



Black British Jazz

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Jason Toynbee:

I think it's getting more and more apparent that Americans can no longer hold up jazz as something that simply belongs solely to them. Increasingly it's becoming clear that we now have a Jazz Planet, and I guess our research is focusing on that part of the planet which happens to be the British Isles.

This music Swings, sometimes it rocks, sometimes it's like a lullaby, but I think always it's rich, it's deep and I'm fascinated by it.

I'm a white, middle class, middle aged man and I love Black British Jazz. Of course I ask myself why. I think it's an extraordinary triumph of struggle over adversity. People who have arrived in this country often in really difficult circumstances and have produced a music with an extraordinary lasting value. That is really what our project is homing in on, why musicians came here, what music they brought with them. Also where they went to. It has both heroism, creativity and a story of emancipation behind it.

First wave 1919 – 1920 the arrival of Black American Musicians. Second wave Black British swing, African and Caribbean musicians coming here from the former colonies to produce this amazing music. Then in the 50's windrush and be-bop, the arrival of a whole new generation of musicians who are now playing modern Jazz, cool hip new sounds. Then on into the 70's with the arrival of the South Africans, Brotherhood of Breath and the Bluenotes. Lastly the second generation of Windrush and my own interest begins.

One of the first bands I saw was the Jazz Warriors, they completely knocked me out with their music and their approach. That's where Courtney Pine comes out of, that's where Gary Crosby comes out of, musician now who are looking back on this rich tradition to make their own sounds.

Gary Crosby:

I would have been about 7, 8. There was a piano at uncle Sid's house, I had to play the bass notes, almost like a ska-boogi thing.

About the age of 19, I started to play bass, that's when it starts, on double Bass, and then it's like wow, we're on a roller coaster now.

I discovered Jazz, while being grounded by the police basically, started listening to Jazz 625, Ella Fitzgerald, I had to be in before 11 for about 2 months, on bail basically. That's where I discovered Jazz.

Jason Toynbee:

The issue of Race is really important for us, to both celebrate Black British Jazz, to see it as a unique form with its own strengths, but also to recognise that it is Black not just in celebration, but the permanent wound which race represents.

In the research we've found that there has been a special vibrancy I'd say with Black British Jazz, and interesting Liverpool and Cardiff are just as important as London.

Gary Crosby: I'd go to these parties, there would always be 3 or 4 of these West Indian guys who would be part of that scene. At some point in the evening they would find themselves around a bottle of rum, with me in the background listening, talking about some guys with some really funny names.

I was really interested in the guys of the 50's, Joe Harriots, Harry Macnere, those were the guys I was really interested in. But my study lead me back to the guys of the 30s. That's where it started. Those guys prepared the ground, for the guys who came later, to travel here and find work. They lived in the houses of the guys who were already here.

The images I got were of smart, hip, womanising rascals, basically. But great musicians.

Jason Toynbee:

And they are arriving in England which is that quintessential melting pot, what's interesting is Jazz has an important relationship to the African diaspora, African sources and roots. Over here it takes on different shades and meanings really.

Gary Crosby:

I believe we are all working towards a British jazz scene that is so reflective of Britain today, that's what we are all working towards.

Its emphasis was really Black community, where as now its musicians of any skin colour or any background, playing to any environment.

I've been waiting 10-15 years for the Book, the record and the film. So it's very important, it's a good project, it's necessary.

Jason Toynbee:

Jazz in Britain has a very special inflection I think, It's not just a question of rhythm, or pastoral British sounds, it's this mixture, this contribution from many different elements and many different sources. It's all these things together in something entirely new.