



There's not a great distance between the patrons and musicians at Montreal venue Dièse Onze.

## Good Vibes at Montreal's Dièse Onze

**LISTENERS WHO WANT TO EXPERIENCE** jazz in Montreal would be well advised to check out the talent on tap at Dièse Onze. The intimate venue has become a key part of the Montreal jazz scene. Established in 2006 at 4115-A St. Denis, the semi-basement venue—whose French name translates to “sharp 11,” a musical reference with an especially hip connotation—presents two sets of high-quality music every night.

The club's proprietor, Gary Tremblay, makes an effort to offer his clientele diverse programming. On Mondays, the club is heated up with Trabuco Habanero, featuring artists from Montreal's Latin jazz scene. Tuesdays are reserved for a weekly jam session led by bassist Alex Bellegarde, running late into the night. Wednesdays are Soul Therapy Night, hosted by The Brooks collective. Thursdays feature a monthly spotlight. Fridays and Saturdays showcase mostly local, and some international, artists. And Sundays are vocal jazz jam nights, hosted by singer Kim Richardson.

Raised in Montreal, Tremblay grew up listening to Jimmy Smith, Marvin Gaye and Miles Davis. As a young man, he worked as a DJ and a clerk at a record store with a significant jazz section. Later he studied computer-assisted sound design and business management. He went on to manage several establishments, covering booking and sound, until walking into Dièse Onze

eight years ago. Impressed with the ambiance but disappointed by the service, he pointed out to the owner that “the manager had no smile,” and was soon hired to take over operations.

When Tremblay took ownership of the club in 2014, it was with the intention of transforming it into a jazz institution. “I was a little hesitant when I took over,” he recalled. “I had already been working 80- to 100-hour weeks, and knew there was a lot of work to be done. But I really dug the vibe. I was involved in the local jazz scene, and believed in it. So I decided to give it a go.”

Seeing the club as a long-term project, he envisioned it as a venue with the highest standards—both musical and culinary. “Every cent of profit since then has been re-invested into the club,” Tremblay continued, noting Dièse Onze's superior sound system, a new house drum kit, a Kawai piano and a completely re-equipped kitchen serving world-class cuisine.

The club's weekly jam session has been led by Bellegarde, a mainstay of Montreal's jazz scene, for the past eight years. The evening traditionally begins with a set by Bellegarde's trio with an invited guest—on the night of DownBeat's visit, it was Bulgarian saxophonist Tihomir Krastev. That's followed by an open jam that draws professional musicians (frequently including out-of-towners), university students and devoted hobbyists with its welcoming vibe. “Gary has done

a great job making musicians feel at home,” Bellegarde said.

Mentored by American-born bassist Skip Bey, Bellegarde had been leading jam sessions at various Montreal establishments for well over a decade before taking the gig at Dièse Onze. “The problem had always been finding venues that had a good vibe, which I think is super important for a good jam,” he said. “It was a no-brainer for me to finally get to do it in a proper jazz club.”

“The common thread of our clientele is that they are all real music lovers, whether they're 18 or 90,” Tremblay noted. Starting in January, he will begin a major renovation, moving the stage and raising the banquettes to enhance the audience's experience.

Dièse Onze partners with L'OFF Festival de Jazz de Montréal, and this past October presented multiple shows during the fest, including alto saxophonist Jason Stillman's Quartet. The venue also hosts its own series as part of the Montreal Jazz Festival. During the 2016 edition of that massive fest, Dièse Onze drew an international crowd for sets from a quintet co-led by trumpeter Ingrid Jensen and saxophonist Christine Jensen.

“Montreal is a jazz city—always has been,” Tremblay said. “There used to be a late-night set, running till 2 a.m. And I want to bring it back.”

—Sharonne Cohen