

# SERIOUS

## TAKE FIVE – EDITION II (2009)

by John Fordham

(published in Jazz UK, August 2006)

This year, the Jerwood Charity and PRS Foundation gave eight UK musicians from various corners of the contemporary scene the chance to take a step back - to think about how and why they make music, to expand their knowledge, and learn from experts and each other. These are some of their reactions.

FOLLOWING A SUCCESSFUL pilot project last year, the Jerwood Charity and the Performing Rights Society Foundation for new music (PRSF) recently collaborated with international music producers Serious on the innovative artist-development scheme Take Five.

The title tells the story - a rare opportunity for a group of British musicians, some of whom had never met before, to step back from their regular working lives and develop their craft with expert help. Most of the eight participants had jazz experience, though not all. Of the two vocalists, former Perrier Award winner Julia Biel had come out of jazz, but singer-songwriter Mara Carlyle had not. Manchester trumpeter Neil Yates had played both jazz and folk, London guitarist David Okumu jazz and contemporary soul. Pianist Gwilym Simcock and saxophonist Soweto Kinch were both jazz virtuosos, but Simcock had strong classical connections, and Birmingham's Kinch had rap and hip-hop links. Cardiff pianist Dave Stapleton was closer to free-improvisation, tabla-player Aref Durvesh to Indian classical traditions and contemporary world/pop music.

Take Five ran from November 2005 to May 2006, with a variety of seminars on everything from studio techniques to handling press, PR and music-publishing - plus one-to-one sessions, jamming and composing opportunities and general social time. The project also gave the participants access to longer-term mentoring with high-profile artists, and opportunities to hook up with artists operating in other forms.

DAVID OKUMU: 29 year-old guitarist, born in Vienna to Kenyan parents. Studied French and Politics at Edinburgh University and jazz guitar with John Parricelli. Former member of award-winning '90s fusion band J-Life, worked with Dennis Rollins, Norma Winstone, Byron Wallen, Afro-funk band Oneness of Juju, Swedish bassist Anders Jormin, Danish drummer Benita Haastrup. Also formed own bands Thieves Without Loot and Jade Fox - the latter with fellow F-ire Collective member, keyboardist Nick Ramm. Jade Fox's debut album is due later in 2006.

'I felt some of it was overly structured - I need more space to retain my sanity, and perhaps musical relationships could have been explored in a more organic way. But it was amazing to explore techniques in such great depth - Tony Platt brought studio techniques to life through his passion, patience and gift of communication. It might have been nice if we could have splintered off more, but it was good to demystify funding processes, and think about promoters, agents, record companies, and the press. Artistic people often feel ill-equipped to engage with all that, yet it's so fundamental to realising our aspirations.'

DAVE STAPLETON: Composer and pianist, graduated from the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in 2002. Founded the Red Eye Music label in 2003, with singer-songwriter Christopher Rees - to promote creative music across the UK jazz, rock, avant-garde and contemporary-classical scenes. Formed improv group Full Circle (inspired by Keith Tippett), released *When Life Was In Black & White* with a quintet in 2005. Co-wrote the acclaimed *Conway Suite*, drawing on classical and spiritual music, jazz and minimalism, works with animators and film-makers, plans upcoming project with Matthew Bourne.

'I was honoured to be nominated, let alone accepted. One-to-one advice on the business, and the incredibly inspiring composition workshop with John Surman benefited me most. I got a much clearer idea of music-publishing, and how important it is to composers - and I learnt a huge amount from the studio techniques workshop. I particularly enjoyed playing with Aref Durvesh on tablas for the first time, and we hope to repeat it. Take Five certainly helped with my approach to promoting my music. It's a fantastic scheme and offers so much - and the more you put into it, the more you get out.'

NEIL YATES: Trumpeter, born 1970 in Stockport. Played in local funk, soul, folk and big bands, and on pop sessions in London for Brand New Heavies, Robbie Williams and others - then began turning them down to work with Gary Crosby, Dave O'Higgins, Peter King and many more. Explored jazz/folk crossovers through Irish flautist Michael McGoldrick, developed special valve technique to mimic fiddle and flute effects. Formed the band e2K to mix folk and African music, wrote Gil Evans-influenced brass/percussion for the Manchester Jazz Festival called *Sketches Of A Northern Town*. About to release *New Origins* album of original pieces.

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'Self promotion, the press, the industry and achieving any kind of reputation outside one's circle of musicians and immediate audience has always seemed a mysterious world. Take Five gave us the chance to meet some movers and shakers - and see that they, like us, are all just jazz and music lovers who express this passion through action and involvement, and don't make much out of it other than satisfaction. The evening jams produced some free but beautiful improvising - notably with Gwilym and Julia, and I've since worked with both. Playing with Aref and Dave Stapleton was interesting rhythmically, and grooving with Soweto again was a joy. But the main thing was having someone genuinely interested in what I do, and pro-actively willing to help. I can't stress how rare that is!'

**GWILYM SIMCOCK:** Jazz and classical pianist and French horn-player. Scored the highest marks in the country in his Grade 8 exams - on both piano and French horn, and at the age of only 11. Introduced to jazz by former Loose Tubes bassist Steve Berry at Chethams School, studied with John Taylor, Nikki Iles, Nick Weldon and Geoff Keezer at The Royal Academy of Music. Has worked with Norma Winstone, Tim Garland, Stan Sulzmann, Martin France and The Swallow String Quartet. Winner of BBC Jazz Awards Rising Star award, toured with Kenny Wheeler's big band, Acoustic Triangle and Bill Bruford.

'All I've ever done is play the piano and write music, so to find out more about how to look after myself as a professional was really valuable. It was also great to meet people from Serious and from the Arts Council, people who profoundly affect working opportunities, but who had been remote for me until Take Five. And it was great to expand my musical friendships, through meeting people like Soweto and Julia Biel - and Neil Yates, who I subsequently involved in a big band thing of mine. And through Take Five's mentoring scheme, I'm going to be working with the classical composer Mark Anthony Turnage, which will be an amazing experience, I'm sure. It's easy to lose contact with people when you're busy, so this was a wonderful chance to meet people I wouldn't otherwise have met, play with them, and share ideas.

**SOWETO KINCH:** Born London, 1978. Self-taught, encouraged early by Courtney Pine and Gary Crosby. Oxford University History graduate, but joined Tomorrow's Warriors, Jazz Jamaica and Nu Troop and switched careers. Admires Sonny Rollins, Benny Carter, Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, Joe Harriott, fascinated by the African and classical musical influences on Britain's 17th and 18th century black population. Influenced by the hip-hop and rap of De La Soul, The Roots and Q Tip. Organised The Live Box sessions and workshops in Birmingham, won international sax competition at the Montreux Jazz Festival 2002, BBC Jazz Award as Rising Star 2002. Released acclaimed debut album Conversations With The Unseen, which won a Mercury Music Prize and a MOBO Award in 2003 - follow-up A Life In The Day Of B19: Tales Of The Tower Block out this autumn.

'I thought the sessions such as composition, would be formal, but instead we had a very relaxed and inspiring session with John Surman. We all brought charts and got to develop them with him. Another unexpected twist was the theatrical improvisation session; I really got into it - maybe my own family's theatrical bent made it easier, but it was liberating work and gave me more warm-up material for my own workshops! Even with those I'd known well before (Neil Yates, David Okumu) the sessions felt different, and it was very valuable to meet Gwilym Simcock - we shared a lot of musical tastes and had never worked together before. Then there were artists whose work crossed different genres and whose personalities were quite different, like Mara, Julia and Aref.

But perhaps the most long-term benefit came from the industry sessions. Meeting people from seemingly aloof funding bodies, and the worlds of publishing and PR. I'm still digesting the info on how to get publicity, publishing, gig promotion and artist management to work in tandem. The recording studio information will also certainly filter into my work.'

**JULIA BIEL:** London-born singer-songwriter, won Perrier Jazz Award for Best Vocalist in 2000, Rising Star at BBC Jazz Awards 2006. Member of the F-ire Collective from that time, worked regularly with guitarist/composer Jonny Phillips, pianist Robert Mitchell and drummer Seb Rochford. Appeared on Polar Bear's debut album Dim Lit, released acclaimed album Not Alone in 2005 with her own band including Phillips, Rochford, saxist Idris Rahman and cellist Ben Davis.

'Sebastian Rochford and Pete Wareham put me on to Take Five, and gave it a resounding thumbs up - they had been on it the first year. Having the chance to talk with people who know loads more than I do about how things work in the industry, I felt more at ease with decisions that needed to be made. Also it was amazing to get paid studio-time to try different microphone techniques and really hear the differences. Maybe some of the scheme could have been better targeted to relate to musicians' actual stage lives more directly. But the project introduced me to the playing and work of some amazingly creative players. That has already resulted in doing gigs with a great musician who was also taking part. It also confirmed to me that as musicians working in the industry today there is no real established route in a world without much managerial structure, so you have to get on with it and find your own solutions. Without the scheme there's no knowing how long I might have been stomping about in the wilderness...

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AREF DURVESH: Tabla-player and percussionist, trained in Indian classical techniques. Extensive pop and world-music experience, toured with Nitin Sawhney and Sting, worked with Jeff Beck, Byron Wallen, Susheela Raman, John McLaughlin and more.

'A chance to just stop, spend some time with fantastic hospitality, meeting musicians I knew very little about. It was also a way to build a bridge between what I knew from an Indian classical position and what the western players knew. I'm British first, then Asian, so it was also a chance to express how I feel about being brought up here. The business side of it helped me to understand about leadership, and what my contribution is worth when I play a session for someone. Sting says 'make sure you know as much as possible,' and Take Five was all about that. But mainly, the highlight was the other players. I felt I could happily tour with them for the rest of my days. Mara playing the saw, that was something. Until then, I'd only thought of a saw as something that could cut my tablas up! It would be nice if we could get together for a gig or a tour, show our appreciation that way.'

MARA CARLYLE: British singer-songwriter mingling elements of opera, bluegrass, electronica, jazz, classical, blues, gospel, even Hawaiian music - and she plays the musical saw, too. Recently released self-made album The Lovely featuring those qualities and more - The Observer called it an 'appropriately-titled, delicious debut.' Regularly worked with samples and electronica duo Plaid, and is now signed to Matthew Herbert's Accidental label. Part-time day-centre worker with homeless teenagers in Euston, London.

'I was surprised to be asked - I don't consider myself a jazz artist - and felt enormously privileged to be involved. Meeting that extraordinary bunch of people was the highlight for me, musically and personally. And the three days we spent on studio techniques was fantastic - it could have been three months and we'd still have been learning. It was also great to find out more about the business. Musicians are either into that, or bury their heads in the sand about it, and I'm the latter. I didn't get all the jazz jokes - but people were nice and explained them to me! Everyone was so inclusive, no snobbery or rank-pulling of any kind. Maybe we might have split up more to play in different combinations, but the late-night shenanigans produced some lovely music.'