

Music lover and entrepreneur

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Music lover and entrepreneur

The death of Claude Nobs marked the end of an era. The French-speaking Swiss, who founded the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1967 and had directed it ever since, was an extraordinary figure in every respect. A tribute by Manfred Papst

He loved presenting gifts on stage – huge bouquets of flowers, for example, or Swiss watches. He was completely in his element when paying his guests compliments in his lifelong quirky English. Claude Nobs was a born fan with a genius for establishing friendships but also an astute businessman and strategist. Music was not just his livelihood, he lived for it. This diminutive, exuberant French-speaking Swiss founded the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1967 and oversaw its strategic management until his untimely death on 10 January 2013.

The much-celebrated festival over 16 days in July, which attracted around 200,000 visitors to the shores of Lake Geneva, bore the impresario's hallmark for decades. Inquisitive by nature, he also organised hundreds of free concerts on the festival site in addition to the big-ticket events in the Auditorium Stravinski and the Miles Davis Hall. And if someone caught his eye there, they might soon find themselves performing as a surprise guest on one of the main stages.

Claude Nobs certainly had a colourful career. The son of a baker and nurse born in Territet near Montreux in 1936, he completed an apprenticeship as a chef and continued his training in Lausanne to become a "Maître d'Hôtel". He then took a job in the Montreux tourist information office as an accountant of all things. But he was not suited to working in an office. Almost immediately he began organising concerts. His passion for jazz, blues and rock took him to France and then to the US. He visited the clubs, forged contacts and established a network with a combination of charm and audacity. He brought the Rolling Stones to perform their first concert in Switzerland in 1964. Three years later, he founded the Montreux Jazz Festival with two friends. The first event was held on a budget of 10,000 Swiss francs and without paid employees. But they managed to bring the Charles Lloyd quartet with the very

young Keith Jarrett to Switzerland. What a way to start!

The world's leading contemporary musicians played in Montreux over the decades. The festival's budget increased to 17 million Swiss francs and it employed 1200 staff. Half of the revenues came from ticket sales and the remainder from ancillary income. Claude Nobs, who made an invaluable contribution to tourism in the Lake Geneva region, received very little in the way of subsidies.

An archive with 5,000 hours of music

As his fame grew, the juvenile whirlwind turned into a grand seigneur. Nobs resided in a magical property in Caux, high above Lake Geneva. He surrounded himself with his collections – model railways, jukeboxes, 42,000 LPs, all kinds of bric-a-brac, as well as a huge film and sound archive. Every concert at the festival was recorded in sound and video in the best quality available because Claude Nobs was also a lover of technology. Well over 5,000 hours of music from Montreux are stored in his catacombs. A lot of it is already on LP, CD and DVD, though there is much more still waiting to be processed.

Claude Nobs may be regarded as a lucky man in many respects. He was much loved, built up an incredible network and felt equally at home in New York and Tokyo. Yet, despite this, he was strangely remote. His creative restlessness never left him and gave him an aura of slight melancholy. He was always thinking ahead to the next festival. He often failed to notice what was going on around him at the time. Only later would he watch everything – on DVD in his home cinema fitted out with first-class seats from the defunct airline Swissair or on his boat.

When Claude Nobs was on his travels, he always had a suitcase full of video and sound recordings of concerts at his festival. He presented them as gifts in the way that

other people give tips. But this famous man did not just look to the past. He was constantly on the lookout for new talent.

A powerful figure and a dreamer

"I've got something to show you," he said when we last met in summer 2012 at the Hotel Baur au Lac in Zurich. Nobs opened his notebook with a conspiratorial smile. "There's this guitarist called Andreas Varydy. He comes from Slovakia and is just fourteen years old. I've just invited him to Montreux." The amateur recording of a concert by street musicians appeared on the screen. The guitarist still had puppy fat around his mischievous face and small, soft hands. But the way he played the guitar was phenomenal. Claude Nobs hummed along, tapped in time to the beat and looked absolutely thrilled. This enthusiasm was perhaps his most endearing quality.

Claude Nobs loved opulence. He had more of everything than an ordinary person could manage. But he was no ordinary person. He was a powerful figure, yet also a dreamer. Surrounded by a small band of devotees who assisted him and looked after his wellbeing – mostly young men who greatly admired him – he directed one of the world's leading and most successful music festivals from Caux. The hotchpotch of the sublime and mundane, of the delightful and whimsical, revealed the master's great sense of humour and irony. And when he played with his treasures, his charisma shone through. He would carefully take old LPs down off the shelves, rekindling memories in him. Every little gem would reawaken some recollection. He looked like a happy child in these moments.

As a lover of music, Nobs would listen to anything and everything. Some critics found his taste just too arbitrary. But it was not quite that simple. He was in fact very discerning. But he sought to mediate, build bridges and bring different worlds together. Someone with a more critical perspective



Claude Nobs with the US soul legend Solomon Burke (left) and the US blues musician B.B. King (right) on July 4, 2005 at the Montreux Jazz Festival

would not have been able to accomplish that. Nobs, however, succeeded in incorporating all facets of jazz, pop, folk and blues into one unique festival. At the same time, he opened it up to world music performers from India to South Africa and from the Balkans to Argentina. This was not purely down to a calculated strategy but because he loved any authentic music and sought contact with creative people. In his early years, he did that, as many anecdotes testify, with the impertinence of youth, whereas later he acted from a position of fame and strength.

A stage full of stars

The Montreux Jazz Festival underwent fundamental changes in the four and a half decades of the Nobs era. The concerts in the Casino always took place in relatively intimate surroundings. A club-type atmosphere remained, with plenty of opportunity for relaxed jam sessions. The scene is

completely different in the Auditorium Stravinski with its 3,500 seats and the 2,000-capacity Miles Davis Hall in the new convention centre: most performers soon brought multimedia shows to Montreux.

Claude Nobs received some criticism, with the accusation made that the Montreux Jazz Festival had become a purely commercial event where sponsors, media partners and luxury goods companies were even more important than the music itself. There is some truth in that. But, in fairness, it has to be said that Nobs always focused on blending the mainstream with the experimental. His love of extravagance was nevertheless often reflected in his line-ups. His friends would refer to the "Salade Nobs" in affectionate mockery. His carteblanche and all-star evenings for legends like Carlos Santana and Quincy Jones seemed to be the ultimate for him. He was in heaven when as many stars as possible

appeared on stage, and when he began blowing into his mouth organ there was no stopping him.

Claude Nobs, who died after a cross-country skiing accident and 17 days in a coma, will remain in our memory as a brilliant festival director and someone who frequently received visitors like Miles Davis and B. B. King. He brought stars like Sting and David Bowie to Montreux. He was a man of great warmth and tremendous intelligence. He did all he could to make sure he would leave a lasting legacy, but he will be deeply missed.

A memorial concert with a top-class line-up was held for Claude Nobs in Montreux on 8 February 2013. Further tribute events are planned in New York and London.