

All About Jazz

CLAUDE NOBS MONTREUX

One-off reunions and gloriously eclectic jam sessions were one thing, but Nobs' instinct and joyful spontaneity also resulted in some magical moments that caught just about everybody by surprise.

Swiss percussionist Reto Weber, a session musician at the Biel recording studio in the late 1960s, where many of the early recordings from the MJF were produced, recounts a remarkable tale that throws further light on Nobs and the spirit of MJF.

In 2010 Weber was touring with the Ayekoo drummers of Ghana—six young drummers from the National Ballet of Accra. Their tour took them through, Austria, Italy, France, Germany and Switzerland. One day the Ghanaian musicians asked Weber if they could visit Montreux and the famous jazz festival. Weber duly lent them his car. Weber picks up the story: "At five o'clock in the evening I got a call from the boss of the band. 'Hey Reto, can you come to Montreux? We will play tonight at the Montreux Jazz Festival.' I said, 'No, it's not true. It's impossible. You are not on the program.'"

Thirty minutes later, Weber recounts, he answered his phone once more. The Ayekoo musicians urged him to make his way to Montreux as they were, they insisted, playing that evening. It transpired that the six musicians had been walking through the town in their traditional African dress when they met, as they described it to Weber, 'an old guy man walking two dogs.' The man, needless to say, was Claude Nobs, and, after a short conversation, he invited Ayekoo to play at the MJF that evening.

Nobs allotted the astonished Ayekoo percussionists an hour at the Jazz Café. Meanwhile, thinking there must be some misunderstanding, Weber drove to Montreux. When he arrived, Weber asked Nobs what was going on. "Claude said: 'Oh, I have the feeling they are very good,'" Weber relates. "Claude had a very good nose for good musicians."

The Ayekoo concert in the Jazz Café was a hit. "Claude was blown away by their concert," says Weber. "The people came and it was a big success. Claude was like, 'Wow! Absolutely fantastic! Tonight you will play as surprise guests in the Stravinski Hall after Joan Baez at eleven o'clock.' "The organizing committee thought Claude was crazy but he said 'Don't worry, this is a great band,'" Weber relates.

When Joan Baez finished her set Nobs took the microphone and invited the audience to stay for a special, unscheduled performance. Baez stayed too. "She, was like, 'Wow!' Weber recalls. "She came onto the stage and danced for the whole set in the middle of the band—one hour. It was amazing; from the street direct to the Stravinski Hall," laughs Weber. "That was Claude Nobs."