

SERIOUS

TAKE FIVE - EDITION IV (2008)

By Daniel Spicer

It's always good to have someone looking out for your best interests. And, right now, young British jazz musicians can count themselves very lucky indeed. Over the last few years, three highly influential organisations have emerged as venerable benefactors on a mission to give our rising jazz stars a much-needed helping hand. Since 2005, Serious – the international producer of live jazz, world and new music – has been commissioned by Jerwood Charitable Foundation – forward-looking patron of visual and performing arts – and PRS Foundation – the UK's largest independent funder of new music – to produce an innovative scheme called *Take Five*, inviting eight young jazzers each year to participate in a unique project with life-changing possibilities.

The eight musicians selected for the 2008 session of *Take Five* represent possibly the most eclectic line up so far. Tom Cawley rose to prominence as keyboardist with London's punk-jazz pioneers, Acoustic Ladyland, and has more recently made waves leading his own piano trio, Curios. Multi-reeds player Dan Stern has worked with sax great Dave Liebman and has subsequently begun to develop his own conception of contemporary jazz incorporating strong elements of his classical training. Guitarist Chris Sharkey is a founder member of LIMA – Leeds Improvised Music Association – and has loaned his fiery fret-work to some of the most avant-garde British bands of recent years, from Fraud to Spring Heel Jack. Clarinettist Arun Ghosh has emerged from the Manchester scene as a distinctive voice fusing Indian classical music, rock and Hip-Hop into his own joyfully multicultural take on jazz. Gareth Lockrane's flute has been heard gracing tracks by Heritage Orchestra and The James Taylor Quartet among others, as well as his own band Grooveyard and, most recently, his swinging Hammond organ-led outfit 5B3. Vocalist Kirsty Almeida settled in Manchester after a childhood that took her all over the world – and her travels shine through in her songs, using elements of klezmer, gypsy jazz, folk and calypso to bring her intensely personal lyrics to life. Scottish guitarist Graeme Stephen is one of the leading figures on Edinburgh's thriving creative music scene, as happy playing with left-field Improv musicians as he is working in a traditional folk setting. Londoner Andrew McCormack has already gained much attention for his powerful solo piano performances and has more recently turned his considerable talents to Hollywood, contributing to the soundtracks of a number of high-profile films.

With such a wide range of styles and approaches, hailing from different corners of the UK, it's easy to see this year's line-up as proof of a particularly robust UK jazz scene. It's certainly something that Tom Cawley would agree with: "In terms of diversity of output and the vibrancy of the music being written and performed, it must be at an all-time high. There is great music coming out of the colleges and collectives springing up all over the place. For me, it's stronger now than at any time since I've been playing."

It's an encouraging situation for all involved but it raises an obvious question: if the current UK jazz scene is so vibrant, why is *Take Five* needed at all? The answer is depressingly mundane. With jazz CD sales dwindling and mainstream media coverage of British jazz virtually non-existent, too many of today's young talents find themselves forced to make a difficult choice between their livelihood and their art. As Chris Sharkey bluntly puts it: "I don't know many young British jazz musicians who make a living solely from their art. If you choose to take time to work on and develop your music you lose out on opportunities to make money. If you choose money, by playing function gigs, day jobs and teaching, then you might as well be a florist or something. The challenge – and it's a bitch – is trying to balance the two." In reality, these everyday difficulties can lead even the most talented and creative of young musicians into a frustrating cul-de-sac; too many of them are so busy scrabbling around trying to make a living that they're simply unable to give enough thought to furthering their career, developing their art and taking their voice to the wider audience it surely deserves.

This is precisely where *Take Five* steps in. Through a series of specially tailored workshops and seminars, the scheme provides a practical forum for the eight selected musicians to address this very problem and make the leap to the next stage of their careers – as Roanne Dods, Director of the Jerwood Charitable Foundation, 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, elaborates: "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."

They're noble sentiments, for sure, but a quick glimpse at just a few of the musicians who have passed through the ranks of *Take Five* reveals that there's much more to it than just lofty ideals. Matthew Bourne, Seb Rochford, Pete Wareham, Soweto Kinch, Gwilym Simcock, Finn Peters and Abram Wilson are among some of the most

SERIOUS

important and successful jazz musicians on the current scene – and all of them have gone on to reach greater heights and wider audiences after participating in past *Take Five* sessions.

With so much at stake, it's unsurprising that expectations among the current batch of musicians are riding high when they arrive in deepest Kent in early February for the centrepiece and defining experience of *Take Five*: a week-long residency at the Bore Place organic farm retreat. Essentially, it's an opportunity for these artists to remove themselves from the day-to-day pressures of juggling art and money and spend a week discussing among themselves – and with leading figures from all areas of the creative music business – the issues that can make a big difference to their careers, but which they may not have had enough time till now to contemplate. As the week begins, these young artists see it unanimously as a decisive moment – as Kirsty Almeida explains: “I hope to get a step up to the next level in my career. I look forward to seeing all the opportunities available to me.” Tom Cawley, too, relishes the chance to learn essential lessons: “I hope to emerge at the end of the week with a clear idea of what I need to do next. I hope to be able to ask every question I want to and to learn all about the things I'm being given the opportunity to.”

But, of course, being passionately committed musicians, there's another aspect of the Bore Place experience that these artists are hotly anticipating – and that's the opportunity simply to play. Throughout the week, the group will undertake intensive composition workshops lead by *Take Five*'s Musical Director, legendary British saxophonist, John Surman – with each artist bringing a composition of their own for the group to work on as a whole. With such a diverse range of musical personalities involved, it's a process that's bound to produce some startlingly unexpected combinations – and it's an element that these questing musicians are keen to savour. Andrew McCormack explains: “I would hope to have the chance to collaborate with musicians that I might not otherwise have had the opportunity to meet, and to widen my musical knowledge and skills by working alongside them.” It's an idea that Arun Ghosh can also clearly see the benefits of: “The potential of sharing a safe environment with other aspiring jazz musicians where we can compare our musical journeys, modes of working and differing influences excites me, especially as I believe such dialogues often enhance learning, widen listening choices and music appreciation, increase experimentation and inspire the production of fresh sounds and new partnerships.”

Clearly, there's a lot these musicians hope to gain from their time at Bore Place. Thankfully, the organisers do everything they can to ensure they do. As well as the musical sessions with John Surman – Surman's sermons, if you will – the group also participates in rigorous, sometimes gruelling, discussion groups with a dizzying array of industry professionals, sharing a wealth of collective knowledge. Joanna MacGregor, Artistic Director of Bath Festival, and Sander Grande, Programmer of the North Sea Jazz Festival, discuss the programming of festivals and venues in the UK and Europe – and how these young musicians can get their name on the bill. Sascha Kilias, International Marketing Manager of Universal's Jazz imprint gives them the inside track on how they can make the most of downloads and other increasingly essential forms of new media distribution. Jon Newey, Editor and Publisher of *Jazzwise* magazine, and Jez Nelson, Creative Director and presenter of BBC Radio 3's flagship jazz show *Jazz on 3*, shed light on how to give the media exactly what they want and get your name heard by the jazz-buying public. You can call it the University of Jazz, if you like, and these honours students spend an intense week of hard work studying for their graduation.

Just like any other students, they have fun too. Friendships are made, wine drunk, late-nights enjoyed. But, at the end of the week, have they got everything they'd hoped out of *Take Five*? Certainly, in terms of their musical experiences, no one is left in any doubt. Here's Tom Cawley's take on the working on each other's compositions: “We got together with each person with a tune – a really unconventional group on paper, not just in terms of diversity of careers but also instrumentation – we all got together and made beautiful music out of it. There's nothing more inspiring. It really was a surprise. It obliterated my expectations in every way.” Now see if you can tell whether Graeme Stephen enjoyed making music with his peers, under the auspices of the great John Surman: “The jam we had the other night, most people in the room agreed it was the most amazing thing ever. I've been playing all these years and it's probably one of the most amazing playing experiences I've ever had in my life – with people I'd only met three days before. It was just so personal and everyone just trusted each other. We played the most amazing music – there was an emotional freak-out – it was intense. It blew me away.”

But what about the business side of things? Have these students learned the lessons they'd hoped for? Kirsty Almeida certainly seems to think so: “It's completely blown my mind – both musically and opportunistically. It's widened my horizon and scope and opened up possibilities. I now feel that I've got the confidence to access some of the areas that, before, I didn't even know existed. Even if I had known, I wouldn't have known how to approach those possibilities. Now I feel totally confident to be able to try even more than I was already trying.” Chris Sharkey, too, seems certain he's got what he wanted: “Every day, we've been turning up hungry for it. It's all stuff that we want to know. It's been so comprehensive. No stone unturned, nothing left unsaid. I feel that all the stuff we've been looking at – about promoters, about publishing, about managers, agents, PRs, all that stuff – it was really fuzzy and foggy for me before. Before, you're sitting there with your music, thinking ‘I know I want this to be easier, better and I want to play to more people in more places’ but your road to getting to that place is just really fuzzy

SERIOUS

and foggy. It literally now feels like its floodlit. In a few days time, once the dust has settled, I'm going to be able to sit down and come up with a plan on how to implement these different things."

The bottom line is that each of these eight musicians will now, in their own way, have a clearer plan for what they want to achieve. For some, like Graeme Stephen, it's a question of ploughing a modest furrow with dedicated commitment: "I'm never going to sell-out and make a million quid playing music. I play my sort of music but with all this information I can make 100% out of the thing I do. It will be a lot easier for me to do that now." Others, like Kirsty Almeida are setting their sights a little higher: "My dream before this was to get a world tour and then to go on and write musicals later on. I knew that it was possible but everyone said I was an idealist, that I was a bit crazy and naïve. Now I know that I was actually right. Now I have the tools to be able to get to the Albert Hall."

Yes, it's always good to have someone looking out for your best interests. But, in the case of *Take Five*, as Chris Sharkey puts it, it seems "'good' is a considerable understatement."