From Music Higher Education to the Festival Stage: Questioning the Neoliberal Environments of Scottish Jazz

Sarah Raine – https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9962-1784
Haftor Medbøe – https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1509-6143

Abstract

As evidenced from the festival stage and behind the scenes (Raine, 2020), the UK jazz scene continues to be male-dominated and middle-class (Umney and Kretsos, 2015; Umney, 2016). Drawing upon interviews and focus groups with jazz musicians, educators, students and festival professionals, this chapter considers the intersecting ideologies of jazz and neoliberalism evident in both the Scottish jazz scene and the educational pipelines that feed it. We argue that, when left unchallenged, this ideological context inevitably leads to a culture of exclusion, monocultural student (and later musician) cohorts and ultimately an unsustainable national jazz scene. Reflecting on our own pedagogical practices at Edinburgh Napier University (UK), we offer a tentative toolkit for an inclusive, critical, and subversive approach to jazz Higher Education.

Introduction

Jazz has occupied a defined space within Scotland's cultural landscape since the 1930s, performed in dance halls, pubs and clubs, and later at urban and rural festivals, while providing the background for dinner dances, wedding celebrations and corporate entertainment. As elsewhere in the UK, jazz has over the years enjoyed peaks and endured troughs in popularity, and in present times is facing considerable existential challenges. Chief amongst these challenges are musician wages that have not kept step with rising living costs, a fragile and precarious working environment that has little to no institutional safety net in place and an oversupply of (often academy trained) musicians for a shrinking marketplace (Medbøe et al., 2023). It is tragically ironic that musicianship and creativity have arguably never been of a higher standard, while the delicate ecology that supports jazz in the UK is under severe threat on most fronts.

Musician engagement with jazz in Scotland has evolved from the emulatory import of the American artform to a glocalised expression of personal and collective identities.[1] Scottish musicians have long attempted to establish their own identity within a music of African American heritage, welding recognised symbols of Scottishness to the urban iconography of jazz to give meaning to the domestic scene and imbue distinctiveness within the global marketplace. However, with dwindling opportunities for live performance, the financial devaluation of both live and recorded music, continual erosion of the efficacy (and therefore relevance) of the Musicians' Union and an increasingly politically driven funding environment, Scotland's jazz musicians must navigate a competitive and deregulated domestic marketplace. Despite a progressively diverse population and society, Scotland's jazz scene remains predominantly white, male and middle-class, and jazz has struggled to attract significant numbers of musicians – or fans – from Scotland's non-white ethnic groups, musicians with disabilities and from the LGTBQIA+ community. And whilst gender balance amongst school-age musicians is generally observed as equitable according to the music educators we interviewed as part of our 2019-22 PLACE study, barriers continue to hamper the progress of women and gender nonconforming instrumentalists, with very few going on to study in the academy or to perform professionally on the scene. The lack of women, gender minority and students of colour on jazz and improvisation courses in higher education (HE) is evidenced in our engagement with music conservatoires in the UK, and this legacy is clear on the festival stage (see Raine, 2020).

Within this chapter, we are interested in issues concerning jazz in HE, particularly in relation to developing a sustainable and diverse future scene. For us, sustainability – economic, cultural and environmental – is impossible without a complementary focus on diversity, bringing new people from across society, new experiences and new ideas, which in turn speak to an expanding audience.

In this chapter, we consider the entanglement of neoliberalism and dominant jazz practices, processes and politics in the jazz scene and in HE, as well as the barriers to access and scene development that these entanglements engender. Although a "loose signifier" (Brown 2015: 20), in this work, we consider neoliberalism as a form of political rationality (Brown, 2015) within which "everything is understood through the metaphor of capital" (Phipps, 2020:

[1] The form and key social processes of creating a Scottish jazz diaspora is considered in Medbøe, MacLean and Raine (forthcoming) in relation to the creation and scene use of the Scottish Jazz Archive.

229). As a core institution (Lynch 2013; Rudd and Goodson 2017) within the neoliberal mission, we build upon the work of McCaig (2018) in framing the neoliberal university as a business driven by market incentives and structured through a "regulatory regime". And in discussing issues of access and providing examples of exclusionary and entangled neoliberal and jazz-scene ideology, we further problematise the neoliberal assumption that social good will be ensured through the neutrality of market forces (McNay, 2009) in the face of a weaking collective (state) welfare offering.

This chapter builds on insights developed through a PLACE (Scottish Government, City of Edinburgh Council) funded research project (2019-22), through which we aimed to map the current state of the Scottish jazz scene. The project captured (in-person and virtually) stakeholder experiences and reflections during the pre-pandemic, COVID-19 and emerging post-pandemic periods. This chapter is therefore grounded in data gathered through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and virtual focus groups with jazz musicians, educators and festival professionals in Scotland and, in recognition of the interconnected touring and musician circuit of the UK, additional interviews with jazz musicians and festival promoters undertaken across the UK by the authors beyond this funded project.[2]

In the sections that follow, we firstly consider the ways in which neoliberalism has shaped the contrasting views of jazz musicians and promoters and discuss the impact of notions of the free market and neoliberal public funding models. Secondly, we explore the convergences of jazz and neoliberal ideologies and highlight the problems these conditions pose for developing and maintaining an inclusive, diverse and sustainable jazz scene. In the third section, we reflect upon how this ideological entanglement plays out in jazz in Scottish HE and offer strategies for the conscious disruption and subversion of exclusionary ideologies and practices. We conclude by considering the potential futures of music HE in Scotland and beyond.

Neoliberal Jazz: Musicians and Sector

As Chapman (2013) notes, the contemporary neoliberal musician is expected to be a master of "dexterous, virtuosic self-reliance" (p. 453) and "self-sufficiency, economic thrift and multi-

[2] All names used within this chapter are pseudonyms and identifying elements have been removed to protect the identity of the interviewee. Due to the sensitive topics under discussion (such as gender and racial discrimination, for example) and the intimate nature of the scene, anonymity was essential. All research was undertaken in accordance with Edinburgh Napier University Research Ethics guidelines.

competence" (p. 467). This neoliberal view is held by many Scottish jazz promoters, festival teams and funders about musicians: "Professional" musicians should be multi-competent and able to demonstrate their value (or promotability) through not only their creative work but also their social media following, industry connections and/or previous successes in gaining funding or gigs. In essence, contemporary Scottish jazz musicians are expected to create a coherent and oven-ready product for promoters that encompasses high-quality video material, press release copy, polished and impactful promotional photography and expansive and well-maintained social media networks, all produced or paid for by the artist as a self-employed worker, as these music professionals describe:

> "The problem comes when musicians don't have official press photos, a social media presence, or a professional website. It's a lack of professionalism" (Steve, jazz promoter, focus group, October 2019).

> "Promoters rely too heavily on musicians to promote the gigs, or booking musicians on their perceived promotability, their online audience, so who they can bring to a gig. Promoters are not promoting, but just booking and expecting musicians to do the promotional work themselves" (David, musician in his 30s, interview, March 2020).

From statements like these above, it is clear that contemporary Scottish jazz musicians feel the pressure of this neoliberal understanding of the musician as a multicompetent entrepreneur. The weight of these expectations is particularly felt by those who lack the training for creating marketing materials (Medbøe et al., 2023) or those without significant support systems and networks, such as women, who consciously occupy a peripheral place on the scene (Buscatto, 2021; Raine, 2020).

Fair pay within the jazz scene in Scotland (and, arguably, beyond: Umney and Kretsos, 2015; Umney, 2016) has been eroded by the neoliberal notion of the free market, with musicians further stretched – both financially and in terms of their perceived self-worth and cultural identity – through the expanding expectations placed on musicians by festival programmers, promoters and media professionals. The stagnation of fees and the proliferation of an exploitative free gig scene (Medbøe et al., 2023) is further compounded by the competitive nature of Scotland's small, city-based jazz scenes, poor national touring circuits, ageing and shrinking audience and (for minority groups especially) discriminatory and exclusionary scene politics

(Raine, 2019, 2020, 2021). The precarious position of Scottish jazz musicians was particularly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, captured through the PLACE project (Raine, Medbøe and Dias, 2022; Taylor, Raine and Hamilton, 2023). This imposed breathing space provided an opportunity for reflections on the jazz scene's neoliberal practices and issues relating to inequality and access. In Scotland, as elsewhere, musicians convened online to vent about perceived and real issues, to stimulate momentum for change and to lay the groundwork for musician incorporation and activism for change. Yet throughout our engagement with Scottish and international musician communities, it became clear that these aspirations were short-lived. As noted by Briggs et al. (2020), the activism and desire for change expressed by individuals during the COVID-19 lockdown period was not supported by the "structures and mechanisms holding up neoliberalism" (p. 831), with governments and small organisations (such as jazz festivals) alike determined to get back to business as usual at the earliest opportunity.

Bearing in mind the economic context noted above, our research found unsurprisingly that the Scottish jazz scene is significantly reliant upon public cultural funding for the creation of original work. This is particularly true of Creative Scotland[3] where successful applications – and therefore musician narratives – articulate cultural and community values rather than economic returns or even economic sustainability. Musicians are thereby expected to demonstrate both commercial and cultural value whilst enduring diminishing status and financial recompense and perceiving their creative autonomy as being challenged by the demands made by both industry gatekeepers and funders. Developing a fundable project and writing a successful bid represents yet another key skill (the development of which lies primarily with the individual and their network in the face of limited central support) required for the contemporary multifaceted jazz musician. Furthermore, the partnership approach of Creative Scotland also clearly exposes neoliberal expectations on the part of the national funders, who request match-funding or in-kind contributions as part of the application process. As Abilgaard and Jørgensen (2021) note, public-private innovation represents yet another form of marketisation, which encourages individuals to "model and transform themselves into the entrepreneur" (p. 2) as market principles permeate the public sectors of the neoliberal system (McNay, 2009: 60). Equally, through an expectation of creatives to fulfil (and provide evidence for) funding criteria that are politically driven, the

[3] Creative Scotland is the public body that distributes funding from the Scottish government and the National Lottery Fund to creatives and organisations in the arts, screen and creative industries.

government increasingly exercises control over publicly funded artistic outcomes. As we look toward a period of likely austerity in the UK (following the costs of national pandemic relief, the economic failings of government and the fuel and cost of living crises), it is also likely that arts funding will once again be used to make up for a lack of funding in other areas (such as mental health provision, education and community outreach) as happened during the last austerity period in the country (Rimmer, 2018), with a move away from the welfare state to individual responsibility – in this case, of creatives (Clarke 2007; Lazzarato, 2009).

As we will now explore, these financial limitations of the jazz sector in Scotland are further compounded at an ideological level through the entanglement of both dominant jazz mythologies and neoliberalism. Furthermore, through the dominant jazz myth of talent, the individualised neoliberal self is further emphasised and the complex reasons for differences in access are reduced by key gatekeepers to being "good enough".

Exclusionary Jazz Myths in Scene and Education

Previous research has shown how neoliberalism has reinforced hegemonic and patriarchal practices, processes and politics, as well as racism, in music-focused contexts (Macarthur, 2014; Scharff, 2017) and in the university (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013; Hamer and Lang, 2015) and, more generally, exposed levels of racism within the neoliberal worldview (Barlow, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Kundnani, 2021). Such research highlights how the comparative lack of success in engaging minority groups is either neutralised through meritocratic discourses of hard work – and "talent" within the jazz scene – or co-opted through neoliberal organisational attempts to "address" inclusion issues. An example of the latter is the ATHENA SWAN initiative in UK HE institutions. This initiative aims to support women and gender minority workers but attempts to do so through the additional unpaid labour of workers who are already struggling within male-dominated, high-pressure organisations that are run on a business model advocating and actively perpetuating precarity.

In a detailed ethnographic study of the jazz scene in France, Buscatto (2021) documents the pervasive and continuing jazz myth of talent, which is used by gatekeepers and musicians who are opposed to providing support for underrepresented groups within the scene by questioning the standard of their music. As differently positioned researchers, educators and individuals within jazz scenes, it has become clear to us that this discourse of talent has become a

key way for individuals active in jazz – most significantly, those in gatekeeper roles – to excuse or neutralise (Griange, 2020) a lack of diversity in the jazz scene, classroom, festival stage or specialist media. Such gatekeepers argue that those given the opportunity represent the most hard-working and talented musicians, relying on discourses of "quality" as a means to sidestep discussions of gender-imbalanced line-ups or predominantly white jazz HE cohorts. In one interview, a jazz promoter claimed that he was not discriminatory as "it does not matter whether they are women or men, just as long as they are any good" (Patrick, jazz promoter, interview, March 2022). Through such actions and declarations, gatekeepers define their role as that of genre experts and tastemakers – selecting the best – rather than accepting and actively engaging in their roles as instigators of change (Raine, 2022).

Other common approaches to engaging with issues of underrepresentation within jazz includes the "Women in Jazz" brand, used by promoters and agents to market all-woman bands and all-woman festivals, etc. As Zola (2022) notes, rather than galvanising feminist activism, this approach further frames successful jazz women as the exception, ultimately doing "little to change the gender dynamics in jazz at large, favouring the neoliberal model of individual success in its capitalist system" (p. 413). Again, the neutrality of market forces – talented musicians succeeding in gaining opportunities – are assumed to ensure social good (McNay, 2009), yet have limited and unsustainable impact beyond the individual.

In terms of jazz-specific HE courses, the pattern of the white, male, middle-class jazz musician continues for both student cohorts and teaching staff (Raine, 2020). This male-dominant environment was cited by women-identifying jazz musicians in our PLACE-funded study in Scotland (Medbøe et al., 2023) and other UK-wide research (Raine 2019, 2020) as a key barrier to engagement for women (particularly those of colour) as both students and, later, HE educators. This homogenous cohort identity – reflecting the dominant all-male, white bands on jazz festival stages – is likely the product of continuing exclusionary HE practices, in addition to issues earlier in the music education pipeline. For example, blind entry auditions have not yet been implemented for places on jazz courses, even though these have been common in orchestra auditions for many decades. Equally, prospective students are expected to pay an application fee to Conservatoire UK for each application, adding incremental financial barriers to accessing higher music education (this is not the case for other HE courses in the UK). Alongside these exclusionary entry practices and processes, musicians have also reported in interviews their

experiences of the competitive and (white) male-dominated spaces of jazz courses and a lack of staff support for minority groups. This is particularly prevalent amongst musicians of colour from working-class backgrounds who do not identify as heterosexual men. As Abi, a musician in her early twenties, notes on her experience as a Black British instrumentalist on a jazz course at a UK conservatoire:

> Until I was 18, my identity had not been politicised as far as I was concerned. … [At the Conservatoire] I felt like I was under a telescope. It was horrible. I was suddenly very highly aware that I was a woman and that I was black.… What people don't understand about the whole going to college thing, as a minority – regardless of what that minority is – you've probably had to fight your way into that space. By asking why so few minorities are at universities studying music, you're already ten years too late. I already feel like I've got the weight of the world on my shoulders because my entire presence is just completely politicised.

Abi, and many other students like her, arrived at music HE courses having already experienced significant barriers to access. In her first year at university, Abi felt the pressures of being a highly visible minority person within a homogenous cohort, compounded by the lack of support she received from her tutors (as she detailed further in the interview). As with the dominant approaches undertaken by industry professionals briefly discussed above, the approaches taken by HE gatekeepers take a similar individualistic attitude. Davies and Saltmarsh (2007: 3) note that in neoliberalism, "populations are administered and managed through the production of a belief in each individual in his or her own freedom and autonomy". By focusing on the success and talent of the individual in gaining a place at an HE institution and performing well on the course, rather than addressing the key intersectional barriers to access faced by minority pupils (as they apply for and undertake HE courses), UK music schools emphasise "individualism and the 'privatization' of responsibility", framing the individual as "solely responsible for their own outcomes" (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013: 7-8). Whilst this points to a wider issue within the neoliberal university – beyond jazz (see Scharff, 2017, and Bull, 2019, on classical music) and indeed beyond music or the arts (see, for example, Hamer and Lang, 2015, on HE in America) – the focus on individual success through hard work is further compounded by the dominant myth of talent within the jazz world, leading to a wider scene culture of competition rather than understanding. In order to support those students who have yet to fully access, benefit from or

feel welcome in the jazz scenes and in formal jazz education, we must proactively and reflexively develop pedagogical and outreach strategies.

Jazz and Scottish Higher Education

Within the HE sector, a disconnect between senior management and teaching staff, underpinned by conflicting political and philosophical positions, can be readily observed. Post-1992 UK universities are essentially products of neoliberal ideology, coming into being during the eighteen-year Conservative government under the premierships of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, and furthered under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's New Labour after 1997. Pedagogical quality frameworks have been devised to encourage and promote "entrepreneurialism and a competitive spirit, to reproduce neoliberal capitalist relations of production and an ideological agenda for and in education" (Maisuria & Cole, 2017: 605), which is often at odds with the more radical or egalitarian perspectives held by teaching staff. This ideological shift can also be observed in the "ancient" or "red-brick" universities as they keep step with developments in the wider HE sector. Across all UK HE institutions, there is a palpable friction between aspirations to provide a safer space for "broadening horizons" (ibid.: 607) and feeding the neoliberal agenda by preparing students for the free market economy. Through our own multiple roles within and outside of the Scottish jazz scene, this balancing act is one that we know well, as we aim to prepare our students not only to knowledgeably engage with the world beyond the academy's walls, but also to subvert and contest this reality in order to protect themselves and safeguard others.

In our own pedagogical approaches, we address the clash between the realities of a jazz sector driven by a neoliberal worldview and the diverse expectations of music graduates (whether ideologically, practically or economically rooted – inherited, assumed or informed), and attempt to disrupt the neutralising nature of neoliberal and jazz ideologies by creating a safer, critical space for student discussion and music-making. In so doing, we draw upon a range of work which offers research-led pedagogical approaches and aims to resist or circumnavigate problematic neoliberal culture (Griange, 2020; Karlsen, 2019; Maisuria and Cole, 2017). As Karlsen (2019: 193) invocates, "[t]his time, we imagine and aim for no less than societal change."

Our pedagogical toolbox draws typically on practice-as-research and academic engagement with grassroots community music and industry. Again, there is a tension between employing music-making as an agency for societal change while simultaneously operating within the commercial paradigm. At the heart of community music are utopian aspirations of access, inclusion and empowerment that sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside the competitive self-promotion demanded within the commercial arena. It is typical to observe fellow jazz educators within HE drawing more on ideals of "art for art's sake" and the personal and artistic growth of students through critical reflection, viewing university education as taking place somehow separate from, or beyond, the commercial realities of the music industries. The "business" of music often appears to be grudgingly included within curricula – again an embodiment of the discomfort experienced by many practitioner-educators in balancing their own artistic integrity against the commercial pressures of industry. The activist elements embedded across our pedagogy are thereby concerted acts of subversion in the hope of a brighter future, rather than simply continuing to service the "demands" of what we perceive, in common with many musicians, to be a broken economic model. Through encouraging responsible and contextually informed freedom of thought and action we attempt to encourage and enable our students to lead this change, as we go on to illustrate later in this section.

Where universities typically give equal if not greater focus to contextual studies, music conservatoires offer a syllabus more grounded in practice (see https://conservatoiresuk.ac.uk). Scotland has just one dedicated undergraduate programme in jazz, offered by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Elsewhere across the country's university sector, jazz studies constitute strands or electives within broader programmes of music education, either as a part of or an adjunct to popular music. Beyond the HE sector, jazz education in Scotland takes place across a range of formal and informal spaces, from individual music tuition and school-based group activities led by jazz-enthusiast teachers to courses and summer schools run in association with festivals, laying the groundwork for pathways to higher-level education. The informal sector is built largely on supply and demand, and not least on the dogged enthusiasm of its animators. Equally, it is also often dependent on the shifting sands of public funding (Medbøe et al., 2023).

Jazz as a topic of practical, and latterly contextual, study has been part of the suite of module options in music at Edinburgh Napier University since 1998. Available to students of

classical and popular music, the nature of its delivery and content has undergone significant transformations in the intervening years. Originally titled Jazz Improvisation 1, 2 and 3, the modules were offered as a practice-led strand of study and delivered through established, conservatoire-derived pedagogies with a fundamental focus on the music's American heritage.

In 2013, these modules were revised and rewritten to reflect a more global perspective: Jazz 1: America, Jazz 2: Europe and Jazz 3: Glocal. These changes represented a conscious effort to provide a pathway that, while not underplaying the cultural and historical importance of the music's African American roots, could lead students to a more geographically situated and inclusive relationship with jazz, one in which students were less likely to feel like cultural tourists or, worse, appropriators. In doing so, a significant degree of theory-led critical thinking was introduced into the curriculum to encourage students to challenge received or accepted tropes and lay the groundwork for the development of new knowledge and understanding around the social and political complexities of jazz history and practice. Through these changes, we have increasingly challenged the neoliberal model of entrepreneurship through engagement with theory and embedded practice that focuses on the imperative value of culture to society, the decolonisation of the curriculum and pedagogy, and mutual respect and sensitivity towards others. This approach has been furthered through instruments of assessment in which we have moved away from subjective notions of performance-related value and toward the foregrounding of critical thinking behind creative action.

This pedagogical toolkit that encompasses the flattening of pedagogical hierarchy and the questioning of canon, placing greater value on freedom of thought through critical understanding of theory, has encouraged students to explore beyond simply the acquisition of received practical and professional acumen in discovering that jazz represents a unique and useful lens through which to view wider thinking around identity, equality, gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability and inclusion. The aim, rather than simply preparing the student for a notional marketplace, is to enable students to use their education to their own ends in forming their musical *and* philosophical identities. In doing so, we (the authors) have also aimed to create a safer space in which students who have been excluded from jazz – whether by race, gender, social or musical backgrounds – are able to claim knowledge and practice as their own.

In using jazz as a frame through which to explore persisting social issues such as racism, gender and social inequalities, we aim to challenge the free-market, neoliberal worldview and

embed a social and political awakening across our provision. Academics can often be heard asking where the political activism – of, for example, the Civil Rights Movement – has gone in popular music and, more specifically, amongst those of typical student age. But perhaps we have simply asked the wrong questions or provided the wrong platforms. In creating safer and more open spaces for discussion, led by haphazard learning pathways rather than by dogmatic pedagogic agenda, we have sought to challenge hierarchies of authority. In doing so, we have found the students to be both willing and equipped to grapple with the prevalent and pervasive issues affecting the society for which we are charged with preparing them.

Conclusion

A cursory scratch at the surface of the pre-pandemic music sector, for which many continue to purport to equip our students, reveals an underbelly of discrimination and inequalities. Might we, in response, aspire to a radical reimagining of the music world by giving a stronger voice to the underrepresented and taking greater direction from those we teach? Many educators have spent the past decades in HE constructing narratives around a commodified and professionalized conception of the music industry, plotting its histories, qualifying its canons and quantifying its structures, employment pathways and value to the economy. Perhaps unkindly, this has been done in part to justify the place of popular music within HE as a "worthwhile" path of study regarding graduate employment opportunities. In doing so, we have tacitly tied our pedagogies to the neoliberal environments in which we work and learn. The "industry" of music is in itself a problematic construction to delineate or unpack, even if as parsed by, amongst others, Williamson and Cloonan (2007) as "music industries" representing a notion which most musicians find to be a highly precarious, fragmented and intangible ecosystem through which to navigate their art. Allowing ourselves a moment of honesty, and putting to one side the constraints of institutional bondage, are such constructions of industry the most appropriate lens through which to seek socially and politically conscious progress in and through the arts?

As activists advocating for social change *and* mindful of the realities of the neoliberal music labour market, we are tasked to develop approaches for preparing emerging artists to equally engage with *and* disrupt damaging elements of the neoliberal worldview applied to both creative practice and pedagogy. In negotiating multiple inherent ideologies, we aim through our own practice as creatives, music educators, researchers and writers to cultivate experientially

informed and research-supported pathways toward more diverse and sustainable music scenes. At the same time, we acknowledge our privilege and work hard to present a decolonised curriculum that meaningfully reflects a post Western-centric worldview and promotes a more level societal playing field.

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