



Quattro MacJazz

March 16th 2019

Invited by friends to accompany them to a jazz concert in Ardrishaig public hall, I thought: Jazz – sure I like that music, and am I glad we went! However the last time I heard jazz was many years ago in a cellar club in Krakow of all places, and also jazz marching bands on the streets of Rothesay.

Jazz for me anyway has to be a live music. I have many LP records in the loft from the late 60s when I was an avid teenaged jazz fan, listening to weekly jazz broadcasts on an old wooden-cased radio beside my bed from 14 onwards. I became obsessed by players like John Coltrane and Miles Davis, even avant-garde saxophonists like Albert Ayler. Needless to say I didn't know any other boys at school who were the least interested in this, to them, obscure music, but somehow once you have the jazz and blues bug you never lose it. However, since as I say jazz is ideally live music, I rarely play those old vinyl records, and until this weekend I have not heard a live performance for years.

But wow what a re-union with my favourite music! Quattro MacJazz (or QMJ – its taken me two days to notice the amusing reference to MJQ or the Modern Jazz Quartet familiar in my student days...) is led by Alastair McDonald, a breezy and cheery banjo player who quickly asserted his leadership by announcing the numbers, singing the gospel song vocals, and introducing the three others in the band. The programme is spot on when it says that Alastair brings a show business touch to the band.

Lennie Herd is a trumpet player of steady brilliance whose solos I found delightful right through the concert. The music the band play is what I know as trad jazz, and which they classify as hot jazz, but to players like Lennie and Hamish McGregor on clarinet who performs equally confidently, due to the many years of experience between them all they have an almost telepathic connection to each other, and it would not matter which genre of jazz they played I think they would excel. Their solo playing soars above and beyond the actual tune or melody to transport the jazz fan in a way no other music can do.

The fourth band member is double-bass player Roy Percy (slightly younger, but I don't want to be ageist) and as the programme explains: who needs a drummer to keep time when you have Roy behind you! Not only keeping time alongside Alastair's rhythmic banjo playing, but also soloing in his own right, Roy plays his classic instrument with some unusual techniques in what can only be described as virtuoso bass playing.

While at Aberdeen University preparing for a career in forestry (68-72), for a while I helped some musicians from the Aberdeen School of Art run a jazz club in a small pub in town. With other events in the Dee Motel plus occasional trips to Dundee, I realised that there were many talented jazz players in Scotland. But after that short musical diversion I spent most time on folk music: at least I could play that on tin whistle!

So, with Scots trad jazzmen and Polish jazz cellars, jazz is clearly international, with wonderful players from all sorts of backgrounds who have made this music their life, and that is exactly what we experienced in the Ardrishaig Hall last week. Alastair described the music as toe-tapping, but that is a big under-statement! I heard from others that they have never witnessed the Mid Argyll arts audiences so enthusiastically stamping their feet, clapping and singing along (Won't you come home Bill Bailey!!), and generally having such a good time. Maybe the refreshments on the cafe-style tables helped encourage some of that exuberance, also the players being on the floor not on the stage maybe enhanced the atmosphere.

During the evening Alastair said a little about the origins of both jazz and gospel music being directly from the oppressed slaves and their descendants in southern USA. Their religious faith, their cheerful jazz music and their

soulful blues singing, were lifelines in an otherwise tough and often miserable existence for those people. Jazz fans have an implicit understanding of this fact, though rarely talk about it.

Yet very recently there has been TV coverage on Scotland's role in the British empire and particularly in the shipping and trading aspects of the historic slave trade. There is now a discussion on the need for openness about our roles two centuries ago, and even talk of maybe a museum to slavery being opened in Glasgow, as Liverpool already has. An unexpected connection perhaps between Scotland and its jazz music tradition, but nevertheless a real and moving one.

But no more moving than the wonderful clarinet solo of 'A Stranger on the Shore' by Hamish, more beautiful than the popular recording of the 60's, and which was one of the highlights of this exciting and high quality concert.

Peter Quelch