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Avenches – rock in the arena

The Rock Oz'Arènes festival is celebrating its 15th anniversary. Charlotte Carrel, the head and programme director of the festival, talks about the arena in Avenches, a Roman site that became a music venue. By Alain Wey.

What does the arena in Avenches mean to you?

It's a unique place. Without wanting to boast, I can safely say that I have witnessed the best concerts in my life there. These very special surroundings radiate a wonderful atmosphere and have natural acoustics. Anyone who has ever played there remembers the arena in Avenches as a special and altogether unusual place.

Can you develop a sense of what audiences will like?

That's something you learn over time. You can be wrong, but you learn not to focus on one style of music. You need a comprehensive view of music. And you must have a sense of the different genres and recognise what different audiences like.

What was your job before you worked for Rock Oz'Arènes?

I always dreamt of becoming Bruce Springsteen's lead guitarist! That was one of my childhood ambitions. I studied business in Domdidier (FR) before spending a year in London in 1987-88. It was the New Wave era: The Cure, Talking Heads, etc. It was during my time in London that my interest in music came to the fore. When I returned to Switzerland, I worked for various American companies.

How did the Rock Oz'Arènes adventure start?

A musician and his partner, who worked for Terre des Hommes, decided to stage concerts at the arena to raise money for children in need. To this day, the festival still donates money to charity.

And how did your debut at Rock Oz'Arènes come about?

A friend asked me if I'd like to be on the team for the first festival. At the time I was in the middle of a public relations training course in Lausanne, and I was very attracted by the idea of helping out on site. I started as a voluntary helper before moving onto the organising committee the second year, where

I took over the programme planning duties in 1993.

Let me quote a few figures on Rock Oz'Arènes: The budget has risen in recent years. It was CHF 2.3 million in 2005 and CHF 3 million in 2006. What next?

This rise reflects the fact that a fifth evening – the Tuesday – was added. In 2003 we had an artistic budget of CHF 700,000. This rose to CHF 750,000 in 2004, reached CHF 850,000 for four evenings in 2005, and stood at CHF 1.25 million for five days in 2006. For several years now, we have increased the artistic budget by CHF 150,000 or even CHF 200,000 a year. We'll get into difficulties if we have to keep increasing the artists' fees. And we'll have to think of something if we want to continue to hold our own on the European stage.

How do you finance these CHF 3 million?

70 percent of the budget is generated from ticket sales. 15 percent comes from sponsorship, local authorities, donations and the Swiss Lottery. The remaining 15 percent is made up of revenue from restaurants and stalls.

What's the festival's maximum capacity?

40,000 people over five days; 8,000 per night. In order to cover the budget for this year's event, we need at least 32,000 people in the arena, i.e. 70 percent of total capacity.

Which records would you take with you to a desert island?

First of all, my "childhood idol": Bruce Springsteen, of course. I've fallen in love with his latest album, "We Shall Overcome – The Seeger Session", which I often listen to in the car. And naturally I'd take an album by The Cure; "Staring at the Sea", for which singer Robert Smith wrote the song "Charlotte Sometimes". Then I'd pack the record by the Valais band Water Lily, which I'm completely besotted with. It's such fun listening to Swiss bands of such high quality. I'd also take an album by the Swiss artist Bernie Constantin, with songs like "Switzerland Reggae" or "Lola Berlingo". Incidentally, he'll be responsible for presenting the bands that are up on the arena stage.



Charlotte Carrel

15TH ROCK OZ'ARÈNES

■ The main attractions of the Rock Oz'Arènes, which takes place from Tuesday 15 to Saturday 19 August 2006 will be: Radiohead (GB), Jamiroquai (GB), Franz Ferdinand (GB), Calexico (USA), Jovanotti (ITA), Body Count featuring Ice T (USA), Texas (GB), Nada Surf (USA) and Bernie Constantin (CH). For further information, visit www.rockozarennes.com

THE HISTORY OF THE ARENA AT AVENCHES

■ In Roman times, today's Switzerland was divided among five different Roman provinces. The Romans founded several towns that then developed into administrative centres. The capital of Roman Helvetia at that time was Aventicum (present-day Avenches). In the first century AD, the town had up to 20,000 inhabitants. The arena, also known as the amphitheatre, dates back to 130 AD. It was mainly used for wild animal and gladiator fighting. From the start of the 4th century onwards, people started using the stones of the amphitheatre as materials for other buildings, and in the 11th century the Bishop of Lausanne ordered the construction of a fixed tower on the site of the east gate, which now houses the Roman Museum. www.avenches.ch/aventicum/de/Archeo/b0.htm