

The School Jazz Band in the '50s

Michael Perry (1953-1960)

To be quite honest, I don't remember the exact date that the school jazz band came into existence during the Autumn term of 1958. And fifty years on, one's memory starts to play tricks. But I do remember that I was a founder member (which also implies that this account may not be impartial). In the next few paragraphs I hope to sketch briefly aspects of the contemporary pop music environment in the UK which probably drove me and a few colleagues to found the band. I shall also briefly outline what jazz is and then tell you what I remember about the band itself, the players and what we played. The aftermath is less well documented since I lost contact with most of the members shortly after leaving school in July 1960 to go to university.

The early nineteen forties saw the revival in the USA of "traditional jazz" -- music played in the New Orleans style that had been in fashion twenty years earlier. By the early nineteen-fifties the revival had crossed the Atlantic and found footing in the UK where Humphrey Lyttelton, Ken Colyer, and a little later Chris Barber had formed bands. The music caught on and suddenly an avalanche "trad bands" descended on the public. Many of these newly formed bands were made up of semi-professional musicians who viewed their activity as a profitable hobby rather than a prelude to full professionalism. They played the local pubs, clubs and dance halls. Out of the UK jazz scene grew "skiffle groups" -- these were small country and blues groups in which the singers accompanied themselves on instruments like the guitar or the banjo, supported by a variety of kitchen-department contraptions like washboards (scraped with a thimble to produce a rhythm) or an improvised one-string double bass, made out of a wooden box and a broom handle. These groups provided an entry-level apprenticeship for youngsters with a gleam in the eye, whose play-it-by-ear rehearsals drove parents and neighbours to distraction.

Several things distinguish jazz from Western European classical music. One of these is the jazz scale, which contains quarter tones - the slightly flattened third and fifth, not found in Mr. J.S. Bach's well-tempered twelve-semitone chromatic scale. Another is the considerable recourse to improvisation (it's called "extemporisation" when its done by a church organist.) Good conversation is rarely scripted, why then should a score be obligatory for music? To improvise well on a theme, you must have a complete command of your instrument to the point that you feel that it is a living part of you. In addition you must know and understand the underlying musical structure of the tune. Put simply, this is the series of chords which a beginner strums on a guitar to accompany the tune. Successful improvisation by a group requires strict adherence to this baseline otherwise the result will be a horrible noise. Early forms of jazz improvisation, such as that found in New Orleans Jazz were largely based on arpeggios of chords. Nothing wrong in that; compositions of Mozart do the same. And a "walking bass" is just elementary counterpoint. For later forms of jazz, as with other music, both the theory and practice get more complicated.

My first hands-on experience with a G-banjo was at the age of eight. When I was ten, I took lessons on finger style banjo for a while. About the age of sixteen me an' ma banjo joined a skiffle group, led by a classmate, Cecil (Ces) Moseley (guitar/vocals), and we "chord-bashed" to our hearts content. Later, another classmate, John (Mac) McMinn, joined us with a home-made bass (like the one described above). Mac introduced me to blues and jazz; through him I also discovered that Terry Brunt, a friend of Mac, a neighbour of Ces and also a pupil at Moseley Hall, was an aspiring jazz trombonist. The circle continued to grow, to include Jon (Woody) Wood who played clarinet, and Larry Hirst, a guitarist who intended to get a proper double bass (The strings of a bass are tuned in fourths just like the lower four strings of a guitar, so conversion was not difficult.) Thus the idea of forming our own jazz group began grow in the minds of a group of sixth-formers and to gather momentum. It was a fifth-former who turned out to be the catalyst. That was Ian Royle. Ian played trumpet, and by any standards, he was a good musician for his age. His father, himself a professional trumpeter, had taught him to play. Ian could sight-read almost anything you put in front of him and could busk (i.e. improvise) like the best. Out of school, Ian played regularly in a local brass band. The music master had 'snapped him up' for the school orchestra. It also leaked out that when his father had conflicting 'gigs' (engagements), he sent Ian - then only fifteen - to fill in for him. So finally we had a quorum if not a complete line-up.

If my memory serves me right, it was Terry Brunt and Jon Wood who went to ask the Headmaster (Mr. C.F. Armishaw) for permission to establish the band as an official school activity. Terry and Woody were prefects and thus part of the school's 'established order'. They would have more influence than the rest of us who were regarded by the staff as *revolucionarios*. It worked, and we got permission to practice in the music room during lunch times. Now it was **all systems go**. Larry bought a base and Mac, now threatened with under employment, acquired an E-flat alto saxophone and began to learn how to use it.

There are few energy sources that can exceed that of a group of motivated teenagers for proliferation and abundance. We practiced. Some of us were already taking music lessons but there was no one who could teach us how to improvise. (As my [classical] clarinet teacher told me, "I can't teach you to play swing.") So

