

The promoter as cultural conduit: between jazz and a hard place

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interdependencies and frictions between the creators and the promoters of jazz in the city of Edinburgh, UK.

In providing a platform for the delivery of the cultural message of jazz (in all its many guises), the promoter walks the tightrope between commerce and art, whilst exercising considerable power in deciding which music/musician is presented to the public (and, therefore, which music/musician is not). In balancing many a jazz festival's accounts, populist (often non-jazz or 'jazz-lite') choices are billed to offset smaller audiences for music of a more creative and/or niche focus. The promoter thereby also wields influence over the aesthetic value chains of jazz music, from the nature of music played to its 'window-dressing' through promotional design.

Notions of value and status are present throughout the manifestations of the jazz musician's musical identity, whether in the role of entertainer, craftsman or artist. Jazz promoters similarly operate within a perceived hierarchy, from the professional concert/festival arranger to the amateur enthusiast or restaurant owner. Furthermore, the platforms on which the music is presented are ascribed status, from the rarified splendour of the concert hall down to the mundanity of the lowly wedding-gig.

The jazz musician's professional progression is traditionally non-linear. S/he may be heard in concert-hall, restaurant, bar or function-room – possibly all in the course of a single day. The multi-platform and multi-function nature of the musician's trade presents a problem for the promoter. How is the concert-hall audience convinced into pay for tickets to hear an artist that on-or-around the same date plays for gratis admission in a nearby pub or restaurant?

From the artist's perspective there are, of course, equally significant flaws in the 'laws' of the performance hierarchy: a wedding gig is often more handsomely remunerated than a concert hall or festival recital.

INTRODUCTION

The promoter plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of the social and cultural messages of jazz music to its audience. The local jazz scene is to a large extent defined by the live performance opportunities available to its musicians and, as the intermediary between musician and audience, the promoter thereby has influence in both its shaping and in its sustainability. This paper seeks to examine the interdependencies and frictions between those who create and those who promote jazz music by focusing on the Edinburgh jazz scene as currently observed, through both first-hand experience and interview.

Edinburgh is a city of just under half a million inhabitants which each year plays host to the world's largest cultural gathering during its July and August festivals. Built on the foundations of the Edinburgh International Festival (established in 1947 to "provide a platform for the flowering of the human spirit") these include Jazz and Blues, Fringe, Comedy, Film, Television, Art and Book festivals, which together attract international participants and audiences in the millions. Now in its 35th year Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival claims audience numbers in the region 40,000 at over 100 ticketed and free events around the city.

THE EDINBURGH LIVE SCENE

On either side of the eleven-day Jazz & Blues Festival, jazz occupies a rather more modest place in the cultural life of the city. Edinburgh claims just one dedicated jazz venue, The Jazz Bar (although even here the programming is not limited solely to jazz), and its concert halls present jazz only sporadically. In common with most other cities, there are a number of bars and restaurants that offer their patrons live jazz along with refreshment and sustenance, while small-band jazz also remains a staple background to corporate and wedding receptions.

The promotion of jazz in Edinburgh is undertaken by a variety of organisations and individuals. Edinburgh's jazz promoters adhere broadly to [Brennan and Webster's] "independent", "artist affiliated" and "venue" models. That is to say

that some promoters operate independently of artists and venues, booking and hiring each subject to requirement, some have artist connections or are themselves musicians and others are contracted to, or otherwise associated with, a specific venue. Promotional activities range from the running of festivals, to year round, nightly club programmes to more ad hoc events in regular or varied locations.

In addition to programming Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival, Jazz Scotland also presents Aberdeen, Dundee, Fife, Islay and Lockerbie jazz festivals. Other Edinburgh jazz promoters, with varying degrees of sustained activity and/or jazz exclusivity, include Bill Kyle (The Jazz Bar/Bridge Promotions), Adrian Harris (The Queen's Hall) Todd Gordon (Jazz International), Graeme Knox (Whigham's Jazz Club) and David Conway (Click Clack Club). Scotland's major music promoters DF Concerts, Regular Music and Unique Events limit their promotion of jazz to the occasional international box-office certainty, hidden amongst their more lucrative rock and pop rosters.

Dependent on and inextricably intertwined with this hierarchical, if somewhat disparate infrastructure of promoters, are the city's jazz musicians. Edinburgh has been host to a jazz scene for over 60 years during which time, as well as maintaining a locally framed network of indigenous and visiting musicians, it has nurtured domestic players of international standing and export value. The evolution of the city's jazz scene has generally mirrored that of those in other British cities, riding the crests and troughs in popularity, social functions and values of the music's reception.

JAZZ ECONOMIES

Since the 1990s the public profile of jazz has suffered increasingly from a lack of print and broadcast coverage due, perhaps, to a diminishing sense of genre identity amongst its makers and understandings thereof by its public and commentators. Beyond the boundaries of its scene, jazz has been anecdotally described as an at best historical or at worst dead music, an elite and unapproachable music, a 'jazz-hands' pastiche of itself or as generally irrelevant to contemporary culture. Lack of media interest, issues with image

and identity, and post-Internet changes in our cultural consumption habits have, unsurprisingly, resulted in fewer concerts to smaller audiences.

Diminishing commercial returns from performance and broadcast are necessitating a reimagining of the value structures of jazz. Where in past times the 'no-pay-no-play' mantra underpinned its industry, we now talk of social and cultural capital in the absence of hard-cash remuneration. The demise of jazz's entertainment status on television, radio and in the dancehall over the past 50 years, along with the weakening of the Musicians Union, have long since had a catastrophic impact on jazz as a vocation. Rates of pay for bar gigs and concerts have over the past 30 years remained largely static against fiscal inflation (£60 in 1984 equivalent to approx. £160 today), with jazz musicians increasingly obliged to find supplementary sources of income to earn a living wage.

This gloomy portrayal of the state of jazz is by no means a new one – making a living from an increasingly marginalised genre has presented a challenge for many years – but contemporary jazz economies are in undeniable crisis and, as such, evermore reliant on public funding and/or goodwill. Despite recent media assertions that the money is now to be made in live music (in place of the beleaguered recorded music industry), this optimistic (and over-simplified) claim rarely has relevance to those that play and/or promote jazz.

Jazz has for many years accounted for only a tiny percentage of overall record sales and the monetisation of live jazz has not transformed in as radical a manner as that of popular music. Jazz musicians typically shy away from models of often 'long-tail' entrepreneurship, for example merchandising or synchronisation, as developed and adopted by the popular music industries. Rather, they traditionally operate with an expectation of entitlement – an entitlement to pay and recognition in return for their commitment to musical excellence. Such sense of prerogative creates friction in the musician's relationship to the marketplace and therefore also their route to it, through the promoter.

THE PROMOTER

Promoters tread a precarious path between looking after business interests, nurturing a scene that develops musicians and audiences alike, while staying in some way true to their own *raison d'être*. Not least due to the considerable risks inherent in staging performances of a marginal (or marginalised) genre, the jazz promoter is typically driven by an enthusiasm for the music commensurate with that of the musicians that perform it. Indeed often promoters are, or have themselves been, practising musicians – leading sometimes to accusations of ‘poacher turned gamekeeper’ by the musicians that they either book, or overlook.

Through interviews it emerged that a range of factors attracted and bound individuals to the promotion of jazz. Central were feelings of kinship and communality with the musicians and audiences that make up the scene. The scene was frequently described as family, and jazz, as both music and philosophy, being in some way superior to other forms of expressive art and ways of working. There was nonetheless acknowledgement that the promoter’s relationship to the musician is not always straightforward; that friendships are by no means guaranteed by virtue of any sense of belonging to scene or way of living.

Where the musician can be said to be concerned primarily with fulfilling their own performance expectations and those of their audience, the promoter juggles the manifold demands of public funders, commercial sponsors, press previewers and reviewers, a diversity of musicians, their representatives, and multiple, disparate audiences. Programming decisions often represent a balancing act between sure-fire income and artistic and commercial risk, with the box office success of populist artists carrying the losses of those with a more limited, or untested, following.

THE MUSICIAN

There appears to be a disconnect between the jazz musician’s professional progression and the status (or lack thereof) bestowed on them by their local promoter. In following the traditional jazz apprenticeship of building a skill

base and reputation through engagement with the broadest spectrum of musical experience, projecting a clear sense of artistic identity or brand can prove elusive. The progression from ‘cutting one’s teeth’ on often gratis performances of jazz standards in front of audiences of questionable engagement, to developing a ‘message’ within a show worthy of a venue or festival’s ticket tariff, presents significant challenges. And having devised such, convincing a promoter to disregard the peripheral activities that have undeniably informed the concept, is often equally difficult.

Visiting international artists enjoy greater prominence in venue and festival programming as compared to their domestic counterparts. Their ‘foreignness’ provides a degree of exoticism and exclusivity that is hard for the local musician to conjure. Local musicians have, after all, to make their living year-round, and in every imaginable corner of jazz related activity from pubs and clubs to corporate receptions and pantomime pits –activities that potentially cheapen or dilute their brand. The irony of course is that visiting musicians are often similarly financially obliged to take such work of perceived lower standing when in *their* home environment.

Here there are interesting contradictions. Visiting artists bring new or different approaches and materials to the local scene, with the potential to refresh and inspire those that attend their concerts. That few of these attendees are local musicians was highlighted across the board in interviews with promoters. Local musicians are, of course, often playing concurrent gigs elsewhere, but their absence was noted, and lamented by respondents. Is there perhaps a perception of ‘busman’s holiday’ involved in attending a fellow musician’s concerts, or a protectionist attitude towards individualised musical approach?

PERFORMANCE PLATFORMS AND PROGRAMMING

Edinburgh Jazz & Blues festival claims to provide local musicians with their highest profile gig of the calendar year, a concert platform significantly different to the year-round pubs and clubs circuit. In doing so, the festival presents the musician to an audience that is distinct from the musician’s everyday followers. This distinction is in large part down to the extent to which different audiences are prepared to pay for being a part of a live music

experience. A ticketed concert is seen as providing a different kind of entertainment; one that promotes a listening environment over that of a more socially rooted, free-entrance gig.

To further vex the musician, different types of promoters have different expectations. Where a contemplative set of self-penned ballads might sit well with a specific festival audience, it will almost certainly disappoint a late-night club clientele who are there to drink, dance and be merry. An energetically complex instrumental set equally risks alienating the 'crooner' expectations of the early evening supper-club audience. The musician is therefore charged with being able to deliver their message in either a range of stylistic and aesthetic guises or in some universal form deemed palatable in a variety of contexts – either of which strategies risks peer accusations of 'selling out'.

The promoters of Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival, whilst asserting objectivity and impartiality in their decision-making, nonetheless concede that a "tone" is set through the programme that they present. The festival promoters see themselves in terms of publishers/editors of an 'edition' of live music, one might say in an attempt to aestheticise their business. Year on year programming sets up expectations of degrees of continuity amongst new and returning audiences that in turn help to define the nature and brand of the festival as distinct from others. Underlying continuity sits alongside the more adventurous elements of programming and provides parallel options for musicians to locate their work within the greater jazz festival culture.

Promotions at The Jazz Bar carry no such claims of impartiality. As a commercial enterprise the venue is wholly dependent on bar takings and modest admission fees. Its programme is designed to cater for the various audiences that the venue attracts, with jazz satisfying approximately a third of demand alongside acoustic roots and funk music. This strategy of providing audience-specific programming encourages a degree of crossover in audience development as patrons often experience an overlap in entertainment styles. Again, in interview the venue's promoter, a distinction between the 'listening gig' and the more social aspects of jazz participation

was highlighted, with The Jazz Bar arguably providing both experiences, dependent on time-of-day and the nature of gig and its audience.

The role of promoter-as-educator was also a common thread in interviews. In weekly mail outs to its database of some 2000 opted-in subscribers, highlighted elements of The Jazz Bar programme are contextualised through links to further listening and reading. The Jazz Bar enjoys no significant interest from the city's newspapers (either in form of preview or review), and relies instead almost entirely on P2P promotion through social media.

CONCLUSION

Although musician, audience and promoter can be taken collectively as the local (or indeed regional, national and global) jazz scene, there nonetheless exist irrefutable fault-lines between and amongst these three areas of engagement. The promoter often acts as a filter in presenting to audiences what they take to be the most significant, refined or commercially viable offerings of musical performance available to them. In their role as arbiter, and doing so within the constraints of commercial and/or public funding strategies, the promoter risks alienating, and being alienated by, the musician pool from which they select.

A wariness can be observed in musicians' dealings with promoters that easily deteriorates into feelings of bitterness and contempt: bitterness that they haven't been offered a gig, and contempt for the rationalisations provided for a programme that excludes them. Such feelings of exclusion either galvanise or erode a musician's motivations, stimulating a creative rethink, the adoption or establishment of alternative performance platforms or, at worst, despondency.

Observed though interview, individual promoters seek to appeal to distinct sectors of the massed jazz audience. Factors of style, aesthetics, function and cost split the generally conceived audience into smaller units with only limited overlap. The promoters' commonly held aspirations to 'educate the masses', while laudable and, arguably, an economic imperative, can also irk the musician. Who more qualified to educate the audience than the empirically or

experientially informed musician – who often also boasts educational credentials through private or institutional teaching?

The jazz community, so often described in terms of family, might unkindly be described as dysfunctional, with its makers and promoters torn pillar to post between the music's waning popularity, blurring of genre identity, diminishing cultural status and stretched economies. Audiences are, in many respects, innocent parties embroiled in a tug of war for their understanding, their affection and their patronage.

The motives of all are, of course, by and large honourable. To create, promote, listen to and sustain a music that is defined by its community's passion for it. Making sense of, coming to terms with and anticipating changes in the delivery of the jazz message in the Internet age provides challenge and stimulus for us all.

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