

“100% White, 100% Male” (?) The Youth Jazz Movement in the West Midlands (1960-1980)

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“100% White, 100% Male” (?) The Youth Jazz Movement in the West Midlands (1960-1980)

Using fieldwork and archival press research to engage with aspiring young musicians in the British West Midlands, I show how the oral tradition of passing musical knowledge down generations provided opportunities for youngsters to experience jazz performance and improvisation. Privileging the jazz collective's social and musical practice, I question how diversity affected the establishment of juvenile jazz in the region.

Keywords: Youth jazz, Birmingham, Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra, Denis Darlow, diversity, Mike Beaumont, Johnny Patrick.

“100% Blanco, 100% Masculino” (?) Movimiento juvenil de jazz en las West Midlands (1960-1980)

Utilizando el trabajo de campo y la investigación del archivo de prensa para llegar a jóvenes aspirantes a músicos en las West Midlands británicas, muestro cómo la tradición oral de transmitir conocimientos musicales de generación en generación brindó oportunidades a los jóvenes para experimentar la interpretación y la improvisación del jazz. Favoreciendo la práctica social y musical del colectivo de jazz, me pregunto cómo afectó la diversidad al establecimiento del jazz juvenil en la región.

Palabras clave: Jazz juvenil, Birmingham, Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra, Denis Darlow, diversidad, Mike Beaumont, Johnny Patrick.

“%100 Txuria, %100 Gizonezkoa” (?) Jazz Gazte Mugimendua West Midlandsen (1960-1980)

West Midlands britainiarretan musikari izan nahi zuten gazteengana gerturatzeko artxi-boko prentsaren ikerketa eta landa-lana erabiliz, belaunaldiz belaunaldi musika ezagutzak transmititzeko ahozko tradizioak gazteei jazzaren interpretazioa eta inprobisazioa esperimintatzeko aukerak eman zizkiela erakusten dut. Jazzaren kolektiboaren praktika sozial eta musikala lehenetsiz, aniztasunak gazte-jazza eskualdean ezartzerakoan izan zuen eragina dut galdegai.

Gako-hitzak: Gazte jazz, Birmingham, Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra, Denis Darlow, aniztasuna, Mike Beaumont, Johnny Patrick.

Introduction

This article follows from a paper that I presented at the Documenting Jazz Conference which took place at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, Swansea, UK in November 2022. The conference theme focused upon diversity within jazz and my paper investigated this topic as it related to the Youth Jazz Movement in the British West Midlands region between 1960 and 1980, and forms part of my wider PhD research project where I consider how processes of audio production mediate and interpret jazz in the West Midlands region during this time.

Much British jazz scholarship has privileged the country's capital city and the "great" voices of the music. I focus on regional musicians drawing on fieldwork, engaging with those who participated in the establishment of the Youth Jazz Movement in the West Midlands, supplemented by archival research in the contemporary music press to shed new light on an unexplored territory of local music culture. I show how the oral tradition of passing musical knowledge down generations provided opportunities for young people to experience jazz performance and improvisation. I question how diversity affected the establishment of juvenile jazz in the region.

This work complements the work of academic colleagues at The Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, including Wall and Barber, (2015) and Cravinho and Homer, (2019) and their contributions to a body of literature focussing on jazz collectives in the locality.

I investigated a pool of aspiring amateur musicians honing their skills as they ascended from grassroots level to the higher echelons of their profession.

The Project

I draw on my background as a jazz radio producer and presenter to rethink the production process of audio documentary features, to tell the story of people involved in local jazz culture in the English West Midlands region in the 1960s and 1970s.

My research participant's memories of the Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra take place through remembering and recollection. I see parallels in my work with that of Philip Bohlman's studies of Jewish musical practices in the Austrian province of Burgenland. Like that area, Birmingham and the wider West Midlands region is multi-ethnic and multicultural, giving a specific context to jazz music in both the present and the past. Bohlman viewed fieldwork in terms of a set of "modalities of interpretation", contributing to ethnomusicology's engagement with the present and the past and I adopted his modality of "Archaeology and Epistemic Knowledge" to my

own work, when undertaking semi-structured Zoom interviews with participants. In Bohlman's words:

Musical practices are frequently central to identity and the knowledge of self, especially when groups must together make the decisions necessary for coherent performance. Epistemic Knowledge does not reside at the surface of musical style; rather, it inheres in the spaces of a shared knowledge that makes performance possible to understand how music has historically served as a means of knowing past. (Bohlman, 2008, p. 260)

I apply this modality to my own work yet struggle with the notion of conducting my study as an ethnomusicologist. Unlike Bohlman, I do not have a deep "experience in the field", however concert-going over many years and more recently producing and presenting jazz radio programmes has allowed me to "place myself in the spaces where (jazz) communities have been, where (jazz) music had been heard". (Bohlman, 2008, p. 260) Furthermore, Bohlman is not Jewish and, similarly, I am not a practicing musician. It is not *my* ethnomusicological past that I am trying to discover. I justify my position as an ethnomusicologist by seeing my position as a jazz radio producer and presenter and long-term concert-goer as falling within the definition of what Christopher Small terms "musicking".

Small views the phrase "to music" not as a noun, but as a verb where:

To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing. (Small, 1998, p. 9)

He goes on to extend his definition to include not only singing in the shower, but also to the people who arrange the chairs in a performance area and listening to music on a Walkman.

The Origins of the Youth Jazz Movement

The roots of the Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra (MYJO) can be traced back to London and the National Youth Jazz Orchestra (NYJO) which had its origins as a rehearsal band evolving from the Youth Jazz Association formed in 1967 by school-teacher Bill Ashton and assisted by fellow teacher Pat Evans. Originally the London Schools Jazz Orchestra, it later became the London Youth Jazz Orchestra. A second Orchestra was formed under the leadership of Pat Evans. Saxophonist Alan Wakeman answered an advertisement in the *Melody Maker* newspaper for musicians interested in playing

in what was to be the LYJO “B” Band. The “B” Band was much more “progressive” than the LYJO under Ashton’s leadership which concentrated on the music of Count Basie, Woody Herman, and Buddy Rich. The “B” Band included music by Pat Evans and original arrangements by Graham Collier and Dick Walter.

In a personal interview, Wakeman explained: “Pat was cutting edge. It wasn’t worth playing unless it was something new that hadn’t been done before” and “that’s where you met the real musicians”.

The British Musicians’ Union were keen supporters of Bill Ashton and the National Youth Jazz Orchestra and Johnny Patrick who was Chairman of the National Executive Committee helped to arrange funding to allow the Orchestra to represent Britain at the 9th World Youth Festival in Bulgaria in the summer of 1968. Birmingham based pianist Patrick was later also to be instrumental in the formation of the Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra.

It was Ashton’s ambition to establish youth bands around the country and by the early 1970s had built a network of bands in the regions including Stockport, Manchester, Oxford, and Bournemouth.



Figure 1: Johnny Patrick handing a cheque to NYJO leader Bill Ashton
(*Melody Maker* 15 June 1968).

West Midlands saxophonist Nick Pentelow noted how the roots of the NYJO extended into the West Midlands with Ashton, assisted by regional music promoter Hugh Robertson, bringing the Orchestra to the Midlands Art Centre (MAC) in Birmingham for a performance and workshop in August 1967.

In September 1968 the newly formed Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra, under the leadership of trumpeter and musical arranger Dennis Darlow performed at a festival at the MAC alongside early incarnations of bands led by Graham Collier and Mike Westbrook.

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Figure 2: MAC Jazz and Blues Festival Poster 1968
(Nick Pentelow archive).

Lasting only a few months, the Orchestra ceased performing as Darlow became busier. He had been performing with his own group The Pentagon Jazz Unit and undertaking other projects including music copying and acting as music librarian at the BBC for the Midland Radio Orchestra.

The
Pentagon Jazz Unit



BILL LOWE
Alto-Baritone Sax's



DENNIS DARLOW
Trumpet



JOHN HOLMES
Piano



LAURIE WARD
Bass



TONY LEVIN
Drums



Sax player Bill Lowe and trumpet player Dennis Darlow, members of the popular Pentagon Jazz Unit.

Figure 3: MYJO's first MD Dennis Darlow
(*Evening Despatch*, 25 April 1959).

Trumpeter Mike Beaumont was an original band member and in a personal interview via Zoom explained the revival of the band:

I think it was May 1970 that the current Orchestra, I would say, formed, because the old one wasn't really formed...So it was a brand-new Orchestra. The only thing in common was that I had the library of about twenty pieces of music.

Mentors

The oral tradition of passing musical knowledge down generations provided invaluable opportunities for youngsters joining MYJO to experience jazz performance and improvisation. The West Midlands region of Walsall was fortunate to have a rich source of peripatetic music teachers who shared a passion for their subject and a belief that children should learn both to play and appreciate music. Trumpeter Roger Siviter worked in both the jazz and big band idioms in the West Midlands and beyond, perhaps most notably with the Ivor and Basil Kirchin Band alongside Johnny Patrick. Several Orchestra members recalled the impact that Siviter had upon them. Saxophonist Sharon Brown joined MYJO at the age of fifteen in 1975 and remembered that a lot of the music students at her school, Joseph Leckie Secondary in Walsall, joined MYJO because of Siviter's involvement. Brown commended the school music department and felt that music was a valued part of the curriculum.

Fellow saxophonist Charlie Wright joined the MYJO organisation in 1973. He took up music whilst a pupil at Barr Beacon Comprehensive School. In the absence of a saxophone teacher, he taught himself and was later encouraged to go along to MYJO rehearsals at MAC where he met other musicians from schools around Birmingham and especially Walsall. In a personal interview via Zoom he remembered Mike Lennon, who was leader of the MYJO second band, being particularly helpful. He was: "A really, really, lovely guy and hugely patient and took us through the nursery slopes of playing arrangements and getting some sort of band out of it. A prodigious, selfless effort really".

Wright remembered a Summer School which was arranged by Mike Beaumont, leader of the MYJO first band, which took place at MAC where a group of the local jazz influenced professional musicians who had teaching experience were enlisted to do classes. Again, the importance of peripatetic teaching is stressed by Wright who cites Joseph Leckie School and Queen Mary's High School "who had some really fine peripatetic teachers" and which Wright saw as good grounding and offering an alternative to straight classical music and a good way of learning in safe environments. He saw teachers such as John Hughes (who was Musical Director of the Walsall Youth Jazz Orchestra, which was initially known as the Queen Mary's High School Band), Alf Gregory and Roger Siviter, as putting a lot of effort into these learning situations.

Drummer Pete Cater became aware of MYJO when they played a concert at his school, Bishop Vesey's Grammar School in Sutton Coldfield around 1976 or 1977 and in a personal interview via Zoom recalled: "What was very interesting to me was to find out that there were other young people who felt the same way about music as I did".

Cater's father was a musician and Pete was already playing with musicians of his father's generation. After the concert he spoke to MD Mike Beaumont who encouraged him to go to a rehearsal and have a play "and that was kind of it". Cater's early musical experience was gained playing on gigs with his father where he became familiar with much of the music that he was later to play in MYJO.

Trombonist Mark Nightingale remembered that a peripatetic brass teacher came to his school, Ridgeway Middle School, Astwood Bank, in Redditch for two days per week and this encouraged him to take up the trombone. Lessons followed at school and privately with Fred Mercer. Mercer was a veteran of the British dance band scene, having played with Vic Lewis. He had many stories about his previous exploits as a musician and Nightingale got the jazz bug from him. In a further interview via Zoom, Nightingale remembered: "I thought that he was absolutely everything that a teacher should be, and I was going to try and do whatever he suggested. He talked about MYJO and that was when I decided that I was going to give that a go".

This was around 1979 and Nightingale was eleven or twelve years old. Another mentor was trombone-player Clive Allsopp who ran improvisation workshops also at MAC and Nightingale recalled that "Clive gently encouraged all the newbies to have a go and there was no looking back after that".



Figure 4: MYJO performing at the Arena Theatre, MAC 1970 (Mike Beaumont Archive).

MYJO's first public appearance under Mike Beaumont's leadership took place at the outdoor theatre at MAC on 31 August 1970. The Orchestra honed their skills in regular rehearsals, and public concerts, subsequently recording a series of albums documenting their work. Their first album from 1973 included guest appearances by regional professional musicians. Further albums featured the likes of trumpeter Kenny Baker and saxophonist John Dankworth.



Figure 5: MYJO win best band award at MUBB Contest
(*Burton Observer and Chronicle* 3 November 1978)

Diversity

Looking back to the early days of the London Youth Jazz Orchestra in the late 1960s, saxophonist Alan Wakeman recalled refugees from South Africa joining the band including drummer Selwyn Lissack and bass player Cecil Ferrer, both white South Africans. Ferrer was required to black up to be able to play with the black musicians in Johannesburg.

At the same time in the West Midlands, saxophonist Jan Steele, who was a founder member of MYJO under Denis Darlow's leadership, in a personal interview on Zoom recollected:

It was 100% white, 100% male and I do remember that girl-friends used to come along and sit and listen or do their knitting. I always thought it was ridiculous at the time. I did not understand why there were no girls in the Orchestra.

This contradicts a contemporary newspaper piece from 1968 indicating that there were in fact two female band members.

The Zoom interview with former MYJO saxophonist Charlie Wright reveals that some five years later the mix was “possibly 70% male and 30% female.” In terms of racial diversity,

It was 90% to 95% white. There were very few black or coloured guys coming through. There were a handful. A little while later after me a few came through from under the auspices of Andy Hamilton to some extent. Some of his family came through the band and people who had been helped or inspired by him. But it was *stupidly* 90% white, easy, I would have said.

Pete Cater remembers:

To have been around music in the West Midlands at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s in that way was a forward-looking time because in the world of pop music there was all the great 2-Tone stuff that was going on with bands like ‘The Specials’ and ‘The Selector’ and ‘The Beat’ and ‘UB-40’ and quite a number of others where nobody gave a damn about what colour you were...and people were just making music together for a sense of common purpose and that was equally representative of MYJO where there were a number of people of a BAME background, male and female and nobody cared. Nobody was looking at that then. It was just about the music and getting together and playing together and finding common ground that way.

By the early 1970s Mike Beaumont “couldn’t care less” about gender balance and welcomed anyone who wanted to come along and play regardless of gender and race. Reasons given for the gender imbalance included the perception that females would not be attracted to the competitive, sometimes macho environment and the fear of risk-taking in terms of the act of improvisation.

However, from the data that I have collected clearly both males and females felt equal trepidation when taking their first improvised solos. Nonetheless, the ensuing years saw an increase in the number of females joining the Orchestra.

Saxophonist Julian Arguelles joined the MYJO organisation in 1976 and quickly worked his way into the first band and shortly thereafter the National Youth Jazz Orchestra. Around this time, he also played with John Hughes’ Walsall Youth Jazz Orchestra and whilst he acknowledges that this was not necessarily the best of the bands, he enjoyed working in the ensemble more. This was partly due to their more contemporary ‘European’ repertoire. In an interview via Zoom, in Arguelles’ opinion

I would say, and I’ve got to say it was less macho than the other bands, which is a thing, especially back then in the jazz scene. There were mostly men in the bands and there

was a certain competitive thing, but there was also a certain macho thing about it...But the Walsall Youth Jazz Orchestra, approximately 50% of the band were female.

A Birmingham Post newspaper feature in 1980 in the Women's Post section makes no specific reference to the girls in the Orchestra yet the accompanying image places them front and centre of the shot and towards the rear there is a sole male of ethnic origin.



Figure 6: Into the 1980s (*The Birmingham Post* 20 May 1980).

Conclusions

Although they would have been welcomed, relatively few musicians of colour joined MYJO. One participant suggested that this was because they had their own music scenes and had little interest in the music that the Orchestra played.

It is often claimed that women in jazz are frequently vocalists with female instrumentalists being uncommon. This statement is not as true as it once was. There is however still a gender imbalance in the jazz and improvised music scene. A promoter may assert that there aren't enough female artists to achieve balanced programming. Promoters only want to book the best acts and it's their music not their gender that matters. They pass the responsibility to the conservatoires who can only work with the applications they receive, and they only accept the best applicants and won't offer places to less deserving people just because they are women. Is it an issue for the schools to address? How can they encourage girls to take up instruments and feel an enthusiasm for jazz when conservatoires, promoters and venues are not perceived as welcoming environments or somewhere where they can flourish?

Youth jazz education seeks to address the gender imbalance observed at higher education level and possibly beyond and to prepare young musicians with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in these environments.

Mark Nightingale maintained that by the early 1980s "there were quite a few girls in the band" and remembered Jamaican saxophonist Andy Hamilton's son Grahame playing lead trumpet with the band. "Thinking about it now, there was an element of diversity, but I don't think it was probably truly reflective of society in Birmingham at the time".

SHOW PAGE . . .

'A kind of madness'

A Walsall jazz enthusiast has given up blowing his own trumpet. Instead, he has found a whole orchestra to do it



for him — and the result has been a resounding success.

Mike Beaumont of Bodmin Rise, Park Hall, is the musical director and conductor of the Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra.

He has played the trumpet himself since he was at school but finds little time for it now.

For apart from directing and conducting the Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra, he also writes their musical arrangements, broadcasts his own weekly jazz programme, carries out a full time job as a college lecturer in Sutton Coldfield — and still finds time to be with his wife Carol and their eight years - old daughter.

"It does get a bit hectic at times," confesses Mike.

"That's why I had to give up playing the trumpet so much.

"Now I concentrate more on the arranging because at least that's one thing I can do while I'm at home with the family."

To say that Mike is mildly interested in jazz would be an understatement.

"I think it's a kind of madness," he says.

"I sometimes wonder why I do it.

"But when the band's playing well I really enjoy doing it and get a great deal out of it.

The Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra has been going from strength to strength since Mike first helped form it 10 years ago.

It is now generally held to be one of the best of its kind in the country and has just won the junior section of BBC Radio's National Rehearsal Band Competition, 1979 - 80.

And on February 10 the orchestra goes to London to record for Alan Dell's Radio 2 programme 'Sounds Easy.'

Many of its members come from the Walsall area and half of the award winning band came from the town.

"In fact there are more Walsall people in the orchestra than there are from anywhere else," says Mike.

"The thing is that musical education in Birmingham is mostly geared towards the classical, whereas Walsall schools tend to have a very wide ranging musical policy.

"For example at one time we could have fielded a full band from Joseph Leckie School and we still get a lot of people from there.

"And a lot of our members also play with the Walsall Youth Jazz Orchestra."

It seems that Walsall's jazz record is one to be proud of.

The trumpet lies to one side as jazz band leader Mike Beaumont turns his hand to the writing of music rather than the playing of it.

Figure 7: MYJO's second leader Mike Beaumont (*Walsall Observer* 11 January 1980).

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Family Mail

EVENING MAIL, SATURDAY, JULY 21, 1979

MYJO — big bold sound for 1980



THE BIG BRASS sound of the Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra.

Report: ROLAND SMITH

Pictures: NEIL DONALD

ONE LOOK ALONG the angelic faces in the line-up of the Midland Youth Jazz Orchestra will make you doubt the description of "the devil's music."

Jazz used to be a slightly seedy branch of modern music, played in smoke-filled cellars where stronger spirits than this band's Cokes were thought a very necessary part of the training.

But this youthful Birmingham-based combination — average age 19 — is slowly but steadily proving all that wrong.

In the initial-orientated world of jazz, MYJO is breaking new ground and confounding the old clichés.

What the band lacks in years, it makes up in musical polish and perfection, thanks largely to the guiding skills of its director, Mike Beaumont. To watch the band in rehearsal is to see a perfectionist at work. And it's a policy which has certainly paid off, with the youngsters currently holding the Midland Musicians' Union Big Band Award, won in the face of

much more mature opposition and playing with such great names as Johnny Dankworth, Don Lusher, George Chisholm and Kenny Baker.

The 20-piece line-up is obviously well-equipped for the bold, brassy "big band" sound. But you won't hear any Glenn Miller stuff here.

Mike Beaumont, a lecturer in graphic design at Sutton Coldfield, explains: "Of course we get people coming up and saying "Can you play *Sirring of Pearls*?"

"But we don't go in for nostalgia with this band. Glenn Miller was recording 40 years ago and he had something new to say then."

"We are playing for the 1980s, and the only Miller number we do is a sort of *sax* on his style."

No "Myjo" as they like to be known, concentrate on the newest of the big band sounds, playing arrangements by people like Toshiko Aoyash, Dankworth and Buddy Rich.

Many of the arrangements are

by Beaumont or other members of the band themselves. While it was there, they tried out a new arrangement by a 19-year-old member for the first time and Mike Beaumont was quick to apologise for the standard. "It's the first time we've tried it," he confessed.

Rehearsal at the Midlands Arts Centre in Cannon Hill Park was more than a little fraught the night I caught them. It was a hot, summer evening, and the atmosphere in the small, ground floor rehearsal room was steaming.

But the rehearsal clashed with an open-air performance of Ben Jonhson's "Bartholomew Fair" by Birmingham University's Drama Group and it was punctuated by distraught Neil Gwynne-type figures bursting in in full costume appealing for quiet.

The young band members took it all in good part, with the comedy duo in the trumpet section

— Andy Redfern and Steve King

— managing to control themselves with some difficulty.

Playing alongside them was pretty red-head Kaye Henderson from Walsall, who was obviously enjoying every minute. But, as she explained, her enrolment to MYJO nearly two years ago was something of a disappointment to her classically-inspired parents.

"My Mum and Dad were both a bit horrified when I joined the band, but I think they're getting used to it now," said 18-year-old Kaye.

Kaye like most of the other members of the senior band, graduated through the junior and intermediate bands to reach the number one spot.

And, like many others, she was encouraged to take up jazz by a teacher at school, after a visit by Mike Beaumont and the band.

The three-tier structure of MYJO is a deliberate and successful policy which encourages young players to work their way

through to the top. Once they get there, there is a pretty fast turnover as many turn professional and are snapped up by other, adult bands.

All of which makes the High standards which have been reached all the more incredible. Band manager, John Killoch, an Aston policeman, told me they had a standing invitation to appear at the prestigious Reno Jazz Festival in the States.

Later this month they are appearing at the Live Music Show at Olympia along with bands like Dankworth and George Fams.

"We want to get away from the 'old and dead', which we often hear because our members are so young," said John.

"They are a wholesome bunch of kids, but they are also mature musicians playing creative music."



MIKE BEAUMONT directs his youthful line-up. "We don't go in for nostalgia, we play for the 1980s."



ANDY REDFERN, at 23, a MYJO veteran. When you gotta blow you gotta blow . . .



KAYE HENDERSON enjoying the freedom of big band jazz.



CHARLIE WRIGHT, founder member of the junior orchestra, now in the senior band.

Figure 8: The dawn of the 1980s (*Evening Mail* 21 July 1979).

Whilst this study ends in the early 1980s the MYJO continues to go from strength-to-strength and has recently celebrated its Covid-delayed 50th Anniversary.



Figure 9: MYJO performing at the Arena Theatre, MAC, 1980 (Mike Beaumont Archive).

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