

LUCCA**Jazz, Lucca and Chet Baker**

If many people know Lucca for its famous classical musicians - from Boccherini to Catalani to Puccini, indisputable Maestro of melodrama - maybe not everyone knows that, since the 1950s, the city's walls cache a heart and soul that beat to the rhythm of jazz.

Lucia Maffei

It is 1947, just two years after the end of WWII. In Lucca, the Hot Club Lucca is born, a club whose purpose was clearly described in its statute: "to favor and promote the diffusion of jazz in the city". The activity of these young musicians who, after years of clandestine activity forced by the Fascist regime, are finally free to perform and transmit on radio the sounds of that new, incredible music coming from America, multiplies the number of jazz lovers in the city.

And this new young blood of Lucca will give rise to one of the most important Italian jazz groups, the Quartetto di Lucca. The group's components - Giovanni Tommaso on double-bass, his brother Vito on piano, Antonello Vannucchi on vibrophone and Giampiero Giusti on drums - all purebred Lucchese - meet and play music in a basement in Piazza San Giovanni, just a few steps from the city's Duomo. And in that dark basement, one of the musical adventures that still today constitutes the basis for the Italian jazz school begins.

And it is true that Lucca, together with the nearby Versilia area, was, at the end of those mythical 1950s, one of the places of cult of the new music. At the Bussola club, turned into a national temple by its patron Sergio Bernardini, we can listen to the voices and the music of the most famous Italian and foreign artists of those years. Not only the "Trio Carosone", Fred Buongusto, Buscaglione, Adriano Celentano, Luigi Tenco, Patty Pravo, Fabrizio De Andrè, Mina, all fundamental names of modern Italian music, but also Juliette Greco, Josephine Baker, Ella Fitzgerald, Ginger Rogers and Marlene Dietrich. Because Sergio Bernardini had the great foresight and talent to mix the new Italian music style with traditional music, sometimes with the addition of just a tad of transgression. Towards the end of the '50s, thanks to this ambiance of great cultural and musical vivacity, many jazz artists from the USA who had come to Italy as part of their European tours, did not limit themselves to performing in the jazz clubs of larger cities, but decided to play also in the smaller cities of Tuscany.

AMONG THEM WAS A YOUNG, ANGEL-FACED TRUMPET PLAYER WITH A RATHER TURBULENT LIFESTYLE, CHET BAKER. Baker arrived for the first time in Florence in 1956 and afterwards came often back to Tuscany, where he became great friends with Giampiero Giusti, the drummer of the Quartetto di Lucca. From here began a musical and human adventure that saw the American trumpet man and the Lucca quartet together for a concert tour in 1958 that spanned all of Italy. Chet Baker remained very tied to Lucca and to the Versilia coast, where Sergio Bernardini often called him for concerts not only at the renowned Bussola but also at the Bussolotto, a small club, a sort of after-hours, where the night owls went on till early morning listening to fantastic jam sessions.

When he was in Lucca, Chet always stayed at the Hotel Universo, room 15 where, sitting on the windowsill, he would often play his trumpet. Room 15, still today highly requested by his fans, looks onto the piazza of the Teatro del Giglio where Chet held several concerts. But maybe, for him, the most exciting concert held there was the one organized in his honor on December 15, 1961 by his jazz friends Giovanni Tommaso, Franco Mondini, Antonello Vannucchi and Amedeo Tommasi, on the day he was left the San Giorgio prison in Lucca, following one year of detention. The year before, on the night of July 31, 1960, Chet, who had a history of drug use, collapsed as a consequence of a heroine overdose in a gas station washroom just outside the city. About twenty days later, he was arrested and indicted. The trial, held in Lucca, makes headlines and is followed by Italian and foreign newspapers. A lawyer from Lucca, Mario Frezza, represents him, and succeeds in reducing his jail time from the seven years requested by the Public

Prosecutor from Florence, to less than two. In the end, Chet is sentenced to “just” sixteen months to be spent in the city's prison facilities. During those months, Chet is an avid composer, and it is told that on the walls of the city that run adjacent to the prison, groups of fans would gather to listen to the notes of his trumpet coming from within the prison.

TODAY, AFTER SO MANY YEARS, JAZZ IS STILL PRESENT IN LUCCA like a constant rhythmic and musical note that in the course of the year creates occasions and appointments that call together many fans. The Circolo del Jazz (Jazz Circle), direct descendant of the historical Hot Club Lucca, each year organizes Lucca Jazz Donna, a festival entirely and exclusively dedicated to women and that has brought some of the biggest stars in the jazz panorama to the city of Lucca. On its stage debuted future drum player star Kim Thompson. In 2006 Lucca hosted Ruth Young, Chet Baker's last partner, for years absent from the musical scenario. American saxophone player Lisa Pollard, a stable member of Duke Ellington's orchestra, MaiaClaire and Joy Garrison, daughters of Jimmy Garrison, have also attended the Nicky Nicolai Festival. And at last year's edition, the voice of Roberta Gambarini - Italian singer known and appreciated above all in the United States and considered the heir to Ella Fitzgerald - enthused the audience. This year, also the Hotel Universo will host, in the fall season, a jazz festival for groups coming from all over Italy, in a tribute to Chet Baker. And, of course, the city of Barga, just a few kilometers from Lucca, will this year as usual host the Barga Jazz Festival, arrived at its 22nd edition, and for over twenty years meeting place of internationally renowned music lovers and musicians.

All this confirms the passion and love for jazz music that exists in Lucca uninterruptedly for over sixty years. o