner set by Tcha Badjo, a gypsy jazz trio from Quebec, drew an SRO audience and brought down the house. Admission was a huge bargain at only 6 Euro. Staid-looking women leapt up to dance, while crowds gathered in the street to listen. We were lucky to catch Tcha Badjo as they passed through Brussels en route to Lille, France, to lead a master class in jazz manouche. They prefer this term to “gypsy,” which has offensive overtones in Europe.

Most of the musicians I’ve mentioned can be heard on YouTube and their own websites. And if this little taste of Belgium intrigues you, you can read my reviews of the eateries and museums we enjoyed — in Bruges and Antwerp as well as Brussels — under my Trip Advisor pen name, which is (what else) JerseyJazz at [www.tripadvisor.com/members/jerseyjazz](http://www.tripadvisor.com/members/jerseyjazz). JJ

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- 17** Marlene VerPlanck, Singer
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