

# Podcast

## Julia Neupert – Julie Hofmeister

### **Julie Hofmeister**

Today we're speaking with Julia Neupert, a jazz editor from SWR, to mark the 60th anniversary of the Berlin Jazz Festival. I'm a student in Hildesheim and have taken a seminar on jazz. Julia, could you please introduce yourself?

### **Julia Neupert**

Hello Julie, I'm Julia. I'm originally from Rostock, but now I live in Karlsruhe, and I've been talking about how warm it is today.

### **Julie Hofmeister**

Welcome and thank you for being here. Yes, how did you get into jazz and jazz journalism?

### **Julia Neupert**

It's been a while. I'm now in my mid-40s, so you can imagine that it didn't happen overnight. I made a lot of music myself as a child. My parents enjoyed getting us kids involved with various instruments—the piano, recorder, saxophone, and so on. But I enjoyed that myself too. And then, I think I went to concerts with my dad—jazz concerts—which I found incredibly exciting. That was back in GDR times and jazz was still a bit of a thing then. Yes, it had the

reputation of being something rebellious and unconventional. As a child, I just thought it was incredibly cool and exciting to be at these jazz concerts. That somehow inspired me. And that never went away. Then I studied musicology in Leipzig which was relatively historically orientated, but I was also able to do a jazz history seminar at the conservatory, and I enjoyed that again. Yes, and then after I completed my music journalism degree, I somehow ended up specializing in jazz.

### **Julie Hofmeister**

I would say so too. It sounds like you're very specialised. I don't really know much about jazz. I actually come from a classical background. I played the violin and I simply chose the seminar -- jazz in general, it's such an open genre that I found it kind of interesting. Yes, then maybe we can go straight to the jazz festival. When was your first time there? How were you there for the first time, as a journalist or as a visitor?

### **Julia Neupert**

It was actually work-related. I was still in Baden-Baden at the time, working as an assistant to the jazz editor. We had a studio project from the New Jazz Meeting with an ensemble. They also performed at the jazz festival. In other words, we travelled with the whole group from Baden-Baden to Berlin, and I managed this production a bit in the background. That was the first time I experienced the Jazzfest live, but actually from behind the scenes. Yes, and since then I've been there almost every year, I think, since 2010.

**Julie Hofmeister**

We also want to talk a bit about how accessible it is. Do you also get talking to the audience when you're there?

**Julia Neupert**

Well, when I think about the last few years, when I've been traveling as a journalist, I've often been in roles like that of a reporter, doing small interviews. And then I consciously approach people where I think, oh, you look like you're here for the first time because you're maybe only twelve years old or something. I think it works quite well at the Jazzfest now, but it used to be different. There used to be a bit of a separate area for journalists and those who were kind of VIPs. At the Jazzfest, it's different now and I think that's really happened in the last few years. This building is somehow designed to be really inviting. It has many, many visual components.

**Julie Hofmeister**

What's it like when you talk to people, when you talk to people who you think were there for the first time, what do they say?

**Julia Neupert**

I always find it interesting to find out why you're here and how you like it. The Jazzfest has taken a different turn in terms of content in recent years. So it's really moving more in the direction of risk. Musical risk. There really is a lot of what you would have called avant-garde in the past, maybe -- openly

transdisciplinary, gender bending stories. So there's a lot of stuff in there that you wouldn't necessarily categorise as jazz jazz. I always find it exciting what people say and think about it. And I've found that most people find it really interesting, even if they're not enthusiastic about it, but perhaps they'd say 'Wow, this is the first time I've experienced something like this and it somehow fascinates me, even if I can't categorise it.

### **Julie Hofmeister**

Do you have the impression that the audience has also changed in recent years?

### **Julia Neupert**

Yes, it's changed a lot. The stereotype of men with corduroy trousers and beards at jazz concerts wasn't just a cliché—they're still there, and I think it's great that they're still coming. There's a nice tradition of people who have been listening to jazz for decades and know it very, very well. But yes, I think it has become more female, more diverse. It always depends a bit on the concert that is taking place. So you also notice that a very specific clientele goes to certain concerts. And I think that's down to the festival management, Nadin Deventer. But yes, I think it has changed and I think it's good.

### **Julie Hofmeister**

Do you also have the impression that you can go there even if you don't know much about jazz? Or not at all? Because you just said that some things aren't really classical jazz anymore.

### **Julia Neupert**

I believe anyone can enjoy jazz, no matter when or how they experience it. Yes, there can be a barrier to doing something like that, buying a ticket and going to this festival theatre, which is in the middle of a part of town that isn't particularly cool or hip. And it's also a festival that is now 60 years old. Of course, there's a lot of weight involved. Nadin Deventer has been doing projects outside of the normal concert programme ever since she took over as artistic director. There were neighbourhood concerts in the area where she went into hairdressing salons with musicians. Last year there was a big project with children from various Berlin neighbourhoods. This year there will be a community project in Moabit, in a neighbourhood that is actually quite far away from where the jazz festival is taking place.

### **Julie Hofmeister**

Yes, we also talked about the activities that are a bit out of the way in the seminar. We also thought it was very cool that there are now activities that involve children in particular. And that there are different locations. So it's not a typical festival, it's a bit spread out. Can you describe a bit how that works?

## **Julia Neupert**

There is one main location, the Haus der Berliner Festspiele. That's where the big concerts take place every evening on the main stage, on the side stage.

Nadin also hosts performances in the foyer and even uses the backstage areas, ensuring the theatre space is utilized differently than just having people on stage, a few hundred people sitting in their comfy armchairs in front of it and applauding afterwards. She has already tried to break that up a bit in the house. But yes, there are also clubs, jazz clubs in the city that are nearby, the A-Trane and the Quasimodo. You can really walk there from the house, where you can experience more intimate concerts, where you are much closer to the musicians, to the bands and have a bit of, yes, that club feeling, which is also important for some music. Sometimes that doesn't work at all on the big stage. Every now and then there have also been concerts at the Gropius Bau, that's the museum of the Berliner Festspiele, so to speak, where exhibitions of visual art or performance art take place. And it's also been used by the Jazzfest. It's a little different every year, depending on the artistic direction, they try to leave their mark there too.

## **Julie Hofmeister**

If it's in so many different places, what does a day look like for one person? Do you have to get a separate ticket for each one or how does it work?

## **Julia Neupert**

There are normal concert tickets. You can buy a concert or a day ticket for the evening, I think. But there are concerts, the small ones in the small clubs, that

fill up very, very quickly because they can only fit 150 people in the room. Sometimes you can't get in if you're not there early enough.

### **Julie Hofmeister**

Yes, another thing I've read about you is that you're also somehow involved in awarding the SWR Jazz Prize. And the Jazzfest Berlin also reflects the development of jazz over time. So do you notice, in your role as juror, how jazz is developing or what jazz has become and how? What role does the festival play in this?

### **Julia Neupert**

So when the Jazzfest started in the sixties with Joachim Ernst Berendt, who was actually one of my predecessors at SWR – he was a radio editor there, yes, yes, and as a radio editor, he somehow got this thing started in Berlin. He had the idea back then to show the whole variety of jazz, everything that exists, because back then it was about establishing jazz as an art form that really had an artistic claim, high culture. They also did it in the Berlin Philharmonie, at the beginning and so on, so that's what it was all about. And he really did everything from gospel to free jazz at one festival. And that was totally new at the time. He was just like, look what's out there. Like a shop window. You don't need that today because there are so many festivals that they have become more specialised. The festival in Berlin has also become a bit more specialised when I look at it over the decades. I've only been there for a decade now but of course you can look at the programmes and see how they've developed. ... What exciting new developments are there at the moment? In other words, really

identifying contemporary, forward-looking perspectives and depicting rather them than what is established. And I have to say -- I have been observing this for a few years, both at the festival and in what I do in jazz -- the respective artistic directors often have a really good nose. There are several trends, one is this transatlantic bridge to the USA, which has been very important for the festival from the beginning in order to somehow feature jazz as an original black culture. There have been a number of projects for a few years now, but this is really on the increase, where black female musicians in particular are dealing with their history. And that's also a really interesting way of doing it. So going into archives, picking out sound or documentary material and developing new projects from it, often transdisciplinary projects. I remember Matana Roberts, who actually had a project in the Gropius Bau, in this exhibition building. It wasn't her own story, it was about Pina Bausch, the dancer. But I experienced it for the first time at the Jazz Festival. It was really such a transdisciplinary project, dealing with archive material and somehow having a concept, a theme, and letting go of this whole genre -- so many of those who perform at the festival no longer say we are jazz musicians. They say, yes, we are too, or maybe we have a certain attitude that we carry with us. For us, jazz is about being able to do a lot. To have this freedom, not to have to think in terms of a genre.

### **Julie Hofmeister**

Yeah, it sounds like you don't really need to know anything about jazz. Maybe you're just interested in the development of themes.



## **Julia Neupert**

Yes. Sometimes it's enough to be open for an exciting experience, I guess! Also, there are often really charismatic people on stage. That should not be underestimated. And that is what I like about jazz, that generations meet there. At a jazz festival, you might see an 80-year-old pianist one day and the next day, or with him, a 20-year-old saxophonist. It's amazing to witness how such extensive experience encounters curiosity. And that is what I like about experiencing jazz. Because you must not forget that it can sometimes be a bit stressful -- maybe you shouldn't go for the whole weekend the first time; and if you do, take a break in between. I always notice that I am a bit exhausted after such a festival. It is very packed --

## **Julie Hofmeister**

-- as an introduction, maybe you can attend a couple of concerts to get a taste.

Thank you very much for talking to me, Julia.