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TAKE FIVE - EDITION III (2007)

Dreams of Tomorrow

By Daniel Spicer, Take Five Edition III Writer-in-Residence

Ladies and gentlemen, we are living in a new Golden Age of jazz. Caving in to popular opinion, the Government has scrapped its plans to spend £76 billion on replacing the Trident nuclear weapons system and has, instead, decided to invest every last penny in nurturing our homegrown jazz talent. In every major city up and down the land, the newly created National Academies of Jazz Excellence and Development run intensive, high-profile, fully-subsidised courses covering every aspect of what an aspiring jazzer needs to know in order to thrive and grow in the pursuit of their art. Evan Parker advises the Prime Minister on crucial matters in his capacity as Minister of Improvisation. Prince Harry has resigned from the Household Cavalry and devoted himself to studying the trumpet. The whole country is jumping to the sound of jazz. There has never been – will never be – a better time to be a young, British jazz musician.

OK, perhaps that's enough fantasy for now. The reality is, shall we say, just a little different. While it's true that the UK is, indeed, bursting with talented young players, for most of them, the idea of enjoying even the tiniest fraction of the support and encouragement we've just imagined is exactly what it seems: an impossible dream. Today's rising jazz artists, by and large, find themselves instead in a far more challenging situation: trying to juggle the urge to create new music with the practical realities of daily existence; catering to a small but devoted niche market and counting themselves lucky if their new CD sells more than a handful of copies; just too damn busy trying to make ends meet to give any thought to how to develop their careers and enjoy the wider success they surely deserve.

Well, thankfully somebody is doing something about it. It's called *Take Five* and it represents the coming together of three forward-thinking organisations dedicated to promoting arts in the UK - who all just happen to dig jazz. Jerwood Charitable Foundation provides imaginative funding opportunities for visual and performing arts; and the adventurous PRS Foundation is the UK's largest independent funder of new music in any genre. Since 2004, these venerable bodies have commissioned Serious, the London-based international producer of live jazz, world and new music to produce *Take Five* – a daring initiative that sees them putting their money exactly where their mouths are.

Roanne Dods, Director of Jerwood, explains: "*Take Five* has been designed to give some of the UK's most talented jazz musicians a unique opportunity to develop their craft. It's about taking time, having space, working with and inspiring the community around you to think about your artistic work and how artists pull together their business practise as well." Claire Whitaker, Director of Serious, also has a very clear vision of what this programme is about: "The whole point of *Take Five* is to give musicians access to knowledge about a whole range of business and creative opportunities and look at how we can help the very talented jazz musicians that we have in the UK go along that journey with a few more tools in their kit-bag. We want to stimulate creativity, raise aspirations and look at how musicians survive and thrive in today's jazz community."

So far so good, but the question remains: does it work? Charlotte Ray, Manager at the PRS Foundation has no doubt: "It's been an incredible few years to see how *Take Five* has gone on. There have been some very visible successes. To name just a few musicians, Pete Wareham, Seb Rochford, Gwilym Simcock and Neil Yates have all been a part of it." Certainly, it's an impressive list, containing some of the most important, vibrant and successful artists on the current scene – a fact that hasn't escaped Roanne Dods' attention: "We've all been inspired by the quality of people who've been applying – and slightly surprised too, by the talent that's coming through. For us, that has been a sign of the value of the initiative."

By those criteria, this third instalment of *Take Five* – kicked off at the London Jazz Festival in November 2006 – looks like one of the most successful so far, bringing together eight of the most talented young jazz musicians in the country, representing a huge range of interests and styles: Trumpeter Tom Arthurs is a member of the influential F-IRE Collective and a key figure on London's left-field jazz and improvised

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music scene; conductor Jules Buckley leads the Heritage Orchestra, a 45-piece ensemble dedicated to performing new music and crossing musical genres; Leeds-based bass player Dave Kane directs LIMA –

the Leeds Improvised Music Association – with a strong penchant for the avant-garde; Manchester's Stuart McCallum is an in-demand guitarist and high-profile collaborator with the Cinematic Orchestra; Corey Mwamba, from Derby, is a fiercely individual improviser specialising in the often-overlooked possibilities of vibraphone, marimba and dulcimer; Finn Peters, also part of the F-IRE Collective, is one of the finest flautists and alto sax players in the UK; American-born trumpeter, Abram Wilson, has already made quite a name for himself with recordings as a leader and as Assistant Artistic Director of Tomorrow's Warriors; and pianist Nikki Yeoh has an impressive list of collaborators and commissions ranging from Courtney Pine and The Roots to the Choir of New College Oxford. It's a wildly eclectic mix, but, as Dods points out, these musicians have got at least one thing in common: "Creativity is at the heart of this initiative and each participant is a creative musician who's been chosen precisely for that reason."

Except, of course, there is another important factor that unites them: they have all, to a greater or lesser extent, experienced the frustrations of trying to make a viable career for themselves in jazz while at the same time devoting themselves to the perfection of their art; or, as Stuart McCallum puts it: "You can practise and practise and practise and get better and better and better but ultimately there's always that brick wall against you that no one knows who you are." It's something that Dave Kane recognises too: "For a lot of musicians, we don't have our business chops together at all because we're concentrating on trying to develop the music. A lot of us get caught up in getting music together, writing music, playing with other people." As Jules Buckley sees it, "it's easy to get locked up in your own little world."

In essence, *Take Five* offers musicians the chance to acquire the skills and knowledge to break out of their own little worlds through a series of specially tailored workshops and seminars, culminating in February in a week-long residency at Bore Place, an idyllic rural retreat deep in the Kent countryside: a kind of jazz-ashram, if you will. While there, the musicians discuss among themselves - and with leading international figures from all arenas of the creative music business - such illuminating subjects as composition, strategic direction, promotion and publishing and public funding. As Stuart McCallum rightly puts it: "It's a lifetime of experience that you're tapping into, a world of information."

This year's participants also get the chance to work with musician in residence, saxophonist John Surman. After four decades at the forefront of jazz, Surman is ideally placed to view these musicians' current dilemmas with a certain wise perspective: "This little niche of jazz is a little bit separate from the mainstream of music-making and career-making in music," he says. "The feeling of many of these folks is that they will make their way in the music world in a slightly different way than others who are coming out of a music college looking to make a career in either commercial music or as classical music soloists. But they need to listen and they need to be aware of the commercial world out there."

And listen they did. After a sometimes gruelling week of intense discussion that seemed to involve almost as much sweat and graft as a three-encore show, every one of the participants feels they've learned important lessons. Abram Wilson explains: "We've been working on composition, we've learned about fundraising, we've learned about managing your career as a musician and how to deal with promoting your career as a musician. I think that all these concepts have affected me and benefited me greatly. I see no reason why in the future you won't see much bigger and better things in my musical career."

This, essentially, is the whole point of *Take Five*: to give musicians the know-how and the confidence to take giant steps forward in their careers. As far as Dave Kane is concerned, it's done just that: "It's really given me a huge kick up the arse. I've decided this is what I'm going to do forever. Music is going to be the thing. *Take Five* has made me aware that through the frameworks that we're being introduced to, there are ways. It gives you a bit of confidence. I'll have a new vigour and a new determination with the music I'm writing now or the projects that I'm doing." Wilson, too, can see the leaps his fellow participants might well make as a result of *Take Five*: "I think you'll see a lot of interesting reviews and star quality things happening with a lot of these guys."

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Clearly, in terms of the UK jazz scene, this is an important scheme, and an amazing boost for the musicians involved. Wilson again: “This is the kind of thing you don’t receive in school. To be in a place

with people who have been in the business and have incredible expertise at what they do – you can’t find that in any conservatory. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for all of us to really benefit ourselves and our musical careers.”

So, is *Take Five* helping us build our imagined jazz utopia, a world where creative musicians get all the support and encouragement they need to push their creative urges as far as they can possibly take them? Well, maybe not, but it sets an inspiring precedent, a glimpse of the way things could be if only every musician was lucky enough to get this helping hand. Certainly, Nikki Yeoh would like to see the scheme expanded to so it can influence even more composers and players. “I think there could be similar schemes for some of the older jazz musicians,” she asserts. “A lot of people don’t get their stuff together until they’re in their mid-forties. There’s education and support available for young people but at the time when people sometimes really need validation and support they don’t always get it and then the struggle begins again. The struggle never really stops. That’s something that people should bear in mind if we’re to create a culture where our musicians that we’ve invested in when they’re younger will manage to flourish when they’re older.”

It’s a dream that probably everyone involved in creative music would like to see fulfilled: a culture in which artists are cherished and appreciated by society at large. Just imagine what we could achieve in a world like that. Instead of parading overpaid, semi-literate footballers as role models for our children, let’s encourage young minds to pursue the mysteries of artistic expression. Instead of holding up the life of a vacuous supermodel as a worthy aspiration, let’s show youngsters the fun that can be had with a piano. Instead of a world disfigured by ignorance, injustice and intolerance, why not give openness, authenticity and spontaneity a chance? Maybe it’s a long way off but, until that day comes, let’s applaud the organisers of *Take Five* for bringing us a ray of hope and making an investment today that just might make our tomorrows slightly better. As John Surman puts it: “It’s an investment in youth and that can’t be bad, can it?”