

SERIOUS

TAKE FIVE – EDITION VII – 2011

By Kevin Le Gendre

Anybody peeking through the windows of the large barn at Bore Place on the final day of Take Five would have had good cause to raise an eyebrow as well as prick up their ears. The eight musicians under the tutelage of British jazz veteran John Surman took up unconventional positions in the sprawling space. They were performing pianist Alexander Hawkins' piece for saxophone sextet and had spread out to let the sound of their reeds roam right around the old storehouse.

Ben Cottrell's baritone bellowed a bass line in the middle of the room, Ivo Neame's alto fluttered next to the window while Trish Clowes' tenor produced a lighter tone that floated around the opposite channel. Adam Waldmann's soprano pierced the space between them as Christophe de Bézenac slap tongued his alto in the staircase. Multi-instrumentalist Laura Rossi pulled up a chair to take in the harmonies while Hawkins wandered freely to locate the best listening post. Tom Skinner, taking a break from behind the drum kit, opted to lie flat on his back and close his eyes. The musicians made for a striking tableau.

It was more than that, though. This final day of workshops symbolised the degree of chemistry and camaraderie that had been fostered in the group in the space of a week. Perhaps one of the key things that any bandleader has to learn is that trust in his accompanists is just as important as the art of inverting chords and the finer points of circular breathing. All of the musicians have to make a leap of faith together. The day before that performance Hawkins had asked his fellow Take Fivers to "feel your way through" the parts he had given them. They duly obliged and put a lot of heart into that final gig.

Each participant brought pieces to these composition workshops and with Surman on hand not so much as leader but facilitator, sonic mid-wife, the group set about bringing the arrangement into the world. Given the fact that there was very little rehearsal time, the scores came together with impressive cohesion. Surman, who has been teaching on Take Five for the past six years, puts that down to the high standard of his charges. "These are established musicians, the majority of whom already have a direction, and already know where they're headed, I'm not here to tell them what to do," he commented. "These aren't kids finding out about music. I'm more interested in helping them put their compositions across to others and hearing the results of these new pieces. They might ask 'how do I edit it?' 'What do I do?' Then I bring in my own experience of working with musicians."

That seemed to be something of a theme during the week long residency. Hands on experience is at a premium, or rather what a young musician can learn from it. Take Five grew out of a tender from the PRS for Music Foundation and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation seven years ago when Serious was commissioned to devise and deliver a professional development scheme for emerging creative jazz musicians living and working in the UK. Benefitting from financial support from the Arts Council England and the Musicians Benevolent Fund since Edition V, the scheme values the knowledge of practitioners who can draw on long years of working in jazz, so the composition workshops are complemented by sessions that examine all areas of the jazz industry from record labels, distributors and media to festivals and management. Marketing,

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promotion and tours are also on the agenda. Guest speakers tell the participants how to balance the pleasure of making creative music with the business of reaching audiences. There are practical things that all artists need to be aware of. There are practical skills to acquire.

“We’re giving them support in their careers that wasn’t necessarily part of the education structure they went through,” says John Cumming, director of Serious. “We try to help fill in gaps in their knowledge and give them a vision of how to expand creative horizons and also develop the economy of their work. We’re trying to help them become small businesses; in this current climate we need to demystify what record labels, management and promoters can actually do.”

Hence while a morning might be spent working out the right pulse of an arrangement, the afternoon might involve a discussion with Proper Distribution Manager Esther Tewkesbury or North Sea Jazz Festival programmer Sander Grande, who gave memorable, indeed colourful, advice on the need to do ‘homework’ before attempting to nail a gig.

The Take Five participants were also given tips on how to write the best possible biography and press release before they prepared and presented an idea to a panel à la ‘Dragon’s Den’ in the hope of securing funds. The session involved a degree of role-play but the underlying object of the exercise was clear thinking and rigorous planning. This was all very different from the composition workshops where the Take Fivers seemed more relaxed when they had their hands on a saxophone or keyboard. The Surman sessions provided a release. Yet the young musicians didn’t balk at the business-oriented elements of the programme.

“It’s relevant to us as musicians to do music in the morning and then go somewhere else and talk about the other side of things that we don’t usually concentrate on,” noted Christophe de Bézenac. “It means that those two worlds collide in the way that they should. That’s real life...that’s just the way it works.” Interestingly, participants were already thinking about their lives as musicians in broader terms by the end of the residency. “The short talk on copyright law makes you realise how careful you have to be in that area,” observed Trish Clowes while Laura Rossi summed up her experience of Take Five like this: “I learnt how to be more confident and how to put things together quickly. But that’s been something I think I got from the entire thing; how to get something together in hours not weeks.”

Given the packed programme that Take Five delivered – the average day started at 9.30am and concluded around 10.30pm – it’s fair to say that the whole residency made for an intense learning experience where the participants put a lot in to get a lot out. But most were more than happy to do so and the secluded, tranquil setting of Bore Place, an organic dairy farm just outside of Sevenoaks, Kent ensured optimum working conditions. It was cunningly out of range of most mobile networks.

“This is their chance to be self-centred,” notes John Cumming. “Obviously there is a certain amount of give and take within the group dynamic and that’s important, but the fundamental principle is self-development. From our point of view it’s great because we get to see key musicians at an early stage of their development, and over the years the whole thing has really turned into one big extended family.”

What came up in casual discussion with the Take Fivers was the need to get their “stuff together” and to engage with “gatekeepers” in the industry. This surely reflected their greater

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understanding of how best to manage their careers, as well as maximise their talent. However, as previous participants such as Shabaka Hutchings, Kit Downes and Tom Cawley have gone on to prove, it is also making music and engaging with other musicians that remains at the core of what they do.

Back in 1966 John Surman was cutting his teeth in a workshop band led by trombonist Eddie Harvey. But there was no accompanying session on how to apply for funding or write a biography, which is why Surman “would have been thrilled to have an opportunity like Take Five.”

People often assume all British jazz musicians know each other. They don't. Take Five was thus a gathering of spirits, an opportunity to foster relationships across a stylistic spectrum running from mainstream to avant-garde. “It's been really useful and informative and helped direct what I want to do,” Ben Cottrell reflected. “Just getting to know seven new people, seven new musicians, getting to know them, playing with them has been great along with the talks.”

Playing is a major part of the jazz aesthetic but so is listening and Take Five is about honing that skill in as many different ways as possible. Listening to industry professionals in a seminar room parallels listening to one's peers in a rehearsal space. It is perhaps when these two elements find harmony that the contemporary jazz musician has a fighting chance of fulfilling commercial and creative potential.