

An effect laden guitar chord murmured briefly in the speakers, blending as if by design with the distant buzz of a plane passing overhead. In the warm barn, the eight musicians sat back in their chairs and laughed. They'd been anticipating that final flourish from Alex Roth as they listened back to their performance of trumpeter Nick Malcolm's very open but structured composition. 'You've made it if you can hold an audience like that' was John Surman's verdict. The elder statesman of British and European jazz was there as mentor to this group of some of the most talented and creative young musicians on the current British scene. A five-day retreat was nearing its end, but its purpose was not just to tone their creative and performance muscles. They were being supported, challenged and provoked over how they might develop and sustain their careers in this most uncertain of fields.

How do you prepare and equip people for a journey with no clear destination, no route map, through terrain that is constantly changing? Take Five is the answer. Serious, live jazz, new and creative music producers have been evolving for a decade with joint funders and long-standing partners the Jerwood Charitable Foundation and PRS for Music foundations, Arts Council England and Help Musicians UK. They embarked on the ninth edition with this 'taking five' residential on an organic farm in Kent where that cosy barn is located.

The programme, unique in this country for its goal of professional and career development for jazz musicians, offers no magical blueprint for success. As well as equipping them with practical knowledge and contacts, it focuses on attitudes and skills for the journey that will mean participants can recognise and take opportunities, find their own answers and adapt and change.

What might need to be in their metaphorical kitbag? Guest speaker Gerry Godley, curator of the 12 Points Festival offered a few candidates: tenacity, flexibility (and the judgement to know when to deploy it), curiosity, the capacity to retreat and renew, authenticity. These are not simply technical skills or knowledge (although some of that needs to be in there too!). To develop them, time, experience, failure as well as success, feedback, wise counsel and reflection are all needed. The week started that process offering inspiration alongside challenge; expert practical knowledge alongside the chance to apply it; time to think and discuss with peers at a similar stage of the journey.

The 2014 group, filtered from upwards of 70 nominations, are already a resourceful and proactive bunch in addition to the exceptional, distinctive musician entry requirement. Trumpeter and composer Laura Jurd started the Chaos Collective and Chaos Orchestra promoting gigs, releasing CDs and curating a festival. Alex Roth has already produced a multi-media theatre production. "We improvise" he said, smiling ruefully recalling the practical creativity involved in ensuring the show went on after the original venue went bust. Saxophonist George Crowley promotes the Con Cellar Bar and festival, Loop collective member pianist Dan Nicholls is also involved. Several are already garlanded with awards. Saxophonist James Mainwaring has a Mercury Prize nomination under his belt with The Roller Trio.

They are no tabula rasa. They've figured out some of the territory around them. "If you are willing to teach and do music functions to supplement your income then you can get by...it's difficult getting guaranteed fees for gigs" observes pianist Peter Edwards. "It's do-able" concur Crowley and Mainwaring. But what of the longer term?

If the future is unpredictable who better as a mentor and inspiration than a pioneer who has survived and thrived? "We were the first generation that started out trying to make a living as jazz musicians" said John Surman, topping up the breakfast tea in reflective mood. Nearly 50 years later he's a well of wisdom and experience with undimmed passion for his art. The musicians worked

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with Surman during the week in parallel with skilled performance coach and actress Mary McCusker becoming a cohesive group, a safe environment to challenge and shake them up a bit.

“What’s your identity as a musician, how do you present yourself? How distinctive are you? Think internationally” from Gerry Godley and Jan Ole Otnaes programmer for 15 years of Norway’s Molde Jazz Festival; “Are you prepared to think long term and strategically? Will you stop playing all those little gigs?” from agent James Wright (greeted with some sharp intakes of breath); “Stop thinking about how you make money from selling music and start thinking about how you make it from fans” from Scott Cohen of digital music distributors Orchard; “How do you use social media? I can’t see some of your websites on my phone” from Amelia Ideh with a big smile. “What do you want from your career?” she added.

There was some discomfort. What about being authentic? Maintaining integrity? What do I want? No quick answers, but plenty to digest and take away with them.

The long view is the compass and direction finder in the adventurer’s kitbag, but there was plenty of practical material for immediate use as well. Each had arrived with a specific project in mind that could be tested out in sessions on finance from ‘the horses mouths’ of funders, putting together budgets, negotiating contracts. Shama Rahman, fresh from completing a PhD in neuroscience, was keen to get her next recording off the ground, diverse songs with sitar together with a performance project: “It was good to have the whole funding thing de-mystified.” Laura Jurd agreed, “I’ll just feel more confident talking about my work and what I want to do... it was good to hear that the music is really important.”

Back in the barn, as the tension of waiting for the last whispered chord dissipated, John Surman fixed them with a look. “The music is what’s it all about.” He didn’t need to labour the point with them. That starting point was shared and he was a very present reminder that it can be a long and successful focus.

Take Five is an investment. Refined and tweaked year on year by Martel Ollerenshaw, Associate Director at Serious who manages the programme, it’s working with artists at a critical time in their career. The musicians do the hard work of making it a reality in their own careers, but the investment made by Serious and their partners is on all of our behalves. The participants become the movers, shakers and creators of a dynamic jazz and creative music scene that enriches all of our lives.