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TAKE FIVE – EDITION VI – 2010

By Chris Ackerley

Now in its sixth year, Take Five continues to offer emerging British musicians the gift of time and support. Mostly in the field of jazz, these are artists who have chosen the shaky path of niche interest, marginal audiences and underwhelming pay. Playing live and CD sales inevitably make up the largest percentage of their income and so financial instability is often a major concern. In many cases gigging regularly is not so much a promotional opportunity but rather a matter of survival, and so to say that they lead busy lives is something of an understatement. These are creative people often at the cutting edge of improvised music, but when the daily objective becomes just keeping afloat, having the time to plan for their careers in any focussed way is a luxury that many simply can't afford. Take Five is an opportunity for these artists to concentrate on themselves for once; a period of emotional and musical respite if you like.

For those nominated, the calendar of events runs throughout the year; but it begins with the official naming of participants at the London Jazz Festival in November, spans a week-long retreat to Bore Place in the Kent countryside, a further residency with a studio producer and various one-on-one talking sessions. In Kent, where the mobile telephone signal is patchy at best and there are only cows for company, the musicians undertake an intensive period of personal and musical development that is fully facilitated, catered and free from distractions. The overarching aim is to provide these emerging artists with a fuller knowledge of the music industry's mechanics, as well as space to further develop their musical ideas away from the usual grind. Whether it's learning how best to present themselves on stage or to write a good press release, securing funding for their projects or a slot at an international festival, Take Five offers a chance to pick up new skills and to network in a safe and nurturing environment.

Funded by the PRS for Music Foundation and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation, with additional support from Arts Council England and the Musicians Benevolent Fund, this is a development scheme quite unlike any other in the country. Over the course of the year, and particularly at the Bore Place retreat, the participants receive advice and guidance from professionals and guest speakers at the very top level of the music business' food chain. Whether it's Andrew Kurowski at BBC Radio 3 or Jan-Ole Otnaes from Molde Jazz Festival, what is on offer is the rare chance to tap into the knowledge of some of Europe's most influential industry insiders. This is largely down to Serious, who – as one of the UK's principal producers of live jazz and world music – are perfectly placed to craft such an extensive schedule for the chosen eight.

This year the musical and geographical range of the participants must make it the most diverse and far-reaching Take Five edition to date:

- Multi-reeds player James Allsopp has won recognition for his left-field approach, including a BBC Jazz Award for work in the band Fraud, and the prestigious Perrier Jazz Award. Among other projects, he is currently a member of The World Sanguine Report, The Golden Age of Steam and the Loop Collective's Fringe Magnetic.
- Tom Challenger graduated from the Guildhall of Music and Drama, and currently plays tenor saxophone with his own outfit Ma, who have carved out a new textural space between jazz and electronic music. Challenger is also a member of Red Snapper and several Loop Collective groups, including Outhouse.

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- While completing his studies at the Royal Academy of Music, pianist Kit Downes received widespread acclaim for his work with the 'Jazzwise Album of the Year' award winning Empirical. He also received the BBC 'Rising Star' Award in 2008 and was nominated for a British Jazz Award in both 2008 and 2009. As well as holding together his own trio since 2005, Downes has completed an album of duets with previous Take Five participant Tom Cawley and successfully launched the much lauded band Troyka.
- Raised in Cornwall but now based in Cheshire, pianist Adam Fairhall has picked up a reputation for his multi-faceted approach to the piano. Influenced as much by boogie-woogie as free jazz, he plays regularly with his own trio, as well as alongside several key Manchester based jazzers, including Matthew Halsall and Nat Birchall.
- Brought up in rural North-East Scotland, Fraser Fifield began playing the traditional highland bagpipes before picking up the soprano saxophone and low whistle while studying at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music in Glasgow. By combining his love of improvised jazz and Scottish folk music, he has developed a truly distinctive voice. Fifield has released four albums on his own Tanar Records.
- Shabaka Hutchings grew up in Barbados and Birmingham but now lives and works in London. As a member of Courtney Pine's Jazz Warriors and the London Improvisers Orchestra he has quickly become a much sought-after saxophonist, having picked up credits playing with Jack DeJohnette and Charlie Haden's Liberation Orchestra. His own experimental bands Zed-U and the Mighty Jeddo have blurred the lines between electronic, hip hop and improvised genres to much acclaim.
- Based in Manchester, violinist Olivia Moore has developed an original sound that combines elements of improvised jazz, Indian classical and folk traditions. Her group Unfurl were recipients of a Manchester Jazz Festival commission in 2009. She also performs using loop pedals with bass player Jon Thorne, as well as subverting classical traditions with the Owl Ensemble; a project comprised of string quartet and jazz trio.
- As a sideman, drummer Dave Smith has worked with some of jazz's leading players, but it is his work co-leading Outhouse and other Loop Collective groups that have garnered him the most attention of late. Having won a BBC Performing Arts Fund bursary in 2006, he was able to develop his interests in collaborating with Gambian Sabar drummers, and in 2008, as a 'Jerwood Jazz Generation' artist, he introduced his Outhouse Ruhabi project at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival to unanimous rave reviews.

While all the participants in this edition have a jazz background to some degree or other, the range of external influences goes a long way towards exemplifying the richness of the current British jazz scene. From Dave Smith's interests in Gambian Sabar drumming to Olivia Moore's training in India, there is an obvious widening of geographical boundaries. The same applies to technology. With players such as Tom Challenger, Shabaka Hutchings and James Allsopp all introducing programmed and electronically manipulated sounds into their work, it can be argued that the British jazz scene has never been so creative, collaborative or experimental.

As well as a chance to develop as professionals, the Take Five residency is also an opportunity for the participants to pursue new musical ideas. As with most previous editions, the selected eight this year made an unconventional group; on this occasion tradition jazz instruments went head to head with bagpipes and violins. Facilitated by British jazz legend John Surman, the daily compositional sessions were stimulating but often challenging, with each player 'workshopping' a piece for the group that was then showcased on the last day of the week. As was to be expected,

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each new tune was stylistically very different, but ultimately everyone found it rewarding to be working towards a common goal and they showed remarkable camaraderie.

“The eight musicians involved were not only great individuals, but good team players and sensitive collaborators,” Tom Challenger recalled. “I feel lucky to have met a group with such a healthy lack of regard for the current status quo in our sector.”

Fraser Fifield continued, saying, “I was surprised at how well we all got on; both musically and socially. We did make for a slightly unusual but fine band together, but I haven’t laughed so much since I don’t know when.”

Aside from the morning compositional sessions, which were a huge draw, when initially asked what they hoped to get out of Take Five, overwhelmingly the participants expressed a desire to learn more about the industry’s mechanics, acknowledging that a better understanding of this would be crucial to their development as artists. After all, being able to apply to funding bodies, or understanding the fundamentals of marketing and promotion for themselves could mean the difference between simply being a cult musician who plays regularly, and one that maintains a long-term and financially sustainable living.

Arriving at Bore Place, all of the participants were looking to take their careers to the next level, regardless of how far along the road they had come. Understandably then, for each of the eight this meant a variety of different things. “I really want to come away with a plan for marketing and promoting myself,” Olivia Moore said before the retreat. Adam Fairhall agreed: “raising my profile is a real priority and so I hope that Take Five will be a chance to meet some valuable contacts.” For marginally more established artists, such as Kit Downes or Dave Smith, there were other issues on the agenda. “Working out how to make a good living by playing throughout Europe with my band is a real concern for me,” Downes said. Smith agreed, saying, “the largest barriers that face me are getting a chance to perform my music in front of an international audience.”

Take Five is perfectly placed to confront such a range of concerns and over the space of less than a week at Bore Place it was able to deliver a schedule of workshops that directly addressed the aims of each participant. Chaired by David Francis, the Director of Arts at Dartington, the daily sessions covered all the major technical areas of the music industry, including sessions on opportunities through the British Council with Cathy Graham; music publishing with copyright solicitor Gillian Baxter; representation with European booking agent Ellen Windholz (Jazzbrain Austria) and manager Kerstan Mackness (Riot Squad); and practical advice on festival programming with Jan Ole Otnaes (Molde Jazz Festival), Ros Rigby (The Sage Gateshead) and Graham McKenzie (Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and Glasgow International Jazz Festival).

As well as being there to provide solid nuts and bolts facts about the industry, sessions often actively provoked intelligent debate surrounding the ethical and moral issues facing creative musicians forging a career. The afternoon panel discussion with Sascha Kiliass (International Marketing Manager at Universal Jazz) and Scott Cohen (The Orchard), for example, concentrated on maintaining an audience focus, but during the following after dinner session, iconoclastic composer and bandleader Matthew Herbert denounced any interest in his audience during the creative process believing that the market should play no part in his art.

It may seem like contradictory advice, but for many young musicians finding the middle-ground between integrity and commercial success is a major concern. “The need to be self sufficient

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means that negotiating a balance between our careers and artistic development becomes really tricky” said Tom Challenger. But at the Bore Place residency the participants have the time to explore such ethical complexities while surrounded by both their peers and advocates.

After a week of intensive musical and professional development the participants returned to their busy lives to a chorus of overdue text messages and voicemail alerts. But with an enriched set of skills, contacts and business acumen are these musicians now better equipped to continue along their own paths with a renewed perspective and focus?

Speaking after the event, Shabaka Hutchings gives a resounding yes: “Take Five has covered all those areas of the business that are usually passed down in a shadowy, vague, oral way, from musician to musician. But by getting the information directly from people obviously at the top of their fields, it meant that each area was thoroughly explored. Having heard it straight from the horse’s mouth, I have come away feeling like I know what the whole deal is.”

Ultimately Take Five isn’t there to tell emerging musicians how to run their lives, careers, or finances; the producers and guest speakers all know that no one artist has the same agenda or resources. Instead it’s a way to provide them with the knowledge and skills so that they as independent and well-informed individuals can each decide for themselves. The net rather than the fish you could say.

Kit Downes’ final thoughts perhaps best demonstrate this overarching sentiment most clearly: “On the whole the most useful thing that I have taken from Take Five is a better knowledge of what I want from the industry, as well as what I am willing to support within it,” he said. “The information I have gained from the week will definitely allow me to have a better idea of who to avoid, and who to deal with in order to achieve my own artistic goals in the future.”

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