

SERIOUS

TAKE FIVE – EDITION I (2005)

By Jane Cornwall

Imagine, for a moment, that you're a jazz musician with a burgeoning career. You have a small but loyal following. Your name is beginning to hold sway. Critics are marking you as one to watch. The future seems dazzlingly bright - or would do, if you could find time to think about it, let alone discover a support network to lend a hand. The fact is that most jazzers are too busy making ends meet, too unsure of who to ask for help, to cultivate the skills that would boost their professional standing. Skills that would turn them into major mainstream players instead of marginal, cult status ones. So imagine, too, an initiative designed to give talented young jazz musicians the opportunity to develop their craft. To mull over their callings. To take five, if you like.

"That there are people out there who can say, "Hey, here you go. What would you like to learn more about?" is incredible," says Scottish pianist Dave Milligan, one of eight British jazz musicians involved in Take Five, a year-long pilot project that began in November 2004 and - due to its resounding success - has been funded to occur again in 2006. "While I don't believe that musicians are necessarily "owed" support or funding, but the opportunities have to be there for those who are willing to go after them," Milligan adds with a grin. "The Take Five scheme lets that happen."

Take Five is the brainchild of three different, simpatico organisations. The Jerwood Charitable Foundation, a body dedicated to responsible and imaginative funding of the arts (among other areas). The PRS Foundation, the UK's largest independent funder for new music of any genre and Serious, the London-based international producer of live jazz, world and contemporary music (and on whose website you're reading this...). The PRSF had previously hosted a series of weekend breaks for folk musicians titled Distil (in collaboration with the Scottish Arts Council), and Serious has a long history of both formal and informal artist development initiatives, but there were few precedents outside formal education for a programme like Take Five - one tailored to the desires and creative needs of the participants.

"Distil showed that bringing musicians together with other musicians from within and outside their own genre was incredibly valuable," says David Francis of the PRSF. "It helped challenge the way music is presented. So with Take Five we wanted to create a scheme that would allow ideas to be developed in a safe haven, over a longer time frame." Take Five, they decided, would incorporate a residential period - three days at the Common Work Centre in Bore Place, Kent - with a series of daytime sessions exploring everything from composition and publishing to production and strategic direction. There would be day-long seminars staggered over the year. Oh, and access to mentors, who'd assist with research, share knowledge, provide inspiration.

A selection panel of industry experts chose its short list from 40 UK nominees, aged between 20 and 35. The final eight looked like this: Matthew Bourne (piano/Leeds), Max de Wardener (double bass/London), Laura McDonald (alto sax/Scotland), Dave Milligan (piano/Scotland), Eska Mtungwazi (vocals/piano/London), Sebastian Rochford (drums/London), Seaming To (vocals/Manchester), Pete Wareham (saxophones/London). All very different. All with something to give the others. There would be no final performance or commission; participants simply had to be open to new ideas. "This is venture capitalism and investment," smiles Francis.

Still, some were surprised to even be nominated. "I'm completely off the jazz radar," says Max de Wardener, whose music is released on Matthew Herbert's electronica label, Accidental. "I don't really play "jazz", whatever that means, although there is a strong improvisational element in my gigs and I use jazz musicians. But it was great to hang out with such a talented bunch of musicians. Musicians that were already pretty experienced."

De Wardener already knew Pete Wareham from college. He was on nodding terms with Seb Rochford (winner of the Rising Star gong at the 2004 BBC2/BBC3 Jazz Awards) and Eska Mtungwazi. But when Serious launched the Take Five initiative at the London Jazz Festival last November - complete with an Access All Areas pass for each participant - it was the first time most of the group had met. ("It was a fantastic chance to get to know other musicians on the scene and share ideas," enthuses Matthew Bourne. Each individual had already discussed his or her work and aims in a series of one-to-one DNA (Diagnostic Needs Analysis) Sessions. They knew, more or less, what they wanted from the scheme, and how they would set about using it.

"I had a need to be more self-sufficient," offers Milligan. "Working in lots of musical projects, I'm constantly finding myself in new situations - being confronted with new technology, administrative problems or performance issues. I didn't want to be so reliant on others all the time." Mtungwazi intended to soak up as much information as possible: "From ways of improving my overall performance to how to generate funding for an album project to how to build a website." There was room for manoeuvre, of course. A composition workshop - Deconstructing

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Messiaen from a jazz perspective, led by the composer Mike Gibbs - was specifically requested by several participants. "We wouldn't have come up with that without close consultation," Francis says.

Sessions were arranged under collective areas. The aforementioned Talk Time, Learning Time, which examined creative processes in other genres and took in, say, how to build a career (with composer Gavin Bryars) make effective arrangements and programme work (with arrangers Mike Gibbs and Joanna MacGregor), how to introduce other media (with video artists Yeast), how to move - a session with the choreographer Sheron Wray encouraged thought on how movement can enhance music, improvisation and performance. Focus Time: days looking at topics driven by the group, such as songwriting with the singer/songwriter Boo Hewerdine; live performance and promotion with John Cumming and David Jones from Serious, Janice White from music marketers The Cogency and theatre director Lucy Bailey; studio production with audio engineer and record producer, Tony Platt.

Platt's three-day intensive proved hugely popular. Prior distribution of questionnaires ensured that the seminar was tailored to individual needs, that a balance was struck between theory and practice. Based at two very different locations - a boutique studio in West London and the scruffy but legendary Premises in East London - participants were instructed on, for example, how to choose the best spot in a room to record, that the most expensive microphone wasn't necessarily the best one. Still, not all the participants were able to attend every seminar on offer. Several of the musicians chosen to take part had ongoing projects of their own. "Trying to coordinate all these musicians to be in the one place at the one time was always going to be near impossible," says Milligan. Mtungwazi is less sanguine: "If the aim is to genuinely stand alongside the professionals, then this is simply unacceptable."

In many ways, the area titled Time-out encapsulated the essence of Take Five. This was an informal, make-what-you-want-of-it period of chatting, jamming, networking. If the jams didn't always work, so what. It was the coming together that mattered. According to Francis, "This was about giving creative musicians some time away from deadlines and creative briefs. We didn't have any preconceived ideas about what this might include." Any pilot scheme involves a certain amount of trial and error; along with further streamlining, the next Take Five will be book-ended by two extended residencies, ensuring 100 per cent attendance.

"The residencies were extremely useful," continues Milligan. "It can be hard to feel like you're taking time out when you travel into London for a one day seminar and then have to get back for a gig or whatever. But the residency let you relax and focus without any distractions. "I wonder, he muses, if they chose a place with no mobile phone reception on purpose?"

Both Milligan and Mtungwazi agree that timing was thoughtfully planned, allowing relationships to be built upon gradually, and information to be processed in-between. Mtungwazi, however, found much room for improvement, both within the scheme and outside of it. "Each artist has different needs," she says. Not as many as one thinks overlap. The funding bodies seem to have little flexibility in their criteria, which means that artists spend time trying to mould themselves into something they're not to qualify for what is, at the end of the day, a bag of peanuts. It incenses me how unprogressive the funding world is," she adds through gritted teeth, "it is clearly not run by artists or people who understand on a practical level how artists survive."

That (and more) said, Eska Mtungwazi feels the most important thing she learned from Take Five was the value of getting away and thinking about her career. For Max de Wardener, "The scheme has really helped me form my own identity as an artist and given me more confidence. It's opened up some fantastic opportunities and made me known to a bigger circle of musicians and funders." Dave Milligan insists that it has actually transformed the way he plays (thanks also to his chosen mentor, concert pianist and Alexander Technique specialist, Nelly Ben-Or): "I've started to change my technique, and it has opened up the boundaries of my writing and arranging. "It has also, he adds wryly, "decreased my tolerance of train travel."

All the participants agree that Take Five has been a fascinating, sometimes frustrating, ultimately rewarding journey. As the mentorships continue (Seaming To is spending time with Robert Wyatt; Matthew Bourne, Seb Rochford and Pete Wareham will spend time with various high-profile musicians in New York), the next group of Take Fivers - to be announced, like last year, at the London Jazz Festival in November - can expect to be similarly supported, stimulated, inspired.

So what message, if any, is the Take Five initiative giving out? "Take Five is not a political animal and our participants are not lab rats," says David Francis. "This is about nurturing creative musicians who may not have been exposed to professional development opportunities because of the musical genres in which they work. Take Five is about filling gaps. Other professionals have ongoing, supported and subsidised training in the workplace in order that they can realise their full potential," he says, summing it all up with a smile. "Why shouldn't musicians?"