



CONVERSATIONS IN BRITISH JAZZ

BY MIKE PEARSON

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This excellent book brings together some of the most insightful and entertaining interviews by writer and photographer Mike Pearson with many of the U.K.s most charismatic performers including over 50 beautiful never-before-seen photographs by writer, photographer and jazz enthusiast Mike Pearson, this is a book for any real jazz fan!!!

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INTRODUCTION BY MIKE PEARSON

This book celebrates the work of a group of self-effacing, outwardly unflamboyant people. Musicians who have made a life for themselves playing modern jazz in Britain. Is there another cultural pursuit less promising in terms of job security or financial reward? Even poets can take a day job and while some of the players featured here support themselves by playing other kinds of music or outside the scene altogether, their existence and survival adds up to a small miracle.

None of them would expect any medals for this. The kind of clear eyed pragmatism even the younger players seem steeped in avoids much reflection around self sacrifice or opportunity cost and ideas about art tend to be located within notions of craft, perseverance and respect for where the music came from. All very modest, all very British and yet these musicians produce wonderful sounds; expressive, passionate, music as good as you will hear anywhere.

The last point hardly needs stressing now because it's been some time since the days when being good locally really meant sounding like an American musician. When daring to play something distinctive and personal rendered a local musician almost invisible. Several of the men interviewed played through those years and managed to create a space for themselves in a luke warm environment. >>



Stan Tracey once observed (that) 'jazz is a bit exotic for the English' and he perhaps more than anyone typifies the quietly determined endurance those senior players had to find to get their music off the ground. It therefore seems fitting that his name keeps cropping up throughout the narrative because as a player, mentor, employer and all round model of excellence over a long jazz life his achievement has been considerable. If anyone really wanted to know why jazz is so special they would simply need to hear him in person playing a piano. His sense of serious playfulness, self-expression and individuality, the warmth, range of affect and rhythmic invention all projected through a strong musical personality engaged on an endless voyage of discovery tells you all you need to know about a unique practitioner of a unique music.

Stan doesn't talk about his music like that but he doesn't need to. He simply gets on with making it and has gradually become a central figure in an established strain of modern music. The contrast between most jazz players shrugging personae off stage and the power in their music is an appealing characteristic. Traceys' hard boiled common sense tells you one thing while his music suggests something transcendent. Ronnie Scott enjoyed playing the fool but he was even better at playing the saxophone in addition to his massive contribution with his partner Pete King as they set up and ran their renowned club.

There is also an attempt at social history in this book as I have aimed to capture faithfully each players own perspective. However, jazz musicians tend to face the future looking forwards and seem much happier talking about the music they might make tomorrow than reminiscing through rose-tinted sun glasses. In the process the question of how jazz might grow and change gets an airing. How the music of the moment can retain its vitality now that it has a history and 'traditions' which have come to objectify the way it's heard. Is it realistic anymore to listen to it for tales of the unexpected ?

The musicians find their own answers and are still able to make the same tunes sound different. Some of them play jazz which doesn't sound like 'jazz'. All of them find self expression in a musical form that gives a voice to their most daring thoughts.

Ronnie Scott once talked about the music he aimed for drawing on fleeting feelings that are inexpressible any other way. Around the time Scott began to play professionally in 1943 Philip Larkin wrote (that) 'jazz is the closest description of the unconscious we have' (1.) This was within a broader argument around the collapse of traditional rites and rituals which had served as conduits for metaphysical concerns. Both men would have surely agreed on a place for the jazz musician within our culture whether it's Evan Parker with his hope to engender 'more playful interactions between people' or Bryan Spring aiming to cater for 'the upliftment of one and all'. John Fordham wrote of Stan Traceys music as like 'a conversation with an old friend' (2) around about the same time that Sir Malcolm Arnold proposed a view of all music (as) 'a gesture of friendship, the finest there is'(3), and Arnold loved jazz having felt inspired to take up the trumpet after hearing Louis Armstrong in London as a boy. Listen to his sixth symphony and catch the ghost of Charlie Parker loitering within the compositional flow.>>>>



SOUNDWORLD

Further creative cross fertilization seems inevitable as the World gets smaller and jazz moves into it's second century where gestures of friendship and playful interactions could be more important than ever. The spirit of jazz - it's sound of surprise - has always rubbed up against other folk music and players like Jan Garbarek or Mikhail Dresch might be more important to it's future than those intent on preservation or loose and regressive notions of 'tradition'.

Neither Garbarek nor Dresch appear in this book but most of those who do will be familiar to the people who buy British jazz records or visit the Appleby Festival - a discreetly diverse crowd able to appreciate the music made by both Brian Lemon and Barry Guy, as wide a field as can be embraced at a festival. Neil Ferber who organizes this annual celebration as a labor of love is one of a number of unsung figures who go out of their way to contribute to a working pattern for the musicians and help ensure the continuation of native jazz. Many of the pictures were taken there.

This book does not attempt a survey of the current scene. Today's picture is much more multi-racial and varied than my account would indicate. There is only one woman featured despite their growing presence, also there are no singers of either gender. It is therefore a personal and partial view but I hope to have documented something of the musicians who do appear in these pages.

