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TAKE FIVE - EDITION V (2009)

By Daniel Spicer

Anyone who's been paying attention will know that UK jazz has, in recent years, been enjoying the most vibrant and energised scene we've witnessed in decades. With fertile and prolific collectives springing up all over the country, and a profusion of young artists making inspired, original music, homegrown jazz is blooming. So perhaps it's no coincidence that, over the last half a decade, an innovative scheme has been generating a buzz among young, British jazz musicians, and helping many of them push their careers into new areas of creativity and success.

It's called *Take Five*, and it's the brainchild of some of the most progressive arts organisations currently operating in the UK. Serious is a producer of live jazz, international and new music, responsible for staging world-class gigs, from intimate club dates to the annual London Jazz Festival. Since 2005, Serious has also been responsible for running *Take Five*, with funding and support from some very influential partners: the Jerwood Charitable Foundation is an imaginative and well-respected benefactor of the visual and performing arts; and the PRS Foundation is the UK's largest independent funder of new music across all genres. This year, for the first time, the scheme also receives the backing of two other venerable bodies: the Musicians Benevolent Fund and Arts Council England. It's an impressive roster, which you'd expect would get results.

And you'd be right – as Vanessa Reed, Director at the PRS Foundation, observes: “*Take Five* is really proving to be one of the most successful professional development schemes that we've supported in recent years. But a scheme like *Take Five* can only really be as good as the participating musicians. Fortunately, the talent we've seen come through the scheme has been outstanding.” Roanne Dod, Director of Jerwood, is also quick to point to the calibre of artists that have been involved with *Take Five*, commenting: “I think it's fair to say that we've all been incredibly struck over the years by the quality of the applications that we've had from around the country. The list of alumni now in these five years is starting to look like an extremely inspiring list of some of the UK's most interesting music makers.” When you consider that that list of past participants includes names such as Seb Rochford, Pete Wareham, Soweto Kinch, Abram Wilson, Gwilym Simcock, Dave Kane and Chris Sharkey, you can see that this is no idle boast. Moreover, it's clear that many of these highly visible musicians have taken their careers to greater heights soon after their involvement with the *Take Five* initiative.

So just why is *Take Five* so successful? Vanessa Reed again: “I think it stems primarily from the scheme's unapologetic emphasis on the basic but neglected needs of musicians, particularly at turning points in their careers.” Each year, the scheme offers help to a group of eight young musicians – through four important elements. Firstly, at an initial meeting, the musicians get the chance to discuss their musical lives, their aspirations, their inspirations and also the challenges that they're facing. Secondly, the musicians undertake research to look for individual mentoring or another research project relevant to the development of their art. The third aspect is a multiple-day studio production workshop where artists work with talented and hugely experienced producer, Tony Platt, to improve their knowledge of working in and getting the most out of recording studios. And finally, the fourth stage of *Take Five* is a five day residency at Bore Place organic farm in the Kent countryside – the perfect environment for these musicians to take time out from the daily grind and simply concentrate on themselves, their music and their future. Or, as Vanessa Reed puts it: “*Take Five* offers time to think and create, away from the multi-jobbing rhythm of the average jazz musician's day-to-day existence.”

And, the fact is, this is help that many of our young jazzers desperately need. In contrast to the vibrancy of the UK jazz scene, today's wider cultural climate marginalises jazz perhaps more than ever before. With high-street record shops carrying fewer and fewer jazz titles, the national press giving jazz less and less coverage – and the current financial crisis only making matters worse – many of our most creative young musicians are finding it harder than ever to make a living solely through their art. Forced to take day-jobs and all manner of paying gigs to make ends meet, many simply can't find the time and energy needed to concentrate on their craft, strive for artistic fulfilment and make the most of their talents.

So, it's good to know that the organisers of *Take Five* are offering a way out of this impasse. Claire Whitaker, Director of Serious, explains: “All of us involved in *Take Five* share the very strong belief that investment in creative development is of paramount importance to artists reaching their full potential. Through *Take Five*, exceptionally talented young jazz musicians are really given the opportunity to become aware of what is there for them, to examine the things that they're doing well and look at the things they need to develop and the challenges that they face. Each year, *Take Five* provides these artists with a special opportunity to discuss, explore and strengthen all aspects of their future career. It provides us with a platform to discover what is important to this future generation of jazz stars.”

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Just one glance at the crop of young stars taking part in *Take Five* in 2009 shows just what a talented generation we're dealing with. Alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey is a founder member of one of the most successful British jazz groups of recent years, Empirical, and bassist Neil Charles was formerly a member too before he left to form his current trio Zed-U. Bassist Jasper Høiby, vibraphonist and drummer Jim Hart and clarinet and saxophone player Robin Fincker are all lynchpins of London's hyperactive LOOP Collective, all playing in a variety of bands and projects under that increasingly influential banner. Natalie Williams is a vocalist equally at home in soul and jazz, and resident singer at the legendary Ronnie Scott's jazz club. Bass player Chris Mapp is one of the top players in a Birmingham scene that's currently bubbling under with activity. And John Burton – better known as Leafcutter John – is a solo electronica artist and maverick sound-maker for Brit-jazz pioneers, Polar Bear.

It's a diverse group of artists from different backgrounds and different places, but for one week in February they're all brought together for the Bore Place residency. For many it's the defining experience of *Take Five*, not least because, throughout the week, the group has the opportunity to work closely with the scheme's musical director – globally renowned British saxophonist and composer, John Surman. Through a series of guided workshops and jam sessions, the musicians get to work on their own and each other's compositions, while gleaned priceless pearls of wisdom from Surman's vast experience. It's a chance to collaborate and make new – often lasting – connections. A few of the scheme's previous participants have even been lucky enough to continue working with Surman after this initial contact. "I've worked with [guitarist] Stuart McCallum, playing on a commission of his in Manchester," says Surman. "I'm going to collaborate with [pianist] Nikki Yeoh at Cheltenham [Jazz Festival] this year and, of course, I did the BBC Electric Proms with [guitarist] Dave Okumu. That was my choice. We're still in touch and I might try and record with him some time. So that's three already that I've worked with after meeting them here. And I've been in correspondence with several others. So, in four years, that's 32 young musicians that I haven't had to go and look for. Am I in touch or am I in touch?"

In 2009, the latest group of young musicians have enjoyed the same close mentoring from Surman – and much more, as bassist Chris Mapp explains: "It's been incredibly useful in terms of the music, but also in terms of giving you a kick up the arse about all the business side of things. John Surman told us we can all play, that's not something we need to work on – that's the enjoyable bit of it. The stuff that I need to work on now is the business side of it." And that's precisely where the Bore Place experience comes into its own. Over the course of the week, the participants are guided through a series of intensive seminars and workshops, attended by leading figures from diverse areas of the music industry – from publishing and PR to management and funding – all of whom are prepared to share valuable insights into the business of making and selling music.

It's a unique opportunity for the young musicians to plug the gaps in their knowledge of the industry, as Leafcutter John explains: "It's intense. I've got a lot of bits of knowledge out of it. It's just really easy for you to get those bits that you're not sure about. You can be fairly sure that there's going to be someone who knows a lot about it, say if you want to get an agent or a manager or something like that, then there's going to be people who will be able to give you different perspectives on that. I reckon anything you want to know, there'll be someone with some knowledge on that."

Moreover, making these personal connections with influential figures can make a huge difference to the musicians' future prospects. Leafcutter John again: "For me, the best thing is that you meet some of these people and they're really nice, warm people and they just love music. Sometimes, viewing a massive organisation from outside, you can feel pretty insignificant. But when you meet these people you realise that, in your heart, your love of the music is actually mirrored by theirs and that's why they're involved with it. Most of the people we've met [at Bore Place] have been like that. It makes you feel a little bit more confident. Your own self-image goes up." Chris Mapp, too, recognises the progress he'll be able to make as a result of what he's learned: "It's very practical advice. It's useful to know what goes on and how people think. Just to meet these people and hear their perspective is really interesting. I feel more confident now about approaching people."

Ultimately, *Take Five* is designed to help its participants take steps forward in their careers, move on to the next level and achieve their aspirations. And that's exactly what's happened for many of the past participants. Guitarist Chris Sharkey took part in the scheme in 2008 and, since then, has gone on to achieve a higher profile and greater success with his band TrioVD. He's sure that much of his progress is thanks to what he learned on the scheme. "*Take Five* has been really good for my confidence," he says. "And there have been certain other things I've learned, to do with understanding the best order in which things should be done – at what point you should speak to a manager or an agent, all of those things. I had no idea about all of that before. It was a bit of a tangle. It was all a lot clearer at the end of that week at Bore Place."

Similarly, pianist Nikki Yeoh – a participant on the 2007 edition of *Take Five* – has seen her career move on since her involvement with the scheme. She came to *Take Five* after an extended break away from music following the birth of her son, looking for a route back onto the career ladder. And that's precisely what she got – as she explains: "I hoped *Take Five* would invigorate my career and give me the push that I needed to get back into

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writing more. It definitely did do that. I've been proactive and had meetings and the combination of this proactive push has led to a commission for Cheltenham [Jazz Festival] in 2009. There's been loads of intangible stuff too – but that's something really tangible that's come from *Take Five*.”

With success stories like this to back it up, it's clear that *Take Five* is doing something right. The UK jazz scene is all the more exciting for it – and that's got to be good news for musicians and audiences alike.

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