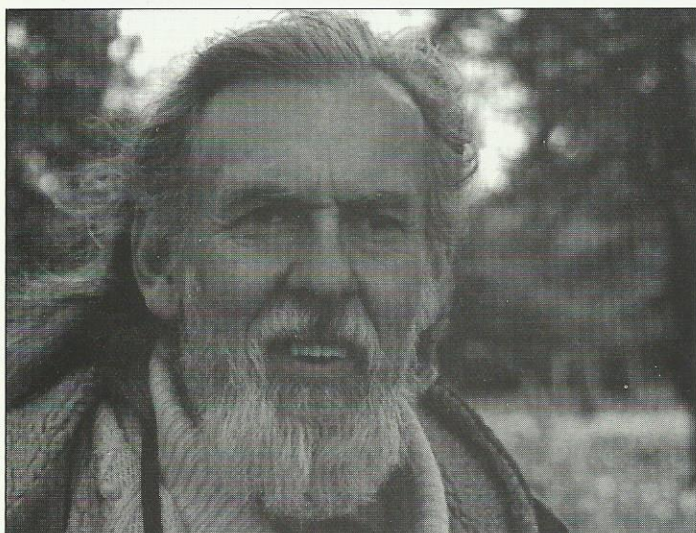


JAZZ IN BRITAIN TODAY



The author, Peter Land. Photo: Susan Jones

IF I HAD NOT BEEN BITTEN WITH THE JAZZ BUG DURING MY YOUTH – and had only now been exposed to the music – it is doubtful whether I would be drawn to it. I have asked myself the question – is it merely that as I got older – I become less open to new influences?

Most of the venues and organisations that sponsor jazz have to depend on the pulling power of "name" jazz musicians. There appears to be a flurry of new names, few of which seem more than brief meteors destined to early professional extinction. Perhaps like all artistic and cultural endeavours there are periods of heroes most of whom have now joined that big band in the sky. Has jazz passed through its golden age, made its contribution to musical culture, its remanence felt only in the influences affecting other musical disciplines?

Such a picture is extremely depressing and must be even more so to those of us who realise the endless well of creativity embraced under the concept of "jazz". Young musicians to day have the benefits of all the studies and struggles of those that came before them. Yet in Britain at least they are faced with a well of loneliness, when it comes to finding work and developing a reputation.

I have seen the effect of this on so many younger musicians. Starting their careers with untrammelled enthusiasm, when they are fortunate enough to get a gig, they often find their audiences noisy and inattentive. To compensate for this the easy option is to overplay and/or to resort to unmusical effects, and any kind of ploy to try to overcome the distractions. A kind of cynical facetiousness so easily creeps in coupled with an underlying sense of frustration and inadequacy – of which they may not even be conscious.

Warne Marsh used to say that if you treat music well it will be kind to you – but misused it is an implacable foe. Many of us have fallen short of this ideal from time to time – but the precept still holds. If we go back sixty years and listen to Lester Young's first recordings "Lady be Good" and "Taxi war dance" we hear beautiful solos, unspoilt by modern pressures. In those days "Making it" meant being appreciated and loved by fellow musicians. Such a far cry from the world of rap and the cynical hipness that exemplifies the end of the piscine era.

But why is jazz in a particularly depressed state in Britain? Though perhaps viewed as a minority art, other countries appear to realise the aesthetic value of jazz. In Britain there is a considerable population of jazz musicians. Some find employment through teaching, others by playing more commercial forms of music. Some work abroad – disgusted with the lack of opportunity here. Since the demise of Bass Clef I find few opportunities to play – though I believe I am at the

peak of my powers as a jazz musician.

How can the situation be rectified? TV Masterclass perhaps – putting the musicians themselves at the forefront – after all they are the ones who know. More emphasis on jazz education, especially by teachers who are inspired players. Jazz encompasses both great and mediocre talent. Without guidance and aesthetic sensibility, the nuggets are hidden along with the dross. Perhaps more time is needed before someone comes along and says – "Wait a minute – we have overlooked great art here". Though the impressionist movement in art took a number of years to attain real respect and recognition – jazz shows little sign of such an awakening. I have my own views – and to the extent that we were able to carry them out through the Bass Clef enterprise – we succeeded in promoting some of the greatest jazz events in London at the time. My idealism was cut short by the actions of the VAT Authorities and the receivers. But that is another story.

Despite this desperate age, there are still musicians around who respect the beauty inherent in music and remain faithful to this. What is pleasantly revealing is that in circumstances where there are opportunities to play jazz with feeling and with respect for the beauty of the art, people are surprised and moved by it – often people who otherwise were unaware of jazz and its potential. The marked improvement in Jazz FM programming is hopefully making something of an impact on jazz appreciation, but the BBC is nothing short of delinquent in this regard, and has been so for years. It is not merely the lack of programmes on jazz, but the lack of any real appreciation of great music, whether live or recorded. There is plenty of bad jazz around – why give it house room? Genuine appreciation and programming is needed. It's pointless canvassing for Art's Council money or lottery handouts, if it goes to publishing bad music. I should emphasise that I am not a latter day "mould fig". I enjoy beauty in music whether it is a sixty year old recording or a live concert. It's quality that counts, and as the old saying goes "If you don't hear it, you aint got it".

Since writing the above I watched the BBC Young Musician of the Year awards. If only the same care and consideration could be given to the Art of Jazz we might yet resuscitate what may be a dying art. But the musicians themselves would need to reorient – leave behind the egotripping and focus upon the beauty of group improvisation. Long live jazz.



The Master with Humphrey Lyttleton who had been presented with the Company's Silver Medal for jazz. Photo: Peter Holland