

## **THE HACKNEY HIGHWIRE JAZZ PROJECT REPORT OF MUSICAL DIRECTOR RICHARD MICHAEL**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Highwire Project was set up with the simple aim of bringing together a group of youngsters with a variety of musical and social experiences and a team of experienced jazz educators, to see what kind of meaningful experience could be enjoyed by all:

In other words, the process of music making was to be examined as it unfolded naturally over a weekend in Hackney...

### **FACILITIES**

Although set in the Highwire Centre, Hackney's showcase multi-media education centre, no use was made of the excellent IT facilities as the focus was on creating live music, with the players responding to each other and not 'tracks' looped on a PC. However, on a longer course, editing other computer facilities could have been used by the students themselves to create a resource for their peer group like the one we have developed on MusicEd.

An area was set aside for socialising and the players were able to chat informally with the adults in charge of the weekend.

### **PERSONNEL**

It was hoped that a band would emerge with a front line of trumpet, sax and trombone with a full rhythm section all able to read with some previous knowledge of improvisation – the reality was somewhat different!

The band comprised:

- 4 keyboard players with limited technical facility
- 1 alto saxophone player approx Grade 2 technique with intonation and tone production problems
- 1 bass player who had difficulty in playing in time
- 1 drummer who found it impossible to vary his loud dynamic
- 1 other drummer with a natural feel for playing but with no idea of any other style than that with which he was comfortable.

Most could play a bit on each other's instruments without having control over one main study.

In other words – a typical gathering which could be found in most schools up and down the country with an age range of 13-15 years.

The tutors were myself and my brother Will, with the valuable help of local tutor Assif who is a professional drummer of high standing.

### **THE PROCESS**

Having heard the players warm up, it was immediately clear that the technical standard was not high and all the youngsters confused musical playing with high volume and thousands of notes (a not uncommon problem!).

The process of teaching would include:

- rhythmical exercises: clapping and stamping (i.e. non-pitched)

- simple melodic exercises using a limited set of notes
- group work with solos
- technical explanation of simple sequences, scales and chords
- how to write and play an interesting bass line
- the performance of written charts and ‘standards’ learned by notation or by ear
- constant encouragement at all times.

Although a complete set of musical examples had been prepared on midi file and bound in a course booklet, only one of the 26 examples was used, as the needs of the group were different from the group envisaged when the project started.

**THE SESSIONS** In the order they occurred:

### **Saturday morning**

**Clapping** The group formed a self-conscious circle and, over a 12 bar blues played by Will, they began to clap on Beat 1 for 4 bars, Beat 2 for 4 bars etc (see ‘Teach Yourself’ section of this site, Part A).

For a group mainly into funk and hip-hop, some found this difficult and were embarrassed at the results. However, slowing down the groove and enlisting the aid of the drummers enabled all the players (in 30-40 minutes) to relax and feel the music, understanding the importance of pulse, or ‘time’ as jazz musicians call it.

They were encouraged to scat a few simple repetitive phrases and to demonstrate through their body language that they were in control.

**Improvising** The players were given a 5 note scale GACDEb known as the altered pentatonic. In turn they began to improvise over a 12 bar blues to a strict formula:

4 bars GAC  
 4 bars CDEb  
 4 bars joining up the scale areas

The problem was that the bass player kept losing the sequence and had difficulty hearing when the chords changed. However, all improvised a solo and were encouraged to enjoy each other’s efforts.

There was no doubt that the basic swing feel of ‘ten, ten to two, ten to two’ was one that none of the group were able to feel with any security so... Example 24 (see ‘Teach Yourself’ section) was tackled, as it used a funk rhythm, two chords and scales.

Chord voicings were taught by rote and the front line of alto sax had a responsible role to play in leading the group. At this point, all players were given the opportunity to count off the band – anyone doing so with a flat monotone voice and looking at the floor was encouraged to count with attitude.

### **Saturday afternoon**

Will began with a simple riff tune that used the same pentatonic scale over four different roots – an easy form to ‘blow’ on. All took solos, though the bass player kept getting confused about where he was in the chord progression. The overall impression, though, was that the group ethic was beginning to grow and that the players were responding to each other.

**Practice** In an effort to sort out the difference between practice and playing, I showed a method of practising scales doubling the tempo while still maintaining the same pulse. Assif showed the importance of rudiments on the drums and his obvious expertise gave the youngsters a new angle on standards. There was a positive feel to packing up and we were assured that all would return the next day.

### **Sunday morning**

They did! Having played ensemble pieces, we thought the time right to look at specific techniques, beginning with the keyboard.

**Keyboard** All players were shown the process of constructing a solo on the 12 bar blues chord sequence. The sequence of learning was as follows:

- all learn a basic LH voicing in G - the G7 chord was G & F following to C & E for the C7 chord, rising to D and F sharp for the D7 chord (a light went on for the bass player!)
- all play a phrase using DEG for 4 bars
- all play a phrase using GABb for 4 bars
- Will and I used call and response to kick start the process – this made all LISTEN and RESPOND

**Interval** At the start of the break we asked that all players stopped playing and reflected on what we had achieved. For 15 minutes they did, but for the last 5 minutes the temptation to slip into old habits was too great!

**Group work** Will started by playing the famous Miles Davis classic funk piece *Jean Pierre*. All were taken by this simple atmospheric piece but they could not maintain the slow pulse required. Assif demonstrated how to play the groove and the younger drummer slipped into it easily. The groundwork had been covered in the keyboard session because the piece uses the same scale as the blues – only in a different key. Cue the need to practice in all keys!

**Lunch** Peace and quiet! A lot of personal interaction took place over lunch. We made a point of asking the players: Are you coping? Are we too slow/fast? What can we show you in the last session?

**Last session: bass line** It emerged that a few wanted to know how to make up a bass line instead of playing the same thing again and again. With Will holding up a concepts chart, I demonstrated on the keyboard and then the bass:

- How to play using roots
- How to play adding fifths
- How to play adding sevenths
- How to play adding passing notes
- How to play adding chromatic lower neighbour tones (very handy to use Stevie Wonder's 'Sir Duke' to demonstrate this).

This was all done on an F7 for simplicity.

**Final thoughts** We thanked the youngsters for their willingness to learn and they responded by asking Will and me to play a few tunes of our own!

## NOTES

**For pupils**      The following points cannot be emphasised enough:

- Listen and respond to each other
- Maintain eye contact with each other and communicate
- Play quietly behind the soloist – and when it is your turn to play solo *play with authority*
- Don't be afraid of criticism – the perfect musician has yet to be born
- Learn all you can from everyone you meet
- Don't become a jazz/indie/funk etc hermit – all kinds of music exist
- Set yourself standards and refuse to depart from them – this is a true test of your character
- Be positive in all you say, play and do – your manner influences others
- Realise you will never 'get there' but all through your musical life you are 'getting there'
- Don't be afraid to show enthusiasm – it is in short supply and much needed
- If you don't enjoy music – stop and give someone else the chance.

**For teachers**      All of the above plus

- Break down everything into manageable chunks
- When something happens that pleases you, show it in your face and body language
- Don't be afraid to criticise (that is different from putting someone down) and have solutions to your criticisms
- Teaching is like driving – you only start to learn when you pass your test
- The ability to think quickly on your feet is invaluable
- Be prepared for all abilities
- Know the transpositions of Bb, Eb instruments to help young players
- Practice harmonising tunes by ear quickly
- Don't be afraid to show your lack of specialist knowledge – you can't know everything.

**For advisers**

- Enlist the help of working pros in your area
- Point young inexperienced teachers in the direction of good role models
- Sell the subject all you can, stressing the obvious social benefits from playing music.