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Article from *Die Zeit* about the Hamburg “Existenzialistenkellerchen” [“Existentialists’ Cellar”] (1952)

In West Germany, new cultural forms found a home not only in Berlin, but also in other cities as well. In this article, journalist Wolfgang Menge reports in an ironic tone on the staid atmosphere at the “Existenzialistenkellerchen” [“Existentialists’ Cellar”] founded by young people from the student and jazz scenes in Hamburg.

When the Club awakens . . .

An “existentialists’ cellar” has established itself in Hamburg. Of course, upon closer inspection it is a little more harmless than its French model or the one in Berlin, which also may have served as something of a godfather: Die “Badewanne” [“The Bathtub”].

The cellar was founded by two existing groups: by members of the Hamburg Student Theater and members of the Jazz Club. This is a splendid mix that is most evident in the fact that the name comes from the student theater, while the activities are dominated by the jazz club.

“Working Group for Progressive Art” is what the young people call their organization, which is to be formally registered soon and was launched with a big to-do. The “working groups” are held in a downtown cellar, which formerly fulfilled important functions as an air raid shelter and later also as a coal cellar. The artists in the organization have spruced it up a bit. The walls have been plastered with newspaper that has been decorated with paint. There is a lamp here and there, a bar as well, a podium for the band, and barrels to sit on . . . yes, that’s about it. Actually, no, there’s also a thick rope; it’s supposed to separate the workers from the band. Otherwise everything is cement. Money is tight and rent alone eats up 200 DM.

“The 65 members of the club split into two halves,” says the leader of the Stage and Film Group (there are also other groups: Music, Fine Arts, Literature, and Journalism), “this is a new kind of symbiosis. On the one hand, there are the artists – those who think they are, those who actually are, and those who want to be. And then the audience, which we have simply included in the club.”

The goal of the club is “to hold meetings, to work, to socialize.” Well, I’m sure it won’t be all that bad. Excerpts were already presented on the first evening; the self-composed poetic pieces that were recited suggest that the club might be better off sticking with music. Although the young

club members listened attentively to what their chairman from Stage and Film read to them, they didn't really believe that this was modern art. In fact, the young people who gather there are all basically good kids. All of them are around 20, 21 years old, just out of school or in a commercial apprenticeship in the import-export trade, as is proper for a Hanseatic city. After all, it's not their fault that this chairman is in his eighth semester of his philosophy studies.

As for the girls – a third of the club members are female – it's not entirely clear if they're good. But there is nothing bad one can say about them, either. For on the very first evening I heard one of them saying, filled with a sense of responsibility: "No, I cannot dance all night. My little one wakes up at seven, and then I don't have another quiet minute."

There definitely is dancing. "Just let them do their literary nonsense, it won't bother us," said another member of the board, "at any rate, on Sunday night the place is hopping. Then there is *high-life* here." *High-life* with beer and Coca-Cola, nothing else is allowed to be served, and with three bands. For if the organization has only one famous poet to show for itself (his name is Hans Henny Jahn), it already has three bands: one plays *Dixieland-style* à la New Orleans, a second *Bebop*, and the third piano music à la George Shearing.

When the bands play, the club comes to life. Then the cement vibrates and passers-by stop outside on the street. The delicate girls are twirled through the air and everyone must make as much of a ruckus as possible. And when they catch their breath, it is unavoidable – because of the scarce seating – that a girl will take a break on the lap of her Dixie gentleman. But everything is proper, for German jazz has no eroticism. There is something abstract about the ecstasy it generates: it's not vitality that's in it, but hysteria. Still: those who have to log boring numbers into even duller books all day long seem to recuperate here.

Incidentally, no less than a Frenchman came as a prominent guest, Gilbert Domb from Paris, who himself founded an existentialist cellar in St. Germain des Près some time ago. "Naturellement," he said, "with literature it's the same as back home" (he does not speak or understand a single word of German), "but dancing, unfortunately dancing is not something the stiff Hamburgers can do at all. *C'est la poisse* [Too bad!]"

Source: Wolfgang Menge, "Wenn der Club wach wird..." ["When the Club Awakens..."]
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