

A Review of Jazzlive at The Crypt – By a fan called Vicky.

I was walking rather slowly, taking in every detail of the street, avoiding puddles and looked ahead to a small group of people shifting some kind of equipment from a van into a house.

'Excuse me' I said meekly '...er, is there a big church round here with, like, a club underneath it?' Convinced I would be met with looks of confusion, I was surprised to get an instant reply.

'Yes love, just keep walking down here and it's on your left. Big place, can't miss it. Alright?' I was now much more confident that I had not heard my friend wrong and there was in fact a church in Camberwell underneath which we would be celebrating her birthday. Sure enough, along on the left I found a huge, dark rather eerie looking church which looked more like a small Cathedral, its tall spire reaching high into the night sky. Again confused, I reached for the mobile and called for help, explaining that I'd found the church but no sign of club life, no bouncer, no neon lights and no pumping beat from below. Eventually I was found and led down some steps to the right and through a small passage into what felt like a cave with black and white brick walls. I found my way rounds candlelit tables and came across a small bar and kitchen. Even further into the grotto-like cellar were doors leading through to toilets and cupboards. The further in I went, the lower the ceiling seemed to get.

A year later I moved to Camberwell, only a few streets from this church which, I found out, was the parish of St Giles, the patron saint of the crippled. I decided to return to the bricked cave, where I had discovered there was live jazz on Friday night. Always one for a bit of live music, I eagerly went down, excited to explore again the underground den called the Crypt because of its original function. There were more tables this time and plenty of people sitting in anticipation or devouring plates of hearty looking food. I was crammed into a church pew with some friends adjusting my eyes to the dim light and occasionally dipping into their lasagne. A little later I managed to chat briefly with the band who told me they had come over from Bologna, Italy especially for this gig. One of them had played here before and tonight was their first time playing together. They liked the 'underground' atmosphere and the fact that it was an intimate performance space. What did they think about the fact that this space was once a huge burial tomb, I asked, as that was the one thing that fascinated me. They said they liked the idea and it added to the quiet atmosphere but was a rare experience, as it would never happen in Italy.

This started me thinking about the very fact that we were beneath a place of worship and at one point and for a long time, the place where I sat might have been inhabited by a dead family. How had it turned into this cosy little jazz club? Whose idea was it? When did it happen? The only way to find the answers was to track down the person who created the place where I sat and drank my beer.

Earlier on that week, I had ventured into the church one afternoon and met Pat, who let me wander around the church soaking up the quiet, until her husband Les came along with keys to the Crypt. As Pat stocked the bar I quizzed Les, who showed me the brickwork, pointing out the changes that had been made during renovation. The original Crypt is about 350 years old and the largest pillar, which stands defiantly in the centre of the room, actually holds up a large part of the building above. A fairly essential aspect, although it does obstruct ones view of the stage from a dark corner opposite. There are some low doors at the back, now out of use that would have been opened to receive bodies destined to spend the afterlife in a brick coffin. Apparently there is a tomb somewhere behind the bar that is still inhabited but as Les found out during renovation, unpenetrable.

We talked about the beginnings of the club and I got in contact with Russell Occomore who had the original idea. Russell came up with the idea of using the space below for a live music venue seven years ago. Previous to this it had been used as a base for a homeless association, but they had moved down the road. The vicar at the time, Rodney Bomford was immediately supportive of the idea and plans went ahead to start clearing the space for the new venture. The only problem at this point was money. They needed several thousands to fit all the necessary appliances, sinks, toilets, heating etc. Fund-raising for the venture was given an enormous lift when a generous gift

was donated by a mysterious parishioner. Left on the church steps one day was a large bag with what looked like several sticks of dynamite. After a Police team had carefully approached it and looked closer into the bag, they found it was not an explosive but in fact, a collection of old coins wrapped in tubes of brown paper. These coins were valued and reached an amazing sum. Attempts to find the owner or anyone who knew how they got there were in vain so eventually the money went directly into the thing that needed it the most, a Jazz club in the Crypt.

Work started going ahead, done mostly by a small group already involved with the church who threw themselves into the huge task with total dedication. They changed the layout of the floor, painted the walls, put in a stage, a bar, a kitchen and did all the electricity and plumbing. Promotion started with posters made and reproduced by their own hand. Opening night was in October '95, the first band on stage were the Robbie Richardson Trio who played to a packed audience.

I wondered how Russell managed to find bands to come and play. His own love of Jazz has kept him in contact with musicians around London and also Brighton, so getting people in was not too difficult. After a while as word got around amongst players, he found that they were contacting him for a gig at the Crypt. The Italian band that I spoke to said, the place has such a genuine feel, it is a pleasure to do a set in that environment. There is a 'no frills' appeal about the place that the organisers felt it important to keep. They have never had any funding from the Arts Council and it remains a totally home-made product that is forever pulling in new crowds. It carries an atmosphere of an original jazz joint. One could forget they were in South London and be transported to a smoky New York den, the kind of place where jazz was first played, where it laid its roots. It has never been about making money for Russell and the others. The reward is getting an interested and often, different crowd every week who have come along on a recommendation. It's an unpretentious friendly night, totally affordable and doesn't have the unbearable attitude of many an 'exclusive' club.

There are elements of being in the Crypt which constantly remind me of where I am. Above the stage is a notice, on display to everyone saying 'Please be quiet during the performance' Of course. If we are going to wake the spirits of the dead, we should at least do it with politeness and respect. Each table has a candle burning still in a tiny glass house. It is reminiscent of the way we would light a flame to actualise a thought for absent friends and also acts as a focus on each table, bringing people closer together, encouraging conversation. The dark corners that are sometimes not even visible, making you wander what might lurk there, watching all that goes on.

For me, the idea that a place so old and steeped in memory is now filled with the buzz of a fresh new sound, is a brilliant example of what happens so often in a big city like London. A meeting of ancient and modern in one room bridges the large gap that is ever increasing between one cultural generation and the next and keeps alive a memory of many a Londoner before us.