



# Bird's Eye Jazz Club

The Bird's Eye Jazz Club celebrated its tenth anniversary last year and has acquired a reputation as one of the best in Europe.



If you go to New York or Paris, people in the jazz world know all about the Basel scene and Basel players like George Grüntz. How did a small city like Basel get such an enviable reputation? Well, Basel has had an affinity for jazz ever since World War II because of the US soldiers who were around at that time and were the first generation to bring swing to Switzerland. Then there was a second phase of development in the 1950/60s, with jazz clubs in restaurants, mostly of the "twilight" kind with rather questionable reputations. Basel has now moved on and jazz is considered as a legitimate cultural form.

According to Willi Elmer, former president of the Bird's Eye Jazz Club, there are many lawyers, doctors – especially surgeons, for some reason – and other professional people who fell in love with jazz when they were students. And a feeling for jazz has even percolated through to other areas in Basel – you only have to think of the Fasnacht cliques and "Guggamusik" bands.

The Bird's Eye Jazz Club's first home ten years ago was in the Elsässerstrasse near the French customs post. It was a very improvised set-up and it soon became clear that as it was outside the city, people were a little reluctant to go there because of the difficulty of getting back home again afterwards – and it wasn't an entirely safe area anyway.

Six years ago, the club was very fortunate in being able to move to its present prime location just off the Barfüsserplatz, mainly through the good offices of one of its main sponsors. This cellar certainly has a history. It's built into the foundations of the city of Basel, with part of the old city wall a few yards behind the stage. Stephan Kurmann, bass player and club administrator, says

it was probably the first big cellar in the city, and part of the old monastery from which the Barfüsserplatz takes its name (the Franciscan monks who settled there in the 13th century were supposed to have gone barefoot). And up to six years ago, it was used by prisoners confined in the Lohnhof above for playing basket-ball.

The name Bird's Eye – a semicircle with a dot below – came from the musical sign for "fermata", which is known as a bird's eye in jazz parlance. The club is run by an association called Jazz Life Basel, and has three full-time employees and about twelve part-timers. It generates about 50% of its revenues itself, but is dependent on the generosity of a group of very loyal and discerning sponsors for the rest. It receives no subsidies, but Stephan hopes this could change once the city fathers give proper recognition to the growing contribution of jazz to the cultural life of Basel.



Stephan Kurmann

Every jazz club has to have a direction or speciality, and the Bird's Eye decided to opt for classical modern jazz right from the beginning. It's closed on Sundays and Mondays. Tuesday and Wednesday nights are reserved for trios, often local, which gives young people a chance of playing in public and gaining experience. Thursday is reserved for professional jazz groups or special highlights, while Friday and Saturday nights are for international groups with up to 16 players. The club has an attractive bar and seating/standing room for up to 100 people, and attracts over 10,000 visitors a year. The clientele is very varied, and it's also a nice place for women to go alone, Stephan says: "The only important thing is that you like jazz." And there is any number of gifted musicians who want to play there, and it's difficult to make a selection.

First-time visitors may be shocked to see amplifiers and microphones on the stage – after all, it's quite a small cellar. A lot of groups do play unplugged, but sometimes bass players or flutes need the amplification to be heard over brass instruments. And the microphones are needed for recording – for the club also produces its own CDs. The club holds workshops for all sorts of groups, including classes of schoolchildren, and has close links with the jazz department of the Conservatorium in Basel – this alone shows how seriously Basel people take their jazz. The next workshop is on April 8 and will be held mostly in English. And there'll be a festival in December this year called "Strings on Top", featuring string quartets in a jazz context.

For more information about this or any of the club's other activities, see its website at [www.birdseye.ch](http://www.birdseye.ch).