

21 Interview with Stephan Kurmann

Steff Rohrbach

The jazz bassist Stephan Kurmann¹ was born in Basel in 1958 and has been a professional musician since 1978. He has accompanied greats such as Chet Baker, Wild Bill Davison, Mal Waldron, Harold Mabern, Sal Nistico, Philip Catherine, Hans Kennel, Adrian Mears, Alvin Queen, Sandy Patton, Lee Konitz, Kirk Lightsey and Steve Grossman. Kurmann has toured Europe, Asia, the Americas, Australasia and Africa and recorded numerous albums. He began playing the electric bass in 1971 (teaching himself) and graduated from the Swiss Jazz School in Bern as a double-bass player in 1987. In that same year, he founded his highly acclaimed long-term band, the “Stephan Kurmann Strings”, with whom he has released five albums and performed at the Montreux Jazz Festival. He has also played in numerous other bands as a sideman. Kurmann was furthermore a member of the Basel Sinfonietta, a symphonic orchestra founded in 1980 by young musicians with the intention of presenting new music and experimental works.

Kurmann demonstrated considerable courage in 1994 by founding the Bird’s Eye, a jazz club in Basel that you can still “drop in and leave at any time” for a moderate price, as the 10th anniversary brochure aptly puts it. In Beatrice Oeri, Kurmann found an ideal, long-standing president for the organisation that ran the club: someone who was willing to attend every evening event and provide the necessary leadership and support. This was a stroke of luck, and not just for Kurmann himself, who was its artistic director until his involuntary retirement in 2022 and often also performed on stage himself as a bassist. It was also a stroke of luck for Basel audiences and for the jazz scene overall, which now gained a new, significant performance venue that attained international renown and became part of a large-scale jazz network. The Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel, headed by Veit Arlt,² also regularly presents African and African-Swiss projects there.

Stephan Kurmann expanded his enthusiasm for jazz with a love of Cuban music and, later, for the music of Brazil – the country that today is where he spends most of the year. This interview was conducted in German in Basel on 5 December 2023.

¹ See www.stephankurmann.com (accessed June 2024).

² Veit Arlt (born 1979) is the Managing Director of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel and coordinates its Master’s programme in African Studies and the Graduate Network African Studies Basel.

Steff Rohrbach: *Stephan, you played twice in the concert series I organised in Frauenfeld, namely “jazz:now”: in 2003 with your “Strings” and in 2006 with “Makaya & The New Tsotsis”. Andy Scherrer³ was on tenor saxophone (a longstanding performing colleague of yours), Vera Kappeler played piano, you played bass, and Makaya was on drums. How did you become a double bass player, and how did you meet Makaya?*

Stephan Kurmann: As a teenager, I played the electric bass with friends and wanted to take lessons because I realised that I needed a few theoretical and practical “skills”. At that time, however, there were no lessons available for the electric bass, not even at a jazz school. I was advised to learn classical guitar, as that would help me. But then I heard Stanley Clarke’s double bass on Chick Corea’s album *Return to Forever* ...

SR: ... *the same Stanley Clarke⁴ who became famous for his electric bass and for fusion (i.e. jazz-rock) and was just as successful as a double bass player.*

SK: Yes. I had already heard a double bass with King Crimson that tempted me to switch from the electric to the acoustic bass – especially as there were teaching opportunities for double bassists outside classical music. Peter Bockius (*1941), a German double bass player, was living in Basel at the time, so I took lessons from him.

SR: *How old were you back then?*

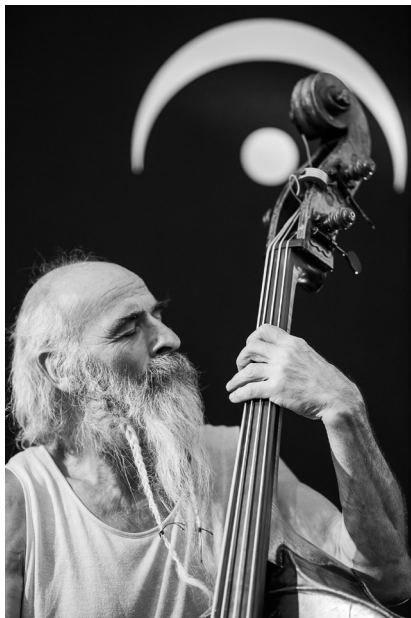


Figure 21.1. Stephan Kurmann at the Bird’s Eye Jazz Club in Basel. Photo courtesy of Mark John.

³ Andy Scherrer (1946–2019), saxophonist and teacher at the Swiss Jazz School Bern, played with Gary Burton, Cedar Walton, Kirk Lightsey, Benny Bailey, Dexter Gordon, Kenny Clarke, Abdullah Ibrahim and others, and was a member of Mathias Rüegg’s Vienna Art Orchestra from 1991.

⁴ Stanley Clarke (born 1951), American bassist and composer. See <https://stanleyclarke.com> (accessed July 2025).

SK: I was about 16 or 17 years old and rented a double bass from Musik Hug – but it wasn't playable at all. I went back to Hug and said something was wrong. The soundpost was missing! But I immediately took a liking to the double bass and played free jazz with two colleagues, André Schütz on drums and Kurt Würmli on saxophone. Then the three of us attended the jazz workshop that the Basel Conservatory – today known as the Music Academy – offered on Tuesdays in the hall of the Totentanz restaurant in Basel, which we could afford. It was run by the flautist and visual artist Peter Fürst (1933–2021) together with Makaya Ntshoko. It was great fun! Peter Fürst hired me “on the spot”: they needed a bass player in the workshop ensemble that rehearsed on Wednesdays, and in Basel the only others were Peter Bockius and Martin Müller – and of course Isla Eckinger, though he was usually on the road. That jazz workshop was my “nursery”. During the week, various bands rehearsed in the Totentanz pub, and their sessions were open to the public, you could go in and out, it was a really good concept. There were concerts at the weekend, so I manned the ticket desk and was able to listen to the music for no charge. On my free Wednesday afternoons, I cleaned for Peter Fürst's stand construction company ...

Makaya played the drums in our workshop ensemble. Peter Fürst played the flute, his son Markus played the congas, and when Makaya was giving concerts somewhere else or was indisposed, Markus also played the drums. So as a 17-year-old I was actually already playing with Makaya, almost every week!

For me, that was the first of the four phases in my career, taking me “from apprentice to master”. It was a phase of “unjustified certainty”, when you feel sure of everything, even though you don't actually know anything about anything. You're not even aware of it, but you do a lot of things right in a playful, open-minded way.

SR: *What music did you play with this workshop ensemble?*

SK: We tried to copy the concept of the Art Ensemble of Chicago: African grooves with long solos, then free improvisation. It was a simple concept that also worked at our level. It was great with Makaya. His skills helped, of course, and he held everything together with his “grooves” when he was fit (which wasn't always the case back then). It was his final phase in The Dollar Brand Trio with Johnny Gertze, and he was also playing with Mal Waldron – and in my innocence, I had no problems playing with him too. Makaya soon retired for several years and made a major lifestyle change. He worked for a plumbing company⁵ and hardly played any more. I used to visit him at work and can still see him hammering on a metal sheet like a madman ... I was a fan of his, and he liked me too.

SR: *If you listened to him playing the drums, you couldn't figure out exactly how he played the rhythms and how he managed to do it so precisely – but it was always perfect.*

SK: He has this incredible beat, he whips the cymbal and drives the sound forwards. There was a certain aggression and anger involved – and that's understandable, because of course he'd experienced incredible injustice.

⁵ According to Rose Ntshoko, Makaya's daughter, it was a metalworking and plumbing company.

SR: *What happened next?*

SK: A few years passed and I entered my second phase – my phase of “justified uncertainty”. The singer Brigitte Bader asked me to play a gig. I was already playing regularly to earn money back then – and after taking a break of many years, Makaya was back here on drums alongside me. I played, but compared to Makaya, every other note I played was suddenly “off”. He was truly playing jazz, whereas what I was playing was something else. That was when my eyes were opened, so to speak, and I realised that I still had a lot of work ahead of me.

SR: *You then graduated from the Swiss Jazz School in Bern ...*

SK: ... yes, but I was already playing gigs with teachers from the Jazz School before then. A friend of mine, the drummer Jürg Werber, urged me to attend. I didn't really want to go there – many of the musicians I'd played with hadn't graduated from a jazz school either, and I didn't think you could learn jazz at a school anyway. The greatest jazz musicians were self-taught and never went to school. Jazz schools didn't even exist in their day.

An additional reason for enrolling at the school was that I'd refused to do military service and knew that I would be punished by being sent to prison.⁶ I had heard that I would be let out of prison each week to attend college. After passing the entrance exam, I indeed got time out of prison – though not for the Jazz School, but for the weekly rehearsals of my band, because that was my livelihood, and the rules meant that I shouldn't lose my means of making a living just because I was refusing to join the army.

SR: *The idea of self-taught jazz musicians is at least partly a myth. After all, many took classical lessons, and many went through the Berklee College of Music in Boston, which has been dedicated to jazz training since 1945. And it's easy to forget that some of those musicians who were supposedly self-taught had actually trained in a US Army band. And young musicians naturally learned by hearing their elders play and by playing with them. Back then, however, musicians sometimes got week-long engagements in clubs, which Max Roach in conversation with Peter Rüedi and Franz Biffiger⁷ once called “the conservatory of the street”. This can hardly be compared with how things were later, or even today.*

SK: Playing with others was also my “conservatory”, and I was lucky enough to be able to play with many older people, such as the saxophonist Christian Baader. The guitarist Peter Brugger gave me theory lessons in the pub, after rehearsals. But the school was also a big help in that you met up with lots of interested people, learning together and forming bands. So I went to the Swiss Jazz School, but stopped after two years because I was getting so many requests to play rehearsals and concerts that I had to choose between college and engagements. Of course, I preferred to play, and concentrated on that completely for a while.

⁶ Military service has been compulsory for all males in Switzerland since the founding of the modern Swiss state in the 19th century. Until a civilian alternative was set up in 1996, it was usual for those refusing to join the military to be sentenced to several months in prison.

⁷ In Roach, “Just Play These Goddamn Drums” in *DU – Die Zeitschrift für Kultur* 12 (1996), 32–48, here 32.

Later, when a proper diploma was introduced to reward graduates from the Swiss Jazz School,⁸ I went back and finished my diploma – even though I never used it later. I used the time back at the Jazz School to focus intensively on composition and arranging.

SR: *You set up the “Strings” after graduating from the Swiss Jazz School in Bern in 1987, didn’t you?*

SK: Yes, that was when I founded the “Stephan Kurmann Strings” with Andy Scherrer on saxophone, a string quartet and the drummer Doug Hammond, who was living in the Black Forest across the border in Germany at the time, close to Basel. When he left the region, I asked Makaya to be our drummer, and he agreed.

SR: *Didn’t Doug Hammond return again later?*

SK: No, that was over, though we continued to play together in other constellations. But it was fantastic for me to have Makaya in the band. Not that it wouldn’t have been good with Doug, he’s also a great drummer, of course. But I was connected to Makaya through my whole history. All the same, it wasn’t that easy with him, because Makaya is a totally free spirit, and with this band, with my compositions and arrangements, I had clear intentions in mind. Makaya, on the other hand, plays best when he has a free hand. I made that possible as best as I could.

Incidentally, there is a piece on *Alive in Montreux*, namely “Sketches 1989 Part II” that I composed for him, with his beat in mind. Like all five “Strings” albums and our Montreux video with Makaya, it’s freely accessible on my homepage.⁹

The “Strings” ushered in my third phase, that of “unjustified uncertainty”: a time when you should by now have realised what’s going on, but you’re still making mistakes. We played quite a few concerts, toured with a bus that I drove, I had to take care of everything, it was quite exhausting. The string players also had less experience back then. I had to give them lots of cues and show them a lot of things. It was challenging.

I remember a concert at the Café du Soleil in Saignelégier in the Jura, which is a hotel and a restaurant as well as a great venue. It was a very energetic concert, which the musicians also really enjoyed. It was great fun and had a fantastic atmosphere. We played a very fast piece as an encore, but I was exhausted, I couldn’t really play any more and therefore played in a very distracted manner. Makaya was next to me. He whipped the cymbal and said quite loudly: “it doesn’t just stop!”. That was a justified slap in the face for me and a lesson for life.

SR: *But Makaya wasn’t with the “Strings” all those years, was he?*

SK: He told me several times that I had to make sure I had another drummer available, as he couldn’t always be there. At that time I’d fallen quite in love with Cuban music and so hired Julio Barreto,¹⁰ who’d moved to Switzerland ...

⁸ An “SMPV-Diplom”, the diploma of the Schweizerischer Musikpädagogischer Verband (the Swiss Association of Music Teachers).

⁹ See www.stephankurmann.com.

¹⁰ The Cuban drummer and percussionist Julio Barreto (born 1967) is a member of the Gonzalo

SR: ... and what about the percussionist Willy Kotoun?

SK: He'd joined us shortly after Doug Hammond left. He and Julio had got to know each other years before in Cuba and were bosom friends. But Willy and Makaya also got on very well.

SR: *You played a few concerts in South Africa with a band formed around Makaya, didn't you?*

SK: That was years later, in 2007, with the "Swiss South African Jazz Quintet" that Veit Arlt had put together for concerts in Switzerland and South Africa. Andy Scherrer didn't want to fly, so Domenic Landolf replaced him in South Africa on tenor saxophone. Feya Faku (trumpet) and Colin Vallon (piano) were there, then Makaya and me. We played at a festival in Grahamstown,¹¹ in New Brighton – the township next to Port Elizabeth where Feya comes from – in Joburg, Cape Town and several townships. Makaya was celebrated wildly down there! He had already returned to South Africa once before, but without playing. That's why there was so much interest this time, including from the media, and crowds of people came to the concerts everywhere, including his old acquaintances and his family!

I also went to South Africa a second time, later, this time with the pianist Bokani Dyer, Donat Fisch on saxophone, Mats Spillman on trumpet and Norbert Pfammatter on drums.

When Makaya got me to join the new edition of his quartet "Makaya & The New Tsotsis", together with the "Swiss South African Jazz Quintet", it felt like my fourth phase, one of "justified certainty" – precisely because I had been chosen for this and for other bands.

SR: *How did you experience Makaya back then?*

SK: Makaya was and always has been Makaya. He's witnessed my entire development and helped to shape it. I was able to learn so much from him and through my interactions with him. I always visit him when I'm in Basel – and I will be eternally grateful to him.

SR: *Did you learn anything from Makaya about the time before he emigrated?*

SK: Not really, he was very reserved. Leaving your people behind in times of need is a cruelly difficult decision, even if it was very understandable, and everyone is entitled to leave a country that is engaged in violence ...

SR: ... especially after the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 and its consequences. The racial segregation there was disastrous, especially for creative artists. Besides all the other instances of harassment, marriages between whites and Blacks were forbidden, as were mixed-race music groups, for example ...

Rubalcabas ensemble and has played with bassists such as Ron Carter, Charlie Haden, Miroslav Vitouš, John Patitucci and Buster Williams.

¹¹ The Swiss saxophonist Roman Schwaller also took part in the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown.

SK: Even though racism is an artificial construct imposed on people for specific reasons, it still meant leaving family and friends behind in a difficult situation. And the question then arises as to how to deal with the dilemma of having left your home and your loved ones behind, possibly never to see them again. Your inner conflicts are not diminished just because you've moved into a seemingly more peaceful, more prosperous part of the world!

Before I went to South Africa, I also got to know musicians of a different generation – people such as Hilton Schilder, for example, who first played at the Bird's Eye club in 2004, who was active in the resistance and had lost many friends in the liberation struggle. Significantly, his best friend and long-time musical partner was a white man with light blonde hair – the trumpeter and accordionist Alex van Heerden, who died in a car accident in 2009.

SR: *But of course, that was much later. Many of the earliest emigrants took refuge in alcohol and other drugs and succumbed to illness; quite a few died as a result, including friends of Makaya. Others managed to find a way out in time. Do you know anything about Makaya's family background?*

SK: He has many siblings, but Makaya didn't talk about them either. The topic of South Africa was difficult for him. I suspect it's something in his life that he's not proud of, or that he's even ashamed of. But it's precisely things like that that we should talk about. We should talk less about the things we're proud of.

SR: *Do you know anything about Makaya's invitation from Weather Report to join them in New York?*

SK: It was Los Angeles, not New York! Sure, that's an anecdote that did the rounds in Basel: "Makaya's got a plane ticket to L.A. from Weather Report" – and when he came back, he supposedly complained that they were playing rock (and not jazz)! I asked him what was true about the story. Makaya laughed, but confirmed it was true. He'd indeed been invited by them and had flown to L.A. Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul led that legendary band and were often on the hunt for suitable drummers – something that wasn't easy. Of course, Makaya would have given their music a completely different slant because he wasn't a fusion drummer. He said that he had to go to concerts to hear what they were playing. But there was already a young drummer there and he didn't want to take his place.

SR: *That corresponds to the version that Makaya himself told me years ago ...*

SK: ... To be honest, I don't quite believe it, and rather think that the music was too unfamiliar to him. As interesting as it would have been to hear Weather Report with Makaya, in the long term the band needed a drummer who would always adapt stylistically to them. Makaya is a great individualist – though at the same time he was also a wonderful team player.

SR: *I share your doubts. There are other versions of the tale explaining why he wasn't engaged by them. For example, I heard from a reliable source that Makaya distrusted Zawinul for wanting to "steal" African rhythms from him, and that Zawinul had started recording him secretly. It is also possible that health reasons were an obstacle.*

SK: Sonny Rollins and others are also said to have been interested in Makaya after Duke Ellington discovered The Dollar Brand Trio with Gertze and Makaya in the early sixties. Makaya told me that in one place or other,¹² the complete John Coltrane Quartet was sitting in the front row at one of the Trio's concerts: John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones!¹³

SR: *In 1965, Makaya was also part of the house trio at the Jazz Gallery or Jazz Jamboree¹⁴ in Berlin, and in the clubs Montmartre in Copenhagen and Domicil in Munich. It's said that Makaya, despite being physically small, had tremendous physical strength. It's even been claimed that he was a South African flyweight boxing champion before becoming a musician,¹⁵ and that he trained boys at the Basel boxing club ...¹⁶*

SK: Yes, that's right! And speaking of energy: Old Schmidli¹⁷ told me that Makaya was once being constantly provoked by a guy at a bar. He didn't react for a long time, just stayed calm, but then suddenly: boom – and the guy in question was flat out on the ground several metres away. Makaya's reaction had been lightning fast and very precise. And I myself remember a street party we went to together, where he punched me in the stomach, just for fun, but still with a certain amount of aggression. He didn't follow through with the punch and stopped just before he would have hurt me, but I got the feeling that he could have punched right through me. He possessed a primal force. Then there was the time when I neither ate nor drank for seven days ...

SR: *... when you were nourishing yourself only from light, as people have said?*

SK: It is not about the light, but about the energy that we all live off. The fact is that I didn't eat anything for seven days, and, more importantly, I didn't drink anything either and after that stayed on just fruit juices for another 48 days. Makaya grew up in the township of Langa just outside Cape Town, with what I find the insanely beautiful Xhosa language with its click sounds.¹⁸ He told me that in his culture, as an initiation ritual to enter the adult world, you

¹² John Coltrane is said to have heard the Dollar Brand Trio at the Cafe Africana in Zurich, where The Dollar Brand Trio played in 1962 after arriving from South Africa. It is possible that Coltrane was indeed joined there by the other members of his quartet.

¹³ Irène Schweizer later recalled: "I saw the Coltrane Quartet once again in Zurich in 1962, when they performed at the Volkshaus". See Irène Schweizer in interview with Christoph Wagner: "Die Jazzwelt ist keine Männerdomäne mehr" in *WochenZeitung WoZ*, 19 May 2016.

¹⁴ Either the Jazzgallery or the Jazz Jamboree; the sources are contradictory here. For the Jazz Jamboree, see www.music.org.za/artist.asp?id=236; Bob Degen spoke of the Jazzgallery. According to Anja Gallenkamp (*Berliner Jazzgeschichten*, <https://jazzgeschichten.de>), the two names were not linked to a specific address, but were used to describe series of concerts.

¹⁵ Tom Gsteiger, "Eine Hommage zu Lebzeiten", in *Basler Zeitung BaZ*, 16 December 2014.

¹⁶ Christoph Keller, "Das volle Leben im Exil", in *WochenZeitung WoZ*, 6 May 1994.

¹⁷ Peter Schmidli (1937–2001) played guitar and banjo with the groups PS Corporation, Hot Mallets, The Tremble Kids and Buddha's Gamblers, among others. He's known in Basel as "der alte Schmidli" ("old Schmidli") in contrast to "der kleine Schmidli" ("little Schmidli"), namely Peter Schmidlin (1947–2015), the drummer, founder and director of the jazz label TCB in Montreux.

¹⁸ The Xhosas are the second-largest ethnic group in South Africa. Their language, with its click sounds, was made famous by Miriam Makeba's performances and recordings of "Qongqothwane

go into the forest alone for one month at the age of fifteen and eat and drink very little. That had been an important experience for him, and he had a lot of understanding for my so-called “light nourishment process”.

SR: Apart from the Strings and the New Tsotsis, did you have any other joint projects with him?

SK: We had many other collaborations. In between those two bands, we also formed a trio with the pianist William Evans¹⁹ to work with the singer Othella Dallas.²⁰ And we once played with the US singer Alice Day for a whole week at the legendary Atlantis, the “-tis”, as it’s still called in Basel today. William had brought her along. That was before her gigs with our band Cojazz.

SR: It’s fair to say that if it weren’t for his health problems – which were typical of emigrants – and without the break that he took because of them, Makaya would surely have reached the very top of the jazz world.

SK: It’s true, without his problems and the years when he withdrew from the scene, his path could have taken him who knows where (even without taking on the Weather Report job). But for a musician, your career doesn’t have to be your main goal, and it’s not everyone’s cup of tea. Nevertheless, he’s a phenomenon: Makaya has been living in Basel for decades, and even on the jazz scene here, which is overall pretty small, hardly anyone knows who he is. I’m simply grateful that I was able to get to know him, that I could learn from him and play unforgettable concerts with him. Playing with him was always, really always a special experience!

(The Click Song)”.

¹⁹ The US pianist William Evans (born 1956) came to Switzerland in 1995 to teach at the Bern Academy of the Arts. He has worked with Dizzy Gillespie, Eddie “Who” Harris, Sam Rivers, Mongo Santamaria, Andy Scherrer, Jimmy Woode and others.

²⁰ Othella Dallas (1925–2020) was the half-sister of the saxophonist Frank Strozier and a solo dancer with the Dunham Company. She sang on stage with Sidney Bechet, Nat King Cole and others, and Duke Ellington wrote two songs for her.

STEPHANUS MULLER AND CHRIS WALTON (EDS)

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and Apartheid South Africa**

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