

Dave Keir – jazz multi-instrumentalist – an appreciation

Born 9th April 1928 in Townhill, near Dunfermline, Died 31st May 2019 in Wareham, Dorset

Dave Keir, who has died at the age of 91 in south west England, was the last of the pioneering jazz generation that established the Edinburgh area as an important and vibrant centre for traditional jazz in the 1940s. His father worked in the dock yard at Rosyth and his mother, who was self taught, introduced the young Dave to music at home by playing hymns and light classics on an old harmonium. When he was about 10 years old, Dave started to play cornet, receiving free tuition from a miner who played with the local miner's brass band and it was not long before he was improvising to his mother's playing. Dave considered this good training for his later move into playing jazz. Later, at secondary school in Dunfermline, he was provided by the music teacher with a bass trombone and a 'teach yourself' manual. Dave taught himself to play this new instrument in 6 weeks and was able to take his place in the school orchestra. Although he was never to find the time to become a good reader of music, Dave was on record as saying that, right from the start, he found improvising, what jazz musicians call 'busking', easy.

In the 1940s, inspired by watching the Bing Crosby film 'The Birth of the Blues', he developed a fancy for playing in a jazz band on clarinet then, during National Service in the RAF, Dave played clarinet and alto saxophone in dance band. On returning to Dunfermline, Dave started a course of study at Edinburgh University and played with local bands in Fife. Moving to lodgings in Edinburgh, he soon discovered the band of Sandy Brown and, after sitting in with the Brown band, by now playing trumpet, he was invited to join them, replacing Stu Eaton. The return of Al Fairweather from National Service brought about a change of roles, with Al taking over on trumpet and Dave switching to trombone. At that time, Sandy Brown was intent on achieving the sound of the Louis Armstrong Hot Five which resulted in him recruiting Bob Craig to play trombone in the style of Kid Ory and Dave, still on trombone, moved over to join the other prominent Edinburgh jazz band of the time, Archie Semple's Dixielanders, led by clarinettist Archie Semple and which would feature Alex Welsh on trumpet. This band played in the style of the white Chicagoans associated with the guitarist Eddie Condon, a style that Dave found much to his taste. Archie Semple, becoming well known as a fine clarinettist, then moved south to join the band led by trumpeter Mick Mulligan and Dave, taking over the leadership of the Semple band, renamed it the Nova Scotians.

Now beginning to make a name of himself in jazz, it was not long before Dave responded to an invitation to play full time, moving to London to join Archie Semple in Mick Mulligan's Magnolia Jazz Band. Dave went on to have a successful career as a professional jazz musician, mostly playing trombone in a number of good bands including that of the trumpeter Freddie Randall. In 1957, Dave visited Russia, playing trombone in the excellent Bruce Turner's Jump Band. He continued to play a variety of instruments when gigging with many other bands, including those of Sid Phillips, Bobby Mickleburgh, Johnny Parker and Ken Colyer's Omega Brass Band, before joining the band led by clarinettist Dick Charlesworth and then setting up a band of his own. However, by 1964 the public enthusiasm for traditional jazz, which had become known as the Trad Boom, was on the wane and Dave returned to Edinburgh to

complete his degree, became a teacher of mathematics and physics and, for the next twenty years or so, hardly played at all. Jazz however had not seen the last of this talented multi-instrumentalist.

The 1980s saw a return to Edinburgh of several prominent figures from the 1940/50s jazz generation including Al Fairweather and the pianist Ralph Laing. The first to return, taking early retirement from teaching, was Dave Keir. Edinburgh was by then experiencing a remarkable upsurge in jazz activity, driven by the success of Mike Hart's Edinburgh International Jazz Festival, at one point out with the jazz festival period hosting an incredible 49 jazz gigs a week, most of them in pubs and free to anyone who dropped in. The return of these high quality, experienced veterans brought a further boost to a burgeoning jazz scene. In the 1980s, Dave was to play with many of the city's top bands including those led by Mike Hart, Frank Birnie and Charlie McNair, as well as being a frequent guest with other bands.

Throughout his professional career, Dave had mostly played trombone and it was this instrument that he played on his return to Edinburgh. However, after a number of years he switched to trumpet and set up a band of his own. This was to be called Dave Keir's Hot Four, although it was occasionally augmented to be the Hot Five, with its original line being Dave on trumpet with Bob Busby clarinet, Jock Westwater banjo and Dizzy Jackson bass. This became a highly respected and popular band which, with a few personnel changes as the years passed, remained Dave's principal musical outlet until he left Edinburgh for the south west of England in 2007. In Dorset, his playing returned to his original roots, playing in the Wareham Town Band until, one day now at an advanced age in 2012, he found himself being left behind as the band marched on into the middle distance!

Although Dave Keir's name, probably because of his origins near Dunfermline and early departure for London, was perhaps less well known in Edinburgh than those of Sandy Brown, Al Fairweather, Alex Welsh, Archie Semple and Stan Grieg, he is a worthy fit amongst those illustrious names. He was a natural, talented musician with a flair for improvisation and an enthusiastic and instinctive feel for jazz. His ability to play several instruments including trombone, trumpet, clarinet, alto saxophone, piano and euphonium was remarkable and he also sang in Stirling Gaelic Choir in his early days. His departure from the Edinburgh jazz scene in 2007 was much regretted by his many admirers and left a large gap in what was now a diminishing traditional jazz scene. Dave Keir was married twice and is survived by his second wife Diane and the 4 children of his first marriage.

Graham Blamire, June 2019