

# From a Local Jazz Club to the Best Venue in the World: Montmartre Jazz House, Copenhagen, 1959-1976<sup>\*</sup>

Frank Büchmann-Møller

Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, Odense, Denmark

Montmartre Jazz House in Copenhagen became one of the most famous venues in Europe. This paper describes its history, from the first concert performed by the American jazz musician George Lewis and His New Orleans Orchestra to the turbulent and economical difficult years in the 1970's when the owner, Herluf Kamp-Larsen, had to declare himself bankrupt. A couple of Danish jazz musicians, trumpet player Palle Mikkelborg (1941-) and pianist Ole Kock Hansen (1945-), explain the importance of the venue, and some of the most legendary jazz musicians that were hired during the clubs history are mentioned. The paper is based upon the author's book upon the venue and gives a survey of the history of Montmartre Jazz House. The research for the book includes lots of concert reviews, interviews with many musicians, members of the staff and Herluf Kamp-Larsen, and besides, the writer had access to the archive of the jazz house.

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## Introduction

Montmartre<sup>1</sup> Jazz House was a rather small club located in the center of the city of Copenhagen in Store Regnegade 19, a few hundred yards from the Royal Theatre. The club could accommodate about 150 people, only, and you entered the club through a gateway and an entrance to the left. The only way you could recognize the club from the outside was a rather large photostat in a window of Count Basie pointing to the entrance. No name of the club was visible from the outside. During the years 1959-1976, thousands of people, Danes and foreigners, passed through this entrance, and for most of them the club provided them with some of their greatest musical experiences ever. The jazz house was also instrumental in causing quite a few of the visiting American musicians to choose Copenhagen as their new home. Among these musicians were saxophonists Stan Getz, Dexter Gordon, Ben Webster, and Sahib Shihab, trumpet players Idrees Sulieman and Don Cherry, pianist Kenny Drew, and bassist Oscar Pettiford. So it is easy to understand why many get nostalgic when the name Montmartre Jazz House comes up during a conversation.

The venue was known as one of the most important jazz clubs in Europe during its heydays, on a par with Ronnie Scott's Club in London and Blue Note in Paris. The writer visited the venue several times and has lasting and vivid memoirs from hearing saxophonists Ben Webster, Hank Mobley, Dexter Gordon, Roland Kirk, Sonny

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Frank Büchmann-Møller, librarian, Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts.

<sup>1</sup> A feature in Danish National TV, broadcast December 18, 1976.

Rollins, and Yusef Lateef, pianists McCoy Tyner and Bill Evans, trumpet players Freddie Hubbard and Art Farmer, just to name a few.

The history of Montmartre falls in three parts. The first one lasted a short year only, as Anders Dyrup who founded the club, got involved in other businesses in Germany. The second period was the one when Herluf Kamp-Larsen took over, and the third period came when he went bankrupt in 1974 and another management tried to continue the club, but had to go out of business in February, 1976.

### **The First Year**

Anders Dyrup who was an architect, was the chairman of a jazz club in Copenhagen called Club Montmartre, and he bought the venue in Store Regnegade 19 in late 1958 and had it renovated and decorated by a group of young Danish artists. On the opening night February 17, 1959, George Lewis and His New Orleans Orchestra played to an enthusiastic audience. Montmartre was still a jazz club with a membership policy, but it was also open to the public, who had to pay a slightly higher entrance fee. New Orleans jazz and Dixieland were very popular in Denmark at the moment, so Dyrup hired not only mostly jazz bands in those styles, of course, but also swing bands and the fine Danish modern jazz trumpet player Jørgen Ryg with bassist Erik Moseholm and pianist Finn Savery's trio were hired once in a while.

Most importance for the image of the club was when Dyrup hired saxophonist Stan Getz who wanted to have Copenhagen as his base for a while. Getz had come to Europe in 1958 with Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic tour and stayed on in Europe the following two years, first in Paris, then in Stockholm, after which he came to Denmark. Getz played his first job at Montmartre with pianist Mose Allison on March 20, 1959. Many years later, Dyrup vividly remembered the music as being the most beautiful and the most naturally swinging he ever heard.

During the summer of 1959, Getz got American bassist Oscar Pettiford to move up to Copenhagen from Paris, and Swedish pianist Jan Johansson who Getz had played with in Stockholm, to move down to Copenhagen to play with him at the Montmartre. After this engagement, Getz was hired to clubs in other European countries, so Pettiford took over and formed the first of several prominent Montmartre rhythm sections over the years, this time with Johansson and the leading Danish drummer William Schiöppfe. During the following months they backed the Danish vibraphonist Louis Hjulmand, trumpet players Benny Bailey, Stan Getz, and Don Byas, among others.

Stan Getz was not very much involved in the local jazz milieu in Copenhagen, but Pettiford was. Therefore, even if he died already in September 1960, his musical footprints became much more felt than Getz's. His professionalism and energy pushed the best Danish jazz musicians to higher levels, and he was a big inspiration for the upcoming Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen. He also taught Jan Johansson how to use his left hand more, thus, giving his accompaniment and solos more substance. All in all, he was a very helpful and dedicated musician from a generation where it was natural to share one's knowledge so that everyone—both the ensemble, but also the audience—benefited from it.

The Montmartre business was not healthy during the first year. The club was rather small and could only hold an audience of about 150 persons, and when the house was packed only kr800 (= ca \$120) came in as entrance fee. This shall be seen in comparison with the pay that the musicians got. Normally, a musician got paid

kr100 a night, but Getz asked for kr1200—but reduced it to kr700 to help Dyrup with the economy—and Pettiford got kr500. On the last day of January 1960, Dyrup closed Club Montmartre because it needed renovation. Also, he had worked up rather a large deficit on the account, so he decided to take a break.

### **Herluf Kamp-Larsen Takes Over**

The break became longer and longer, mostly because Dyrup had to travel to Germany in his work for the record company Storyville/Sonet. In late 1961, he finally decided to sell Montmartre, because he realized that he couldn't take care of both businesses at the same time, and this was where Harold Goldberg and Herluf Kamp-Larsen entered the stage. Goldberg was an American pianist who had settled in Copenhagen, and he had also played at Club Montmartre several times. Goldberg knew Herluf Kamp-Larsen, a jazz loving waiter who had served a jazz loving public at a series of local pubs. Kamp-Larsen and Goldberg agreed to buy Store Regnegade 19, and for Kamp-Larsen, it was a dream coming true:

I had for a long time an idea of opening my own venue after having been in Paris at the club Le Chat Qui Pêche. Here, a pianist played, and musicians came by and sat in. I was very fascinated by that and thought that at some time or another I would like to have a place like that. (personal communication, November 7, 2007)

Goldberg and Kamp-Larsen reopened the venue on New Year's Eve, 1961, changing its name to Montmartre Jazz House. The main attraction was American tenor saxophonist Brew Moore who became a mainstay at Montmartre the following years. His Lester Young-inspired playing almost free of clichés was a success, and after the opening night, Goldberg said to Kamp-Larsen, that he didn't think it was necessary to change the program ever. Brew Moore played for the whole of January 1962, the first soloist to have such a long engagement there, a policy, however, that became the norm in the future. This way, a new soloist could be familiar with the accompanying rhythm section, so that after a few nights the group could manifest itself and thus gave the audience a greater performance than if they had only played for a couple of nights. On the other hand, Danish upcoming musicians could check out the guest soloists night after night and maybe also sit in with them. The pianist Torben Kjær told that he:

Heard Dexter Gordon, Ben Webster, and Johnny Griffin, it was so great. Also to detect how they formed their music and how they had problems having it coming off, because it was not every time it came out as planned. It was a genuine education. The importance of Montmartre was first and foremost local, it was of invaluable importance to us musicians in the Copenhagen area. When Dexter Gordon told me: "Torben, you play too long solos" and he played 48 choruses himself, then you later on understood what he meant. (personal communication, September 24, 2007)

Pianist Ole Kock Hansen also looks at Montmartre as the rhythmic conservatory of the time:

On one of my jobs with Dexter Gordon, he asked me to accentuate more the leading notes of the chords. At first, I did not know what he meant, but I took the advice back home in my study to work on it, and later on I benefited from it, both as an accompanist and as an arranger. (personal communication, December 11, 2007)

Due to fortunate circumstances, Herluf Kamp-Larsen was able to become the sole manager, and he turned out to be an excellent leader in his own way. He was not very good in English, and he was a shy person who favored talking to people he already knew, so how did he come in contact with foreign American musicians? Well, he did get some helps along the way. Kamp-Larsen knew Anders Stefansen, who was an upcoming organizer of jazz concerts in Copenhagen, and through him he got some musicians to Montmartre, among them

saxophonists Don Byas, Roland Kirk, Coleman Hawkins, Albert Ayler, Ben Webster, Johnny Griffin, and Sahib Shihab, pianists Bill Evans and Teddy Wilson, trumpet players Rex Stewart and Don Cherry, and violinist Stuff Smith. One of them gave Kamp-Larsen two directories over American musicians, one over New York based musicians and the other one covering the rest of the United States. When Kamp-Larsen returned to his home after a long night and had difficulty falling asleep, he thought about musicians he would like to present. He recorded his wishes on a small tape recorder, and the next morning he listened to the tape, found the musicians' addresses and wrote to them, or rather, he had some of the women who worked in the kitchen of Montmartre do it for him.

### **Working Conditions for the Musicians**

Montmartre had during the years become a club with a legendary reputation, and for good reasons. Especially during Kamp-Larsen's management which at the same time was both loose and tight, the musicians worked under what could be called freedom with responsibility. The American musicians were used to rather strict club owners who wanted this and that, but at Montmartre it was up to their own better judgment how and what to play. Kamp-Larsen never interfered as long as the music did not start too late after the fixed time. The waiters and the personnel in the kitchen were also kind to the musicians, and there was no discrimination in Copenhagen at that time. All in all, this made the venue a good place to work, primarily also due to the excellent rhythm sections. Johnny Griffin played at the Montmartre several times—he was very popular with the Copenhagen audiences—and he knew a lot of European and American clubs. He summed it all up in this way: "Montmartre was the best jazz venue in Europe, not to say in the whole world—and they didn't even know it!" (Frank & Henrik, 2008, p. 214)

During the years, Kamp-Larsen presented jazz music of every style, from Danish New Orleans bands such as the Theis-Nyegaard Jazz Band to American avantgarde musicians like Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, and Cecil Taylor. But it was a number of American musicians rooted in bop, hard bop, and cool that were stylistically dominant. Among these were the pianists Bud Powell, Horace Parlan, Duke Jordan, Al Haig, Joe Albany, and Abdullah Ibrahim—at that time known as Dollar Brand—and Bill Evans, the tenor saxophonists Dexter Gordon, Brew Moore, Lucky Thompson, Roland Kirk, Booker Ervin, Johnny Griffin, Yusef Lateef, Jimmy Heath, Clifford Jordan, Hank Mobley, Joe Henderson, Stan Getz, and Sonny Rollins, the alto saxophonists Leo Wright, Sahib Shihab, Phil Woods, and Lee Konitz, the trumpet players Kenny Dorham, Donald Byrd, Art Farmer, Carmell Jones, Charles Tolliver, and Freddie Hubbard. Among the musicians of the swing era, Ben Webster was the one most associated with Montmartre. Beside the big names, Kamp-Larsen also featured Danish groups, and especially after 1970 these were preferred to American musicians because they were cheaper and the economy had become more sensitive. Finally, he was very generous towards the young avantgarde musicians such as saxophonist John Tchicai, who got a chance on Monday nights—the night off for the main attractions.

The soloists, who normally did not bring their own rhythm group, needed one, and from an early stage Kamp-Larsen instigated a house rhythm section. The first one had Bent Axen at the piano, but he didn't last long and was replaced by the Spanish virtuoso Tete Montoliu, and in 1964 Kenny Drew took over for seven years to come. Bassist Niels-Henning Ørsted Pedersen played his first engagement in March 1962, not yet 15 years old, accompanying Bud Powell, and he became the permanent bass player in 1963 when he left high school. The drum chair was first occupied by William Schiöppfe, who was relieved by Alex Riel, Al Heath, and Makaya Ntshoko

respectively. All these musicians were able to give the best soloists first class accompaniment and thus contributed to the high musical standard at Montmartre. From 1970 there came a shift from a house rhythm section on a permanent basis to rhythm sections of more varied local musicians, who now had developed a stronger capability.

### **Financial Problems Turn up**

For some years, everything went well at the Montmartre, especially considering that there were no public financial support, but around 1970 everything became more difficult, and to help the economy of the jazz house, several Danish jazz groups played for free during two months in the Spring of 1970 and, likewise, the following two Springs.

There were several reasons for the financial crisis. American musicians now wanted to bring their own groups which of course made it harder to pay names like the Harold Land-Bobby Hutcherson Quintet, Tony Williams Lifetime, Herbie Hancock's Sextet, Weather Report, Mahavishnu Orchestra, Chick Corea's Return to Forever, McCoy Tyner's Quartet, or Charles Mingus' Quintet, all ensembles that were presented in the early 1970's, not to speak of big bands like that of Gil Evans and the Thad Jones—Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, both guesting Montmartre in 1974. A new tax system, the withholding tax, was introduced in 1970 and this immediately caused problems for all music clubs and venues, including Montmartre, because it meant an increase of the entrance fee of about 40 pct. Flight tickets had also become more expensive, especially during the oil crisis, and the growing popularity of rock had also made the jazz audience more scarce. All this resulted in an accumulation of debts so high that Kamp-Larsen had to declare himself bankrupt in November 1974.

The jazz house was such an important institution in the Danish jazz milieu that forces were joint to reopen it under a new management. On February 27, 1975, Dexter Gordon on his 52nd birthday played to a full house, but the management never got the chance to carry on the tradition from Kamp-Larsen. The owner of the building, Alex Friedman, wanted to make the upper floors into apartments and the ground floor to an office, so the last jazz music in St. Regnegade 19 was played on February 15, 1976, almost exactly 17 years after George Lewis's first concert there.

Nevertheless, during the last year, some memorable music was presented, such as, Clifford Jordan Quartet, Johnny Griffin, Jimmy Heath, Duke Jordan, and Elvin Jones Quartet. Warne Marsh and Lee Konitz closed the year 1975, while Palle Mikkelborg's new ensemble Entrance played to a packed and enthusiastic audience in February 1976.

You cannot overestimate the importance of Montmartre. Trumpet player and composer Palle Mikkelborg (1941- ) compared what happened in Montmartre to a crystal that became enlightened:

The more it became enlightened by Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, Yusef Lateef, and Kenny Dorham, the more powerful and beautiful its shining. Not till now, I really understand how important Montmartre was to us, how important it was that there was such a crystal to shine upon us. (Frank, B.-M., & Henrik, W.-I, 2008, p. 25)

Though the Danish jazz musicians were lucky to benefit from this crystal for many years, it also had a negative side effect, because the crystal shone so heavily, that it took much longer for them to find their own voice compared to other Scandinavian jazz musicians.

Shortly after the closing of Montmartre Jazz House, efforts were made to open a new venue at another place in the centre of Copenhagen, and already in September 1976 a different Montmartre opened, this time in Nørregade 41. With different managements along the way, the venue would offer all kinds of jazz, and also in its later years rock, pop, hiphop, world music etc., until it had to be closed in January 1995. The connection of jazz and the name of Montmartre in Copenhagen didn't stop there, because in May 2010 a new venue called Jazz House Montmartre reopened at the old address, Store Regnegade 19. The interior has changed, as there had been all kinds of businesses there since 1976, but the music offered is still international and Danish acoustic jazz.

Even if most of the music played at the old Montmartre Jazz House only exists in the memories of those fortunate people who visited the venue, luckily much jazz has survived. Danish National Radio broadcasted almost every week from the venue—usually on Thursdays—and many of these broadcasts have since been issued on both LP's and CD's. But also other recordings were made there, so that now you can listen to, among others, Ben Webster, Dexter Gordon, Kenny Dorham, Sonny Rollins, Stuff Smith, Cecil Taylor, Don Byas, Johnny Griffin, Albert Ayler, Bill Evans, Brew Moore, and Roland Kirk, all jazz performers that peaked musically during those years.

### Conclusions

Montmartre Jazz House was during the years 1959-1976 instrumental in making Copenhagen the jazz capital of Europe. The music offered was played by some of the greatest American jazz musicians, and quite a few of them made Copenhagen their base of operations in Europe. The musical spectrum was a varied one, from dixieland to swing, from bop to neo-bop, from cool jazz to avantgarde jazz, from modal music to fusion, from American to Danish jazz, and from other-European to African jazz. All this music was—with a few exceptions—provided without public financial support. Almost 40 years after the gateway was closed, “the old Montmartre” remains unsurpassed as the most legendary club in the Danish jazz history.

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