

Jazz in Dundee in the late 1960s

A Memoir by Iain Forbes

I decided to write this personal memoir after realising that I had already written about various aspects of my experience as a jazz enthusiast in Dundee in the 1960s in a number of replies to discussion threads on the All About Jazz (AAJ) bulletin board. I had also written a letter to someone I had known in Dundee when a letter from him appeared in Jazz Journal.

I was born in October 1948. I came to jazz as a teenager because it was, for a while, “top twenty” pop music. Chris Barber’s *Petite Fleur* was a hit single in 1959. Dave Brubeck’s *Take Five* (from the *Time Out* album) was a UK hit single in October 1961 and Brubeck’s *It’s A Raggy Waltz* went even higher early the following year. My friend Iain Ferguson’s father (who was a doctor) had the *Time Out* album and some decent equipment to play it on. Clarinetist Acker Bilk had a few hits in 1960-63 and trumpeter Kenny Ball’s band had hits around 1962-63. Some of these acts undoubtedly appeared on television at the same time, and I remember that Scottish trombonist George Chisholm seemed to appear on TV quite regularly.

At some stage in my (very) early teens and possibly a little younger, I got the *Boys Own Paper*. This monthly magazine was by then on its last legs (it started in the Victorian era and died in 1967) but was making some effort to be up-to-date with articles on science, astronomy and so on. Part of this effort was a column by Rex Harris which I think covered pop music or “records” more generally. However, Rex Harris’s real interest was jazz, although he had a very firm view about what constituted “real” jazz (namely traditional jazz in the New Orleans style).

What all this meant was that jazz was much closer to popular culture than it is today, even though the really popular singles by Barber, Bilk and Ball were pretty watered-down stuff.

My parents did not have a record player. After some strong hints I received a Regentone portable record player at Christmas 1962, when I was already 14. The four singles that came with it (i.e. chosen by my parents) included no jazz, although I did go out and buy Acker Bilk’s *A Taste of Honey* which was in the charts at the time.

I think I would describe my musical taste at the time as fluid, including chart records, classical music (my father had played first violin in the Dundee Orchestral Society), songs from the shows and so on. It has to be remembered that this was a time when music on the radio meant the BBC Light Programme, which carried a range of music from light classics to pop music, often through request shows like *Housewife’s Choice*, *Two Way Family Favourites* and *Children’s Favourites*.

Not every teenager had a record player, and in some households the ability to play records came via the medium of the parental radiogram and the records the parents had chosen to buy. When I was given my record player, neighbours lent my parents a few albums. The ones that made the biggest impression on me were Frank Sinatra’s *Come Fly With Me* (still a favourite!) and an album by the American satirist/pianist Tom Lehrer which my parents hated.

To illustrate my fluid taste at the time, the first vinyl LPs I bought were Dvorak's *New World Symphony* and a selection of songs from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. These were on a cheap label, which cost 10 shillings or 50p. Inflation between 1963 and 2016 has run at nearly 20 times, so these "cheap" records cost the equivalent of £10 today. A standard full-price LP cost £1 12s 6d (or £32.50 today) for about 35 minutes of music. A pop single cost 6/3 (six shillings and three pence) or over £6 today. At the age of 14 my pocket money barely covered the cost of a single, and I wouldn't have money for anything else, so I didn't buy too many.

I'm not clear about exactly how my tastes started to focus on jazz, but it definitely happened over the course of 1963. After getting my record player I started buying *The Gramophone* monthly magazine. As well as carrying reviews of classical and spoken word records, in those days it also covered hi-fi and had a section of jazz reviews. 1963 was the year the Beatles became massively popular, trailing a number of other groups in their wake, but I didn't buy any Beatles records, and indeed didn't until the 1970s when I bought a few singles because I was doing some (very) minor DJ-ing.

However, during the course of 1963 I did acquire my first jazz LP, Louis Armstrong's *New Orleans Nights*, on a mid-price label (around £20 today). This choice was almost certainly influenced by a review in *The Gramophone*. I also started to buy the occasional EP (a 45 rpm vinyl record the same size as a single but with double the playing time). These included a couple by Dave Brubeck (including *Take Five*) and an EP taken from *Come Fly With Me*. My next jazz LP – bought in 1963 or early 64 and showing a development of my musical taste to include "modern" jazz – was Cannonball Adderley's *Still Talkin' To Ya*, which I discovered much later was a mid-price reissue of *Presenting Cannonball Adderley*.

My tastes were clearly being influenced by the reviews I read. Also I had become friends with another boy in my class, Ian Smith, who was also very interested in jazz and who had rather more "modern" tastes, who also influenced what I listened to. We became close friends (I was best man at his wedding) but we lost touch in the 1970s. There was also some jazz on the radio. *Jazz Record Requests* was launched on Radio 3 in December 1964 and became compulsory listening. I started to take *Jazz Journal* on a monthly basis starting in February 1965.

As far as live jazz was concerned, I read in *Take It To The Bridge – Dundee's Rock and Pop History* by Lorraine Wilson that bassist and (later) impresario Andy Lothian Jr. ran a band called the East Coast Jazzmen in the late 50s and early 60s, and that there was a Trad Cafe at the top of Rosefield Street around 1963 which was also home to the Dundee Modern Jazz Club. Musicians who played in the local dance halls would, apparently, go there to "jam". Other sources indicate quite a lot of live "trad" around in the late 50s and early 60s. However, I was a bit too young for all that, and I have no recollection of the Trad Cafe.

There was a boy in my secondary school (Harris Academy) a couple of years ahead of me (at that age it might have well have been 20 years, and I didn't know him). People would say "Ken Hyder's a really good drummer" and you took it with a pinch of salt. However, it was true, and he went on to a musical career in jazz and other types of music.

During 1963/64, the influence of the beat groups became overwhelming, and, as far as I know from my teenage perspective, by the mid 1960s Dundee had become a bit of a jazz desert.

The first live jazz I ever saw was the Malcolm Duncan quartet at the Liberal Rooms at 52 Reform Street (soft drinks sold from a trestle table at the back). I have a membership card that suggests you had to join the “Jazz and Blues Association” which seems to have been based at the Liberal Rooms. I was 16 or 17 and Molly Duncan (tenor) must have been 19 or 20. He went to Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and I later saw him perform a couple of times with Roger Ball (also at Duncan of Jordanstone) on baritone. I got to be on nodding terms with them through my university involvement (see later). Of course, they went on to be part of the massively successful Average White Band. I would have read about the Duncan gig in either the *Courier* or the *Evening Telegraph*, which were the only sources of information about what was going on locally.

In October 1966, I went to St Andrews University (Queen’s College Dundee – which became Dundee University in 1967), living at home. There was no jazz club at the university (certainly in the Dundee part). Whatever had previously existed seemed to have vanished without trace.

In 1967 the Harold Davidson organisation, which promoted jazz concerts nationally, decided to add Dundee to its touring list, and over the course of a few months I saw Duke Ellington, Count Basie, the MJQ, Woody Herman and a mainstream package called Jazz From A Swinging Era at the Caird Hall. Audiences had started to decline and Dundee came off the list again! I have programmes and/or tickets which give the dates of these concerts as follows:

- Duke Ellington Wednesday 15th February 1967
- Jazz from a Swinging Era Tuesday 28th March 1967
- Count Basie Monday 15th May 1967
- Top Brass (Glasgow*) Sunday 8th October 1967
- Modern Jazz Quartet (MJQ) Monday 27th November 1967
- Woody Herman Wednesday 31st January 1968

(*The list includes a concert in Glasgow which I drove to in my newly-acquired 1955 Morris Minor with Ian Smith and Grant Elliot as passengers.)

I have a membership card for the Dundee Jazz Fellowship dated 1967. (What happened to the Jazz and Blues Association?) My recollection of how this came about was that there was an advertisement in the local press calling a public meeting at the Tivoli Cinema. (The “Tiv” was a small independent cinema which showed “continental” films which were either too uncommercial or too rude for general release. It also had a small bar which was useful for meeting girls without much chance of being spotted by your friends.) My recollection is that I attended this meeting – which must have been in the first half of 1967 - with my school friend Ian Smith, and that we met a fellow Dundee University student called Hugh Bache and a young accountant called Grant Elliot (see below). We also met an art college lecturer called (I think) Joe Andrew who played bass, and who was a leading light in the Jazz Fellowship. He may even have been responsible for calling the meeting.

The Jazz Fellowship had its first events in the downstairs bar of a small hotel near the university, but I don't have any documents relating to it except the membership card. My recollection is that they booked more "local" (i.e. Scottish) talent, but I can't remember any details.

The other key event in my personal history was the establishment of a Jazz Club at the newly-created Dundee University, from October 1967. I think Hugh Bache and myself put up a notice in the Students' Union towards the end of the 1966/67 year, to test the waters. Before the new term, I persuaded my mother (who worked in a small office) to duplicate some membership application forms, and I had some membership cards printed by a local printer.

Initially, I was President of the Jazz Club and Ian Smith and Hugh Bache were Secretary and Treasurer (perhaps not that way round). Later I think I was Secretary. Other committee members that I remember at various times included Dave Jackson, who went on to play saxophone with Van der Graaf Generator, Marion Williams, Robert Swan and Ed Newman (who played piano).

I'm slightly vague about the Jazz Club's activities in the 1967/68 session. With a handful of records we started a record library which I ran for an hour each Saturday morning in the Students' union common room. (It fell to me because I could carry the records back and forward in my Morris Minor.) There was a small deposit and a smaller weekly borrowing fee which was used to buy more records. I also remember that Dave Jackson organised a short-lived quartet which played an informal gig/party for us in someone's student house or flat in Broughty Ferry (which had a big front room!).

Shortly after the Jazz Club was established, we were approached by an employee of Andy Lothian's agency, who had formerly been a student (and I think entertainments convenor) at the university. He offered the club the "opportunity" to take over the promotion of a gig at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in which was due to feature the singer Dakota Staton and saxophonist Tubby Hayes. Even to us this seemed a bit odd, and after seeking parental advice, we turned him down. Nevertheless we helped advertise the gig. We turned up on the night to discover that Tubbs was unwell (I wonder who else knew that?) and was being depped by alto saxophone player Pete King (of whom no-one at that time had heard!). This would have been in late 67 or early 68. I never did manage to hear Tubbs before he died.

The first "proper" gig promoted by the Jazz Club was the American singer Jon Hendricks. I have no documentation at all relating to this event, not even a ticket. It would have taken place either in the summer term of 1967/68 or the first term of 1968/69. Hugh Bache had seen Hendricks perform in London (Hendricks lived in Britain for a few years from 1968) and had approached him about performing in Dundee. Hugh made all the arrangements with Hendricks and generously took care of the financial side (in other words he covered any possible losses).

Hendricks travelled with his Musical Director / pianist Larry Vukovich (and their wives), but the club was responsible for finding local musicians to support. Initially we approached Malcolm Duncan and Roger Ball, who declined on the grounds it was beyond them (!), and eventually contact was made with musicians in Glasgow to

play the gig. The only one I remember was tenor sax player Frank Pantrini (who I heard once more about 30 years later at a London gig with Bobby Wellins, who also came from Glasgow). The gig was held in the "Old Dines" hall/bar of the Students' Union, at that time in a building next to the Tower Block on the Nethergate. I have a couple of slides which I took at the gig. Jon and Judith Hendricks were put up overnight by Ian Smith's parents in their council flat!

To demonstrate how naïve we were, the upright piano at Old Dines was kept locked, supposedly to protect it from abuse. On the Saturday afternoon of the gig we got the key from the Students' Union and opened the piano to allow the musicians to rehearse. When Larry Vukovich tried it, not only was it a bit out of tune, but one of the strings was missing! We had absolutely no idea how to contact a piano tuner on a Saturday afternoon (this was before the era of Yellow Pages, and in any case most people didn't have a phone). So the gig had to proceed with the piano as it was. Future gigs which needed a piano were held in College Hall, which had a "proper" (and properly maintained) grand piano, although I remember that the authorities were a bit nervous about allowing the piano to be used for jazz.

Over the next few months the Jazz Club was able to promote gigs by the Rendell-Carr Quintet (Tuesday 28th January 1969), Keith Tippett's sextet with Marc Charig, Nick Evans and Elton Dean (Friday 14th November 1969), the Frank Ricotti Quartet (Thursday 15th January 1970) and John Surman's Trio with Barre Phillips and Stu Martin (Thursday 19th February 1970).

At the time, I think we believed that recorded jazz still had a substantial market. In particular, recordings by British artists would often receive excellent reviews and there would be glossy(ish) advertisements for them in music periodicals. However, it seems that this was not necessarily the case, with some second-hand albums (especially those which were not quickly reissued on CD) later fetching hundreds of pounds on account of their rarity.

I have an anecdote which supports the suggestion that sales could be low. We booked Frank Ricotti's quartet following the release of their album *Our Point of View* and a review having appeared. Someone from the jazz club would have bought the album and recommended the band before we made the booking. In other words, some months would have elapsed between the release of the album and the band's appearance in the northern wilderness.

We had arranged to put the band up after the gig, and a handful of us went back to the accommodation to chat to the band, carry on drinking and so on. The band decided to play cards. The stakes? Their recent first royalty cheque for the album. We were impressed. Surely such a well-reviewed band with a record deal would have sold many thousands of copies. This would be a high-rolling game. Well no, actually. The band explained that the cheque was for 150 copies.

Dundee is a long way from London, and all these gigs had to be arranged by hand-written letter. Occasionally we were able to get one of the other Scottish universities to book the band as well. The musicians were put up in student flats - I'm not sure how clean the sheets were! We always made tickets for these gigs available to the

public. They were sold without commission (except for a free ticket) by a jazz-loving newsagent who had a centrally-located shop (Robertson's in Crichton Street).

Our contacts with other universities (by writing to the jazz club c/o the students' union!) led in particular to contacts with Edinburgh University. There was a quartet there called Jazz Impressions, whose saxophone player was Howard Copland, later of a relatively well-known Scottish fusion band called Head. I'm fairly sure they played a gig for us, and some of them travelled through to Dundee for the John Surman gig.

The other memorable activity of the Jazz Club was to organise a "stunt" (i.e. fund raising event) for the 1969 Dundee Students' Charities Campaign. This was called Jazz-50, the intention being to have 50 hours of continuous jazz and blues in one of the examination halls. There was tea and coffee (for a donation) and of course you could bring your own cans of beer. People with even a passing interest in jazz or blues, who could play any instrument, were scheduled to turn up at various times for a few hours with the intention of letting happen whatever happened musically. Some truly terrible music was produced, but it was a surprisingly successful if minor event, since it provided a space for people to hang out at all the hours (bearing in mind that pubs in Scotland closed at 10 pm and didn't open at all on Sundays). I was told that there was a gap of a couple of hours when no musicians turned up at all (the main organiser - me - had gone off to grab some sleep). And not all the music was terrible. Jazz Impressions turned up unannounced from Edinburgh, an established electric blues group from Perth called Blues Complex agreed to play a set, and one evening some local dance band musicians turned up and played.

Away from the university, and probably around 1969/70, there was Saturday lunchtime trad/mainstream at the Gauger pub on Seagate, led by a one-armed trumpet player.

The final attempt (that I recall) at providing a regular jazz venue in the town was the establishment of Jazz Scene 70, which ran on Sunday lunchtimes at the Queen's Hotel in the Nethergate from April 1970. Alex Sutherland, who was Director of Music for Grampian Television in Aberdeen, used to attend some of the gigs, so perhaps he was one source of contacts for the bands that played there.

I finished university in 1970 and left Dundee in November that year to go and work in Leicester. I can't remember anyone other than those mentioned above promoting any jazz in the area up to the time I left. However, I do know that we couldn't find anyone to take over the running of the University Jazz Club for the 1970/71 academic year and it folded.

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