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INTERVIEW: CAMBRIDGE JAZZ FESTIVAL

Roslin Russell

We caught up with Cambridge Jazz Festival co-founder and director, Roslin Russell, to find out how she went from scientist to music producer, how she finds time to juggle it all, and what audiences can expect from the Festival this year.

FROM science to music producer. . . How did that happen?

I've always loved music as much as I love science. I'm a nerd in both areas! They're both fascinating and creative, and in many ways I think improvisation is probably the key to both. It's a creative process that I feel needs to be encouraged especially in schools; it's problem solving on the spot and whether it's learnt through music, art or theatre, you can advantageously use that skill in many other areas too.

While I was doing my degree in Biology and masters in Medical Parasitology, we had Ronnie Scott, Jamiroquai and US3 play at the Student Union. Jazz with funk and hip-hop was very much emerging and in vogue in the early '90s, and I was greatly inspired and influenced by this genre at the time. I was gigging with a band all over campus and around London, from the Royal Holloway Students' Union to the Half Moon in Putney. I even came fourth in Battle of the Bands – we were the only jazz, blues and funk band among a load of goth, metal and rock bands, apart from one very quirky music student whose music stood out from everyone else's. . . She deservedly won it – Katie Tunstall!

When I moved to Cambridge to start work as a medical parasitologist and to do a masters in Computer Science (ARU) and then a PhD in Molecular and Computational Biology at Christ's College (almost 20 years ago now – I told you I was a big nerd!), I had to leave much of that behind and study hard. But, I seriously missed the music scene and for many years I pined for more jazz here in Cambridge. There wasn't much of a similar music scene here at all then; you had to go to London.

Cambridge already had a long-established folk festival and many other festivals were popping up but none of them really catered to the jazz community. Worse, jazz was and still is a very much misunderstood genre of music. The ideas I had for a jazz festival had been brewing for quite a while but Cambridge back then wasn't really ready for it and nor was I.

It wasn't until after my studies and having kids, who are now older and more independent, that I found I had more time for myself to do something I felt passionate about. I decided to end my hiatus and get back into the music scene (back in 2008) by meeting and performing with other musicians locally at jazz and funk jams. It re-ignited my dream and passion of having a Cambridge Jazz Festival.

Jazz is so much more vibrant and diverse in Cambridge now; although very much spread out all over the place and because of this I felt it needed an umbrella organisation to link up all the different groups and communities. After meeting a few like-minded musicians (many of whom are also scientists!), in 2014 I finally found the courage to talk to them about it and roped them in to help me formally establish the Cambridge Jazz Festival, a not-for-profit organisation. We finally did it and the inaugural Festival last year was a huge success with around 5,000 people of all ages coming along to live music, workshops and talks. This truly was a dream come true!

You have a full time job as a scientist and coordinate the Cambridge Jazz Festival. How do you manage to juggle two such demanding roles?

It certainly takes over a lot of family and social life and most of my weekends are dedicated to music and the Festival. I owe a lot to my colleagues, volunteers, friends and especially my husband, also a scientist; he's had to look after most of the household chores and school pickups. I also share quite a few of my responsibilities with my co-founder, Gavin Spence, who is also passionate about jazz. Gavin is an incredibly multi-talented musician too; he plays trumpet, piano and violin and is also an orthopaedic surgeon at Great Ormond Street.

Other voluntary members of the organisational team include Cambridge-based American saxophonist and local music educator/lecturer, Kevin Flanagan (RipRap; ARU Music Department) and John Blandford and David Gower, who both run the Cambridge Modern Jazz Club. We also owe a lot to other volunteers many of whom are well-known musicians and local educators and we have an amazing team of marketing, production and graphic design experts to support us. Next year, we're hoping to grow and expand the team, and I've started to look for potential sponsors to help us achieve this.

Do you see yourself being a music producer full time at some point in the future? Or would you like to keep doing both?

This could be a possibility; I do enjoy both and can't really live without one or the other. Although, music probably keeps me more sane! If an opportunity arose to take the Festival to another level then I could see myself as a full-time producer, and likewise in science. It's a hard one to answer as I love and enjoy both, and I think I will always have a foot in both. Maybe I can try combining the two somehow. There's a lot of interesting research into the science of music!

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Which came first for you, music or science?

They have been together for as long as I can remember. My earliest memories are of recording myself singing and playing the piano. I was creating my own songs on my new snazzy tape recorder when I was seven years old. I also remember at that age being so inspired by my primary school teacher, Mr Walker, who used to bring live mini-beasts into school and even a live snake that was found in the school playground (I lived in Hong Kong at the time). He gave fascinating accounts of his explorations in the Indonesian rain forest with another fellow teacher – who also took his parrot to class every day! My love for music and biology started at the same time.

Who are your greatest musical heroes?

Wow! There are so many and a real eclectic mix as it spans over four decades of my life! Growing up, I would say The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Prince, Michael Jackson, Harry Connick Junior, Depeche Mode, The Cure, The Cocteau Twins, Sonic Youth and the Pixies.

During the late 80s, I got heavily into rap and hip-hop – bands like The Beastie Boys, Public Enemy and De La Soul were just revolutionary to me and got me seriously hooked for several decades. Actually, I'm still hooked! In the 90s, while I was at Uni, my big heroes also included Nirvana, PJ Harvey, Tori Amos, Bjork, Jeff Buckley, Orbital and Aphex Twin. At the same, I also discovered more jazz and jazz-influenced musicians who inspired me a great deal, old and new, such as Miles Davies, Oscar Peterson, Freddie Hubbard, Cal Scott Heron, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Gang Starr, Guru, Cypress Hill, The Roots, Jamiroquai, Massive Attack, Portishead, Erykah Badu and D'Angelo.

More recently, artists like The Bad Plus, Brad Mehldau, Cinematic Orchestra, Dianne Reeves, Gregory Porter, Snarky Puppy, Robert Glasper, Jose James, Frank Ocean, James Blake, Kendrik Lamar, Kamasi Washington, Flying Lotus, and Hiatus Kaiyote have all been having a huge impact on me. I met Nai Palm when Hiatus Kaiyote came over to the Festival at The Cambridge Junction last year. I was in absolute awe and beaming for days!

Why did you start the Cambridge Jazz Festival?

Over the years, I have seen a huge amount of musical talent in Cambridge and I wanted to start an umbrella organisation to help inspire, nurture and promote jazz to all ages and to celebrate the huge variety of music that jazz encompasses. It's often misunderstood as just one particular type of jazz when in fact it's probably the most diverse and influential form of music out there and I wanted to reflect that at the Festival – there should be something there for everyone!

I also wanted to bring all the disconnected groups of jazz musicians from various organisations and institutions together as this can help initiate new and exciting collaborations, spark and share ideas, skills and resources. The Festival aims to bring international and national musicians to Cambridge while showcasing local and emerging artists alongside them. We also champion new artists, especially women instrumentalists, and provide talks and workshops led by world-class musicians for all ages and abilities.

I love living and working in Cambridge. It's an excellent centre for both the sciences and the arts, although I would like to see more invested in the arts. The educational, creative and therapeutic benefits of the arts to the community (all ages and backgrounds) are enormous and the scientific evidence for this is overwhelming!

What should audiences expect from this year's Festival?

There should be something for everyone with almost 80 events covering everything from jazz, funk, hip-hop, soul, blues, poetry, folk and rock.

Our main headliners include Mercury Prize 2016 nominated soul singer-songwriter, Laura Mvula (Corn Exchange event in association with the Cambridge Jazz Festival); Grammy award-winning keyboardist Bill Laurance (of Snarky Puppy fame; West Road Concert Hall); MOBO award winners Sons of Kemet (a huge amount of fun and energy from tuba, sax players and two drummers! A Cambridge Junction event in association with the Jazz Festival); British, Swedish and Danish trio, Phronesis (The Mumford Theatre) – "one of the most exciting bands on the planet today" (Jazzwise); Danish vocalist and saxophonist Mads Mathias (one of the most original-sounding crooners around at the moment!); and multi-award winning saxophonist and MC Soweto Kinch, not to mention vocal award-winning virtuosos Anita Wardell and Cleveland Watkiss in the line-up. There is a fantastic array of talent coming to Cambridge this year with instrumental and vocal workshops and masterclasses from many of these artists.

Performing alongside them over the 12 frantic days are some of the finest jazz musicians from our own patch. Jazz Funk Fender Rhodes driven band, Resolution 88, have just signed to Incognito's label Splash Blue and have released a stunning new album. *Harmony in Harlem* celebrates the music of Duke Ellington, and you can have a dance lesson from the Cambridge Lindy Hoppers beforehand to take full advantage. Cambridge University's premier a cappella group, Cadenza , perform alongside the fabulous Oxford Gargoyles in a night devoted to choral jazz, and Soweto Kinch perform as a special guest with Cambridge University's finest big band CUJO.

Also new this year are projects with artists from other genres, with a three-way collaboration between exploratory jazz group RipRap, beat-style bebop jazz poet Jazzman John Clarke, and dancer and choreographer Laura Brera. Fresh from their performance at the BBC Proms, the band Snowpoet combine jazz and folk inspired music with poetry in an innovative live performance with award-winning vocalist Lauren Kinsella.

We now also have Jazz for Young Kids! UK jazz singer, Sara Mitra and her seven-piece band have been collaborating with children's theatre company Magic Box for two interactive storytelling and music shows of *A Magical Musical Storybox* – for young children ages 5 and under.

There's a chance to quiz Mark Baxter, the producer of the documentary, *Man in a Hurry*, about the legendary Tubby Hayes before a screening of his film, and a performance from Hayes aficionado Simon Spillett and his quartet. Of course, there's a Jazz Kissa from Gearbox Records – a chance to listen and learn about the history of some of the finest Blue Note vinyl first pressings (and a few wild cards!) on a state-of-the-art sound system (provided by locals Kerr & Smith) with Gearbox founder, Darrel Sheinman.

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And what can we expect from Roslin Russell in the next year?

I've already started planning for next year's festival and very excited about it already! I'll be keeping myself very busy as usual, juggling between my scientific work developing biomarkers for various diseases, family, Festival, playing and making music. I've been working with a very talented multi-instrumentalist, pianist and arranger, David Burgoyne, for over four years now and we've been in the studio recording. So, hopefully I'll be able to finally release that album next year sometime!