

# Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival – the early years

The Edinburgh Jazz Festival (EJF) was founded by Edinburgh jazz musician Mike Hart. In 1978, Hart had made a trip to California to study the setting up and running of the Sacramento Jazz Festival, later the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee. On his return, Hart ran a small event as a 'trial run' over 3 days, in Stewart's Ballroom in Abbeyhill, in the summer of 1978. The following year, EJF was sponsored by Drybrough's Brewery, driven by a Board of Directors and produced a printed programme. The festival included many Scottish bands and three guest attractions from Newcastle and France, and the Oregon Jazz Band led by Bill Borchert who had founded the Sacramento Jazz Festival – 18 bands in total. There was an opening 'Festival Jazz Ball', a free pub-based 'jazz trail' and a couple of paying venues. The event included evening and lunchtime sessions and ran over five days in August.

In 1980, 'International' was included in the title (EIJF). The event again ran over 5 days, with the same sponsor and featured 21 bands and five soloists from six countries. It also was said to have stylistically 'broadened its wings' but continued to emphasise 'hot traditional jazz'. The programme included BBC broadcasts from the George Hotel sessions, a 'jazz bus' provided free inter-venue transport, EIJF T-shirts were for sale and a 1980 EIJF LP recording was produced for sale the following year. The headline star of this festival was the veteran reeds player from the USA, Benny Waters. Much the same pattern was presented in 1981 when a number of awards including a Youth Jazz Band trophy were introduced to proceedings. 1981's edition concluded with a 'Grand Farewell Ball' which culminated in the 'Great Breakfast Jam Session' at 4.30am.

In 1982 and 1983 the festival expanded to feature performers from many more countries and solo guests, including performers of the calibre of the great pianist, Teddy Wilson. A tradition had been established of beginning the EIJF with a grand parade along Princes Street featuring bands and individuals playing on the back of highly decorated lorries. 1983 saw the end of Drybrough's sponsorship who were succeeded by Scottish Brewers. From 1984 the festival was to carry one of their brand names, 'the McEwan's EIJF'. The free pub trail continued but now in Scottish Brewers' premises across the city. Each of the first six years had seen an impressive increase in ambition, presentation and quality, notably in the international aspect of the programmes. The policy of featuring renowned individual guests with more local bands had been particularly effective and, equally, that of bringing in fine players who were not necessarily household names. Critics in the media began to sit up and take notice, praising the wider stylistic policy.

In the mid-1980s there was a move towards including more modern and contemporary forms of jazz and performers with a more general appeal, such as Van Morrison and Georgie Fame. There was also an influx of younger performers who played in a pre-Bebop style, such as sax player Scott Hamilton and trumpeter/cornetist Warren Vaché. However, a good number of older pre-Bebop musicians such as Buddy Tate, Milt Hinton and Doc Cheatham were featured and would continue to enhance the EIJF throughout the late 1980s. 1984 paid tribute to the late Count Basie. Similar tributes to great players from the past would continue in 1985 with centennial celebrations of Joe 'King' Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton. 1985 also saw the development of the assembling of 'all-star' bands, bringing together compatible solo performers led by an internationally respected visitor.

The 'Festival All Stars' for the 1985 opening Ball comprised Buddy Tate (ten sax), Spanky Davis (tpt), Carl Fontana (tbn), Ray Bryant (pno), Al Casey (gtr), Milt Hinton (bs) and Gus Johnson (drms), a line-up that would have graced any jazz event across the world. The 1985 programme featured 33 bands, excluding all star presentations. The closing event, 'Hot and Suite', was staged in the city's Usher Hall in collaboration with the Edinburgh International Festival.

By 1986 there were 37 bands on the bill and an increased number of 'paying venues', seven being 'Gold Star' venues for which tickets were required. The free pub trail continued in 13 venues. There was again a star-studded Opening Ball with a flavour of the classic Count Basie Band featuring Harry 'Sweets' Edison (tpt), Al Grey (tbn) and Buddy Tate (ten sax) with the same stellar rhythm section as in 1986. The closing event, 'Golden Age of Jazz', was again held in the Usher Hall and presented by the distinguished American pianist Dick Hyman. In 1987 there was a tribute concert to Benny Goodman who had died in 1986 and the advent of two major new venues: a 1000 capacity 'Jazz Big Top' in the Meadows and the 'Jazz Amphitheatre' on Lothian Road. The EIJF was now staged over eight days. The acceleration in stylistic expansion was again hailed by the critics, with 1987 being described as 'the ninth in an increasingly impressive series'.

In 1988 more than 400 individual musicians were on the bill, presented in 23 venues, under the continuing sponsorship of McEwans. A 'Hall of Fame' was introduced, the printed programme showing that 294 bands and featured soloists had appeared since 1979. The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert in the Usher Hall marked a tribute to Woody Herman and included the NY Jazz Orchestra and musicians such as Warren Vaché, Scott Hamilton, Dave McKenna and Jake Hannah, and the Harlem Blues and Jazz Band with Doc Cheatham.

In 1989 the bicentennial of the French Revolution was marked through the programming of a number of French musicians including the Claude Bolling Big Band and tenor saxophonist Guy Lafitte. Having celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary the previous year, the festival was now firmly established in promoting international jazz musicians and bands alongside a burgeoning younger generation of homegrown talents, including saxophonists Tommy Smith and John Burgess, pianist Brian Kellock, bassist Brian Shiels and drummer Tom Bancroft, alongside national stalwarts such as vocalist Fiona Duncan, bassist Ronnie Rae Snr and pianist Alex Shaw. By now, the festival also included a two-day Blues festival in its programme.

1992 heralded a new-look larger format brochure and a break with major sponsors Scottish and Newcastle Breweries, replaced by Lothian Regional Council. Under the continued leadership of Mike Hart with a tirelessly industrious production team, the festival included in its line-up the musicians at the vanguard of the new London scene, including the Mondesir brothers (drums and bass), vibes-player Orphy Robinson, and saxophonist Andy Sheppard, alongside stellar international acts including guitarist Pat Metheny and bassist Dave Holland. 1993's headliners were piano legend George Shearing, the Michael Nyman Band, and the Ted Heath Band. Scottish and Newcastle Breweries returned as joint-main sponsors with Lothian Regional Council in 1995. The festival's headline act was Van Morrison with the BBC Big Band, reflecting a trend that could be seen in other international jazz festivals to programme big-name acts with cross-over appeal. 1995 also marked the year that festival director, Mike Hart was awarded an MBE for services to music.

# Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival – a new identity

Rebranded as Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival, the 1996 edition introduced the newly formed Scottish National Jazz Orchestra under the leadership of Edinburgh-born saxophonist Tommy Smith and included a number of festival-related educational events. In 1997, the jazz festival became co-promoted with Edinburgh-based jazz promoters, Assembly Direct. The artist roster this year included an emerging generation of jazz greats including guitarist John Scofield and saxophonist Courtney Pine, and the following year headliners included the household names, B.B. King and Diana Krall. The now sadly-missed venue, Café Graffiti was included in the festival programme, giving a platform to the jazz underground by featuring DJ sets and performances by the cutting edge of the period's younger generation. Sponsorship during the decade of the 1990s came from a range of contributors alongside stalwarts Scottish and Newcastle Breweries. These included The Scotsman Newspaper, Lothian Regional Council, City of Edinburgh Council, Bank of Scotland, KLM airlines, Great North Eastern Railway, Lothian Regional Transport and others. Through its association with promoters Assembly Direct, the festival staged over 100 concerts annually by the end of the decade.

By the early 2000s, the festival had to a degree reinvented itself, presenting new talent at the vanguard of international jazz while still paying respect to the music's founding fathers through the inclusion of musicians of older generations. The 25th anniversary of the EIJBF and the important part played over the years by the City's stalwart traditional bands was recognised by the 2003 'Silver Jubilee of traditional jazz' concert in the Queen's Hall. Young Scottish artists that appeared regularly on the festival bill included saxophonist Laura MacDonald, guitarist Kevin Mackenzie, trumpeter Colin Steele, saxophonist Martin Kershaw, drummer John Rae and the Bancroft brothers (saxophone and drums). During this period, the legendary New York vocalist Sheila Jordan made several memorable visits to the festival. Starbucks Coffee briefly became main sponsors in the years 2004 to 2006 during which time the festival foregrounded the new wave of Nordic musicians including Esbjorn Svensson Trio, Silje Nergaard, Tord Gustavsen, Petter Wettre and others.

In the year following the its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2008, the festival was the beneficiary of Scottish Government Expo Funding, allowing it to showcase the country's now vibrant jazz scene that included musicians such as saxophonists Konrad Wiszniewski, Phil Bancroft and Tommy Smith, drummer Stu Brown, vocalist Tam White, trumpeter Colin Steele, and in subsequent years, saxophonist Laura MacDonald, drummer Tom Bancroft, guitarist Haftor Medbøe, pianist Tom Gibbs and bassist Mario Caribé alongside an impressive international roster. Scottish Government Expo funding also saw the formation of the Edinburgh Jazz Festival Orchestra, presenting a number of themed performances during this period. The place of jazz from Scotland on the world stage was cemented in 2012 with the first ever Scottish jazz musician to appear on the festival's programme cover – saxophonist Konrad Wiszniewski.

2013 saw the festival reach out beyond the capital city's borders with a series of special performances staged in Stirling, Dunfermline, Linlithgow, Haddington and Peebles. The programme continued to celebrate the breadth of jazz through the presentation of artists as diverse as Snarky Puppy, Stan Tracey, Tia Fuller, Darius Brubeck, and festival regular, Chris Barber.

# Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival: a cultural gem

From modest beginnings as a free to attend 'grass-roots' happening, Edinburgh's jazz festival has grown in scope and stature to celebrate the best in international and home-grown jazz. As the UK's largest independently run jazz festival, the festival holds its own within the offering of international festivals across Europe. Over its 40 year span, audience numbers have increased exponentially to in the region of 60,000 attendees annually at the festival's ticketed and free events. Through its association with Edinburgh Napier University, the festival has brought jazz education to young and old musicians for more than 20 years and has launched and supported the careers of many of the country's current jazz stars, and inspired musicians and audiences alike through its presentation of the finest in jazz from around the world.



## Exhibition Credits:

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