



# UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES FOR JAZZ

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## Briefing 8: How can we develop younger (16 – 25 year olds) audiences for jazz?

### Key Points

- Young people enjoy live music as a social experience. This means that the interaction between audience members and between the musicians and the audience is important.
- Like other audiences for music, most young people are Emotional not Analytical Responders
- Young people are intimidated by jazz and their perceptions of jazz audiences
- They lack a framework within which they can make sense of jazz and find accepted codes of audience behaviour unfamiliar
- Promoters need to find new, more informal ways of presenting jazz as events, not concerts
- They should recruit young people who are influential within their peer group as ambassadors
- Getting more jazz, both live and recorded, played in the venues where young people gather would also be effective
- Current publicity material actively discourages young people from attending.

### How do people develop musical preferences?

Music and language are similar because they both need the brain to be sensitive to and remember sound patterns. There is a critical period for language acquisition.<sup>i</sup> It appears that the same is true for music. In pre- and early adolescence, following the language learning period, the brain more readily develops neural connections linked with the acquisition of musical 'grammar'. This means that we are more likely to remember and prefer the styles of music we were exposed to when young.<sup>ii</sup>

Children aged under six don't have preferences for particular musical styles but by twelve they listen to less non-rock music than at any other age. A range of research has

shown that tastes broaden again after that. One study identified that overall preference for traditional jazz increased each year from the age of twelve throughout secondary school and college.<sup>iii</sup>

Although most adolescents prefer popular styles, the research shows that they may also be open to other genres, given the opportunity for exposure. In all styles, young people prefer faster tempo examples of unfamiliar musical styles with moderately complex melodies performed with high levels of dynamic variation. They prefer music in major keys. How the music sounds is much more important than the lyrics or theme. Repeated listening increases positive responses. Levels of preference for particular pieces begin to rise after three listening sessions and peak between six to eight listening sessions.<sup>iv</sup>

- *The kids I teach don't have a problem with jazz. There's very few - if you're lucky only one per cent - who don't want to improvise.*
- *But do they connect what they are playing with jazz?*
- *Yes, because I always call it jazz. I start them off with Blues because that's much easier to play. I've had problems with swing - not interested - but get them onto funk and they are away.*
- *Where's that demographic in the audiences, though?*

Leicester focus group participants

### **Musical tastes and personality**

Between the ages of 12 and 17, the average teenager spends over 10,000 hours listening to music. They use it to shape their identity:

Young people use music to resist authority at all levels, assert their personalities, develop peer relationships and romantic entanglements, and learn about things that their parents and the schools aren't telling them.

They actively use music to satisfy emotional, social and developmental needs so, of course, researchers are interested in their preferences. They have found links between preferred musical styles and personality types.

Marginalised teenagers and those experiencing psychological challenges prefer 'heavier' styles such as hard rock and heavy metal. They use this music to distract themselves with external stimulation, so avoiding unwanted moods, to reassure themselves that they are not alone in thinking and feeling as they do and to create a catharsis that calms them.

'Lighter' music such as pop, dance and teen pop is characterised by lyrics that explore relationships, identity and fitting in. As girls tend to focus more on social issues, they are more likely to prefer these styles. Preferences for these styles tend to reflect personal developmental issues eg teenagers with few friends prefer music with themes of loneliness and independence.

Adolescents with no strong preference for either 'heavy' or 'light' styles of music change the way they listen to music according to particular circumstances. They may listen to validate their mood or to change it. They may listen to one style of music when with peers and another when alone. They change styles according to the issues they are dealing with at the time because no one issue particularly distresses or preoccupies them.

*I like pretty music - chillout stuff. But then when I'm walking down the road and I'm really in a strop I like really heavy stuff. It depends on my mood.*

Derby focus group participant

Listening to one style of music rather than another doesn't cause developmental issues in teenagers, but the researchers speculate that exposing teenagers to a greater variety of music may help greater self-exploration and validation of thoughts and feelings and so help their development.<sup>v</sup>

### **Social influences**

Teenagers are strongly influenced by their peers.

*I really like live music, I like going to gigs. I really like Marley and Josh's band. I like all of Josh's music because he's really cool. I like being around musical people.*

Derby focus group participant

They want to fit in and this means liking music that is popular. Scanning teenagers' brains shows that when they are rating how much they like a piece of music without knowing how popular it is, the reward centres of the brain are active. When they know the popularity of the song, only the areas of the brain associated with negative emotional states are active. This appears to be because they feel anxious about the mismatch between their preference and that of other people. To reduce the negative feeling, they tend to switch their choices towards the consensus.<sup>vi</sup>

The problem with jazz is that the stereotypes associated with enthusiasts are particularly negative (see Briefing 6 for more details).

*My 14 year old burst out laughing when I told him where I was coming this evening. He found it funny that anyone would want to talk about jazz music or have an opinion on it ... And he plays the trumpet in the school jazz band.*

Leicester focus group participant

## **How do young people respond to jazz?**

All the quotations that follow are from the twelve participants in the Derby focus group. Aged between 19 and 35, they were recruited from Derby University undergraduates, students from other tertiary education institutes and young people working in Derby. They were selected because they had an interest in music but had never attended a live jazz performance. They were invited to see a gig with Tony Kofi at Buddha Jees, a stylish bar on the edge of Derby city centre and to discuss the experience a week later.

### **Why do they go to live gigs?**

Gigs are a social experience:

*There was a live band I went to see at a local festival. Their name escapes me. It was a couple of guys in suits. They were kind of like folk music and one of them played the fiddle and there was a lot of banter between them. There was just two of them but they were doing amazing things and had a really good interaction with the audience. and the setting - that it was a little festival and I was there with my friends.*

Active participation in the gig is really important. The worst kind of gig is where there is no interaction between audience members and between the musicians and the audience.

- *One of those gigs where there's a band and everyone just stands and nods their heads and holds their drink and no-one dances.*
- *Or when they sit on the floor - kind of detached.*
- *Or when the band's not into it at all. You can tell because the atmosphere just dies.*

For many of the participants, active participation is about physically expressing an engagement with the music. Sitting and listening is a novel experience that only a few have started to enjoy:

*I used to go to a lot of rock gigs. And I'd be one of the people who's always at the front going crazy. But this gig we sat upstairs and we had a table and we just sat and watched the band. And that was really different, taking a step back and just watching it. Just appreciating the music in a different way. That was my first experience of not jumping around and just listening and watching.*

### **Finding new music**

The most important way of finding new musical experiences is through recommendations by friends and musical heroes:

- *It's like a tree. It started with one person that I really got into and it was who they liked and then who they liked and then who they liked. And it carries on branching for ever and that's what's so great about music. You read interviews they've done and they talk about people.*
- *And MySpace. I look at someone's MySpace page and listen to some of the tracks they've got and then they'll have other bands they're friends of and you might listen to them.*

Music is even a way of finding new friends:

*It's just people really. I've met quite a few people recently at gigs and things. You talk and you say 'I like this and I like that' and you swap music. And hearing what other friends are listening to. And then films and adverts.*

### **Perceptions of jazz**

Many of the young focus group participants are intimidated by jazz:

*People think it's pretentious and a bit kind of cliquey and a bit self-referential and up itself.*

This is largely because most (but not all) are Emotional rather than Analytical responders:

*Some music is about the words and the feelings in the song and sometimes jazz is quite intimidating because it's so sort of clever and that's sometimes the main focus - how clever it is.*

The few positive perceptions they have are around a stereotype of authenticity and heritage:

*I'd prefer something really edgy and out there or some old guys playing proper jazz in a smoky room*

*This wasn't the kind of jazz I expected when you said 'It's a jazz night' I expected old jazz like with a rusty sax. And it would be an experience rather than sort of ...*

They recognise that these perceptions are probably inaccurate but have few reference points that would better shape their expectations:

- *-I think its exposure as well. A lot of music - blues or whatever - has come down, we've got it watered down in the music that we listen to today. I know there's elements of jazz but ...*
- *-Yeah, it's not much in the mainstream so it's hard to understand it.*
- *It's not something we listen to every day. You don't go 'Oh, that's come from jazz' whereas we would say 'Rhythm 'n' Blues, it's come from there'.*

## **The gig**

Most of the participants found it difficult to get into the music but overall found the experience interesting but not necessarily enjoyable:

*I got into it at points when I forgot about everything else and was just grooving on the jazz. It's a bit like that - you just lose yourself. The points where I was enjoying it, I sort of forgot who I was and was just into the music. For the first five minutes when they started playing I said 'I don't think I can go to the [focus group]. I don't think I can tell people what I think.*

There were several reasons for this:

These young people have different codes of behaviour when attending gigs that centre on a group experience of physical and emotional engagement:

*I wasn't quite sure how I was supposed to enjoy it, how I was supposed to show my appreciation. There wasn't anywhere to dance. I wasn't sure that I wanted to dance, though because the place was too bright for dancing. And I felt a bit self-conscious being so close to the artists and at times not really being that into it, I felt awkward.*

They found some aspects of jazz audience behaviour bizarre:

- *I really didn't like the clapping after every little bit.*
- *Yeah, I absolutely hated that.*
- *Yeah, it was really annoying, they kept clapping.*
- *After everyone had done a solo you had to clap and I felt really like awkward.*
- *I'm clapping because everyone else is clapping and I don't know why.*
- *It's like a convention in jazz, you hear it on recordings of gigs. After every solo everyone claps. But it did feel a bit contrived.*

Sitting quietly without being able to comment on the music and musicians is an alien experience:

- *It would be great if you were kind of talking as well but we were sitting watching all that time and it's a long time to concentrate.*
- *It was the way they had arranged the chairs. They were all looking at the jazz players and you couldn't turn round and talk to each other.*
- *I felt really bad if I talked to anybody. I thought everyone was watching me and I felt embarrassed.*

They were unnerved by their perceptions of the other people there. They felt that the rest of the audience were committed enthusiasts:

*This is a bit of a weird thing to say but I felt awkward and part of that was because I know we didn't pay but people had paid ten quid to come and see it. So it was like a gig. I'd quite enjoy it if I was to walk in off the street and sit and have a drink with jazz playing. But you wouldn't pay ten quid if all you were going to do is sit and have a chat and a glass of wine. The kind of people that were there had probably looked forward to it for ages and got their ticket in advance ...*

This highlighted their own lack of knowledge:

- *I feel embarrassed that I don't know anything about jazz.*
- *You've got a couple of records and it's like nothing compared to the massive collections that people have got.*

They regarded the local musicians very positively but because their previous enjoyment of live music focuses so much on the inter-relationship between the musicians and between the musicians and the audience, they were hyper-sensitive to the dynamics on stage:

*Because they were from Derby, it kind of broke down the barriers that come with jazz a little bit. But then you had the guy that was famous and he was kind of, not stand-offish, but he didn't know their names and he was like 'I'm really cool.' and that kind of put the barriers up again.*

They felt they weren't familiar enough with the musical context to make sense of what they were hearing:

*It's the history as well that's kind of the unknown. We were talking to a lady and she was saying oh, if you listen closely you can hear the skeleton of that song. But we wouldn't even know the original song to tell what they had adapted and changed that from. If they did a jazz version of a song we all knew then we could pick up ...*

They were fascinated by what was happening on stage and recalled moments from the gig in great detail but clearly had no frame of reference to make sense of it:

*There was a kind of format: the alto sax and then the guitar and then the piano and then the drums. Sometimes it was the drum instead of the piano but every song seemed to be in that format.*

- *Sometimes they were freestyling, and the guy that was leading it, the celebrity musician, he sometimes pointed to the drummer like he ... because there seemed to be like a battle between the keyboardist and the drummer and the drummer usually won because he was really good.*
- *Yeah, [Tony Kofi] would be going like 'Wait, wait, wait, wait, now you go.*
- *I noticed him doing it to the guitarist to let the saxophonist go.*
- *He'd started to go for it but [Tony Kofi] was like 'No, it's my turn.'*

They place huge store on originality, listening out for material written by the musicians rather than what they regarded as 'covers'

- *I noticed they played covers, songs that had already been written, and songs that he'd written but they didn't really play anything that they'd written.*
- *He did let them just do their thing one time.*
- *That was the best bit.*

Although their positive perceptions of jazz were based on nostalgia, they also respond positively to musical experiment:

- *I didn't feel they were like taking any risks really in the music. I felt it was all very controlled and rigid.*
- *Jazz isn't meant to be like that, it's meant to be improvised.*
- *They were improvising but it all felt very clean and nothing new about it.*

*There were sections where they had composed sections of music and others when they were improvising and I thought those composed moments were more interesting and more edgy than when they were actually improvising. They were improvising in a format.*

# What would persuade young people to engage with jazz?

It would be very difficult to develop younger audiences for the kinds of event currently promoted by EMJAZZ members.

## Presentation

Young people are potentially open to the music – in fact they are more likely to engage with contemporary jazz than existing attendees as long as there is an entry point.

*We love the Dust Collectors. They do some jazz but they do it in a really contemporary way.*

Here the entry point is that they know of the musicians as part of the Derby music scene. They are not friends, but their social circles interconnect.

The problem is the way the music is presented. Young people need gig formats that enable them to engage actively, feel at home and interact with the musicians and the rest of the audience. This is about informality and atmosphere. They respond to events, not to concerts:

- *If they combine education stuff with films and stuff - like I remember there was a film a while back about Ornette Coleman. And a jazz evening in the Square.*
- *With all different types of jazz, Latin Jazz.*
- *Street party, yay!*

The key factors are:

- Informal, friendly venues
- Seating layout
- Lighting
- Food and drink
- Interaction with the musicians
- Interaction between audience members

## Ambassadors

If the influencers in their peer group and their musical heroes are into something, they follow suit. The most effective strategy for EMJAZZ promoters is to recruit young people as ambassadors who can make recommendations and get appropriate publicity to the places where young people hang out. Derby Jazz has a 24 year old local musician on their board and he clearly has a huge influence on a wide circle of young people in the city.

## Collaboration

Another entry point would be to collaborate with local artists and musicians with a strong local following and to develop cross artform projects to widen the appeal.

*You know like we were saying about how they improvise on songs and [we didn't know the originals], maybe you could get a local band to compose a piece of music and [jazz musicians] take that and do something like jazz with it.*

## **Venues**

Taking jazz to venues where young people gather would also be effective. But the paid-for concert has no appeal. Clearly EMJAZZ promoters must charge an entry fee to afford to book their usual high quality professional bands and soloists so this would mean finding another format in which to promote jazz alongside existing activity.

- *Maybe they could have a tour of cafes and bars.*
- *There's been a real proliferation of cafes.*
- *You could talk.*
- *It's quite intimate which is good for that sort of music.*
- *It's more casual, you don't have to get dressed up.*
- *There's coffee.*
- *Yeah, you don't have to get drunk. Especially in the week nights. You want to go out but someone has to drive and you don't want to all drink.*
- *And if you go to a club then you're obviously going to have to get really wasted.*
- *If there's a jazz night somewhere you feel really comfortable then you can have one drink and go home.*
- *It's nice to sit down as well. Sometimes when you go into venues it can be a bit intimidating. If you can go into a nice environment where there are comfy sofas - I know there were sofas here but the whole set up was very, like, in rows.*

The jazz doesn't necessarily have to be live. Finding ways of getting more jazz played as background music would also be effective.

## **Publicity**

Young people are actively turned off by current publicity. They need visuals and samples, not words, and a brand that they can identify with.

*And get local artists to do the flyers. Because when initially I looked at the flyer, it was really Council, it's very like Derby City Council. They're all the same format and the same logo. It's not pleasing at all. ... The Derby Jazz posters at the moment are like the same every month, they just have a different colour.*

This publicity is pointless unless it is distributed to the places where young people hang out and where other relevant music events are advertised.

*I didn't even know the jazz nights existed at all. I've never seen it advertised.*

## Education activity

Some young people would like to know more about jazz as this would help them engage with the music:

*If it's really bad music then I don't think there's a lot anyone can do about it. If I'm like 'Oh, I'm not quite sure,' if it's intrigued me a little bit, then I can be steered different ways by learning new information about it.*

The majority are Emotional Responders and so increasing their knowledge would not encourage them to engage more. They simply need to listen to more jazz so they can find the styles that appeal to them and that they can respond to emotionally:

*I think jazz has created an intellectual, elitist divide to it. It puts people in their place who don't know much about jazz. It makes them think they would like it if they could understand it. To me that doesn't make sense. To me, if I didn't like a piece of music and someone spoke to me about what it meant, I still wouldn't like the piece of music. It doesn't matter to me how much I understand it because if it speaks to you, it speaks to you and if it doesn't, it doesn't. And people would feel bad if they don't understand it when it's about getting people not to feel bad about not like it or not understanding it. If someone breaks down the musical theory you think 'Oh, it's quite clever but [it still doesn't speak to me]'.  
  

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## References

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