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JULIAN JOSEPH

DIGBY FAIRWEATHER

2011: BLUE SKIES OR
ALL BLUES?

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Moving all the time

Following **JULIAN JOSEPH's** recent big band gathering, **JOHN FORDHAM** keeps the tempo with the multifaceted pianist and composer.

The sense of a special occasion shimmered through Ronnie Scott's one night in late October when the British pianist, composer, bandleader, educator and broadcaster Julian Joseph brought his all-star orchestra to the club for a rare three-night run. Joseph conducted his richly-textured, often Ellingtonesque scores from the piano, but his regular rhythm section of bassist Mark Hodgson and drummer Mark Mondesir was effectively also conducting - and reacting - all the way through. Joseph would repeatedly fire off flinty piano phrases that Mondesir echoed in fizzing snare patterns, jolting bass-drum offbeats and cascades of cymbal sound. Peter King stunned even his own sax partners with a freewheeling double-time bop adventure on 'Shadowball Blues', Nathaniel Facey played in a zigzagging, Dolphy-like manner and Jean Toussaint was weighty and soulful on a quirkily luxurious arrangement of 'Ruby My Dear'. Teenage trumpeter Jackson Mathod and





old hand Byron Wallen struck sparks in the brass section, while Steve Williamson's radiant sound on soprano sax served to remind listeners just what UK jazz misses when this gifted artist makes his periodic Rollins-like withdrawals to the woodshed.

Joseph was moved by his rarely-convened big band's London performances, though a shadow was cast over the gigs for him by the illness of his mother Ursula - a 'tower of strength' in his life, as she was for his brothers James and John. Joseph was on the phone to her between every set at Ronnie Scott's because she was unable to attend the shows. But by the time we talked for JazzUK, Ursula Joseph had sadly died unexpectedly, in a sudden worsening of the condition that had been hampering her mobility. Nonetheless, Joseph was as courteous and attentive to the interview as ever, despite the shock to him and his close-knit family.

'I've often mentioned her in public, and I did it at Ronnie Scott's in a couple of stories I told about my student life,' the softly-spoken Joseph observes. 'She said to me, don't make it unhappy because of me, have a happy time there - and that was typical of her. We're all devastated, of course, but even this close to her passing I've very quickly realised that life might leave the body but her influence will go on being immense with us, and with many others she came into contact with.' Ursula Joseph trained as a nurse and midwife when she first came to London from the Caribbean, and developed as a teacher and inspiration to the generation of nurses to come. 'It's where my

interest in education comes from,' observes the man who helped initiate the formerly all-classical ABRSM's (Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music) jazz syllabus. 'Our mum was a natural leader, she passionately believed that all kinds of education were liberating, and she didn't believe they necessarily had to happen within a conventional institution either.'

Both within conventional institutions and outside of them, Julian Joseph has followed her lead. He learned classical piano in childhood, but was turned on to jazz by hearing Oscar Peterson and Herbie Hancock, pursued the enthusiasm with the late Ian Carr at the Weekend Arts College in Camden and studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston from 1985 until 1989, years in which he was also frequently on the road with saxophonist Branford Marsalis. On returning to the UK in 1990 he played regularly with his contemporaries Courtney Pine, Steve Williamson and Mark Mondesir, worked all over the world with American saxist Chico Freeman, ran a series of innovative duo concerts at London's Wigmore Hall and launched the big band in 1994. Since then Joseph has gigged regularly with his trio, worked with symphony orchestras and with classical string players, composed two operas (2007's 'Bridgetower' and last year's 'Shadowball'), presented Radio 3's Jazz Legends series and lent his experience to the advisory boards of several jazz-related institutions.

The success of this year's big band gigs has turned his mind to ambitious thoughts for its future: 'Everybody inspired everybody,' Joseph says of

the Ronnie Scott's season. 'I agree that my trio might be at the core of it, because in any big band the rhythm section has to be an inspirational and energising force and the whole ensemble is weakened if it isn't - look at Duke's band, or Basie's. The music is supposed to be moving all the time, whatever the tempo is; this is about everybody, everybody listening and responding.'

Williamson's presence in Joseph's illustrious saxophone section was another ingredient in the group's charisma, this subtle artist, one of the most innovative of Joseph's and Courtney Pine's generation having often dropped below the radar in the years since, as if overawed by the challenge of developing an original contemporary music after the fashion of his most powerful influence, American saxophonist Steve Coleman. 'Steve's had various hiati, if I can put it like that,' Julian Joseph observes, with obvious affection. 'We've always tried to keep in touch with him and he performed regularly in 'Bridgetower', my opera about the 18th century Barbadian violin virtuoso George Bridgetower. Steve has done a lot of wide reading and contemplation over the years as well as playing, and in my opinion he's on a level with some of the greatest people who've played this music.' Joseph also credits the 'massive inspiration' of Peter King's presence. As King's autobiography 'Flying High' establishes, Joseph's encouragement and musical support was crucial when the older man was trying to straighten out his health and musical perspectives in the 1980s.

Joseph is now considering adapting some of the big band charts for a tenet version including clarinet, tenor (Williamson), two altos (Soweto Kinch and Nat Facey), plus trumpet, trombone, bass trombone and rhythm section. Mini-festivals built around the star-power of the sidemen also appeal to him, perhaps weekenders in which a series of concerts and workshops might feature the players' own groups, followed by a showcase finale for the whole orchestra. 'Workshops are very important,' Joseph the subtle educator insists, 'It's crucial not only to acknowledge the contributions of the greatest figures in jazz history internationally, but set the pathway of the music's development in the UK within that - the roles of people like John Dankworth, Humph, Stan Tracey, Ronnie Scott, Joe Harriott. You can mark the overall history, but observe within it how organically different individuals build their own style. We're lucky to play jazz, because it encourages self-education - it gives us a palette of our own, offers the freedom to investigate ourselves. It's a wonderful attitude to music-making that brings the best out of us as human beings.'

At the top of his agenda for 2012, Julian Joseph puts his trio, as ever ('it keeps me honest, keeps my technique together'), but close behind are his partnerships with eclectic classical cellist Matthew Barley ('not as harmonically sophisticated as pure jazz, but the creative feeling is pretty high') and violinist Victoria Mullova, in a world music setting also featuring percussionist Paul Clarvis. Joseph is also

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writing two new pieces for the revamped National Youth Jazz Orchestra and a mixed-genre piece for the Cultural Olympiad with dancer Sheron Wray, plus there'll be another opera composed with writer Mike Phillips, with 'Tristan and Isolde' as its inspiration. As if all that weren't enough, the pianist is also advancing a project with the Hackney Music Development Trust and fellow pianist Trevor Watkis to open a new jazz academy. 'It'll be called the Julian Joseph Jazz Academy,' Joseph declares, with the characteristic wide-screen addendum that the long-term plan 'is to develop it nationwide, and then worldwide.'

Joseph is encouraged by recent developments at NYJO and also endorses campaigns for the expansion of jazz content in the broadcasting media. 'I have a great home at Radio 3,' he says, 'and they're doing their best to keep the quality high, but it always seems to me that when we're all being told to tighten our belts, that's the time to try harder. Jazz musicians are easy to take for granted. You can call us yesterday, and we'll still do it. It isn't like that for classical music or rock. So maybe we need to take ourselves more seriously, and keep pressing for the people in charge to recognise how amazing this music is.'