

**Mike Hart MBE, born Inverness 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1934, died Edinburgh 11<sup>th</sup> December 2018 – jazz musician and founder of the Edinburgh International Jazz and Blues Festival – an appreciation**

The death of Mike Hart at the age of 84 brings to an end a career in jazz that spanned more than 60 years. Mike was born in Inverness but at an early age moved with his family to Edinburgh, where he was educated at the Royal High School. The school would become well known in jazz because of the extraordinary number of jazz musicians it produced, the group becoming known as the 'Royal High School Gang'.

An early interest in jazz, inspired by the 1940s world wide revival of interest in the jazz of the 1920/30s, led to him taking up the drums and by 1949, still in his mid-teens, he was playing in a local band, Gavin's Gloryland Jazz Band, led by trumpeter Jimmy Gavin. Edinburgh was already a flourishing centre for revivalist jazz and, one night in the West End Cafe, a thriving jazz venue in the centre of Edinburgh, Mike was approached by the formidable figure of Sandy Brown. Sandy was already a band leader and was to go on to be one of the finest jazz clarinetists that the UK ever produced. Mike was astonished to find himself being invited to sit in with the Brown band, even then an impressive organisation featuring the trumpet of Al Fairweather and the piano of Stan Greig, both of whom would go on to establish international reputations not far below that of Sandy Brown. Mike recalled that he *'nearly fell over but immediately accepted'* and he was to go on to play a number of gigs with Sandy over the years. Mike would often say how much he was influenced in his subsequent jazz career by his early association with Sandy, Al and Stan. With the Brown band, Mike made a trip to London in 1952 when they played several gigs, including the 'Big Jazz Show' at the Royal Albert Hall.

Following his National Service in the RAF in 1952/54, Mike returned to Edinburgh to find a burgeoning jazz scene. He had by now taken up the banjo and it was on this instrument that he joined the band of trumpeter Charlie McNair. It was soon clear that the young Hart was an enterprising and ambitious individual who wanted to make things happen and he was soon setting up a band of his own. This was 'Mike Hart's Blue Blowers' and by 1956 he was playing a leading part in founding one of Edinburgh's longest serving bands, the New Orleans styled 'Climax Jazz Band', with which Mike made his first recordings. This band included players such as cornet player Jim Petrie, bass player Jim Young and drummer Kenny Milne, who would all have long and successful playing careers.

At the end of the 1950s, Mike again played a founding role, this time with trombonist Archie Sinclair, in the formation of another successful Edinburgh jazz band, 'Old Bailey and his Jazz Advocates'. In the middle 1960s, Mike was yet again to play a key role, this time in the formation of the 'New Society Syncopators', later to become 'Mike Hart's Scottish Society Syncopators'. Mike was to lead this band on tour abroad on many occasions, broadcast, make many recordings and with them be awarded the title 'European Amateur Jazz Champions 1979' at the Dunkirk Jazz Festival. This band featured some outstanding jazz musicians over the years, including clarinetist Dave Paxton, pianist Tom Finlay and trombonist Johnny McGuff. Mike was also a key member and joint leader of the 'Scottish Jazz Advocates', who also toured abroad, broadcast and became 'European Amateur Jazz Champions 1980' at Dunkirk.

However, it was in the late 1970s that he made the move that would establish him as a major force in a wider jazz world. In 1978, he travelled to the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee in California, intent on finding out just how a major jazz festival was put together. By the end of that year, he had organised a 3 day jazz event in a single venue in Edinburgh. A year later, having attracted sponsorship funding and arranged an impressive programme, this had grown to be the first Edinburgh Jazz Festival, featuring a mix of Scottish jazz and guests from elsewhere. In 1980, International was added to the title, to become the Edinburgh International Jazz Festival. Not the least of the festival's benefits was that, in 1983, spurred on by the festival, Edinburgh was offering 49 weekly jazz gigs, most of them free entry. By the end of its first decade, internationally renowned jazz musicians of the calibre of Buddy Tate, Teddy Wilson, Carl Fontana, Milt Hinton, Doc Cheatham, Harry 'Sweets' Edison and many more had appeared. The mid-1980s brought a move to include some of the more modern and contemporary forms of jazz. Later the festival became a charitable limited company, Mike took on the role of Artistic Director, 'All Star' bands and tribute concerts to the likes of Count Basie and Benny Goodman had taken place and specially commissioned suites in collaboration with the Edinburgh Festival had been presented in the Usher Hall. The open air 'Jazz on a Summer's Day', in Princes Street Gardens in the heart of the city, attracted the largest jazz crowd in the UK.

Eventually, after many years of tireless work and spectacular success, Mike was able to move to a less demanding role as Founding Director. Today, entitled the Edinburgh International Jazz and Blues Festival (EIJBF), Mike's creation is one the biggest events in the jazz calendar and continues to go from strength to strength.

In 1995 Mike's work for jazz in Scotland was recognised by the award of an MBE in the New Year Honours list. He also received a citation from the City of Sacramento in recognition of his work for jazz.

The sheer scale of the work that Mike put in to the founding and running of the EIJBF was astonishing. Roger Spence, who succeeded Mike as festival producer, has said that, in the early years, the festival ran on Mike's adrenalin. Mike was Artistic Director for 25 years and in the early days ran the ambitious event supported by a team of local volunteers. Mike himself worked in a voluntary capacity until 1989 when the festival became a limited company and Mike became its employed Director. The volume of work that was involved was vast: the programme to be planned, bands and solo attractions to be booked, all star bands and special tribute events to be set up, an army of volunteers arranged to run the festival, ever more sponsorship to be negotiated, broadcasts to be arranged, ruffled feathers to be dealt with and much, much more. Through it all, Mike remained one of the busiest local jazz musicians and took a full playing part in the festival.

This would seem enough for one lifetime but it would be wrong to think that jazz was Mike's sole interest. His daughter has spoken of his other interests including fast cars, deep sea fishing, aeroplanes (he held a pilot's licence), sailing and his family. Mike was twice married, both marriages ending in divorce and leaves behind his 2 children and 3 grandchildren.

Mike Hart would never have claimed to be an innovative or particularly original jazz musician but he was a fine player, both as a member of the rhythm section and in his solo

work. He could be a volatile and demanding individual with whom to work but he had vision, energy, and determination and, when he wanted, a great deal of charm. He was a major influence on Edinburgh jazz for a very long time, a leading figure in some of Edinburgh's best bands and left his mark on jazz at an international level through his creation of the EIJB. Mike deserves enormous credit for the founding of his jazz festival and other jazz initiatives that it inspired; he leaves behind a rich legacy in memories and recordings and a famous jazz event that will be his enduring memorial.

Graham Blamire, December 2018