

IAN CARR 1933 – 2009

A Personal Note

One of the more tragic effects of Alzheimer's Disease is that the need for lengthy care often means that people are out of the public eye and, in our fast moving world, out of public memory. When Ian Carr died last February he had not played for some time, and had barely appeared in public at all for two years, yet when I started suggesting a memorial event I was struck by the eagerness with which the idea was greeted, the generosity shown by so many musicians and non-musicians in making this event possible. It is a measure of the impact Ian had on so many lives.

One example of his impact was shown when he was in a care home and the American trumpeter Wallace Roney, who was playing at Ronnie Scott's, went out of his way to make contact and to invite Ian to the club. Roney was the only young trumpeter to be mentored by Miles Davis; just before his death Miles had given his famous red trumpet to him. We expected Roney to want to talk about Ian's monumental biography of Miles but he spoke about Ian's work with Nucleus, which turned out to have been a huge formative influence and inspiration in his teenage years.

Ian was amazingly well-read. You never knew what aspects of his wide knowledge a conversation about music would draw on, but it ended with you having deeper insight into aspects of jazz, greater understanding and more love for the music. I vividly remember a lift home from a Rendell - Carr gig during which he explained to me with great clarity the German philosopher Nietzsche's usage of the terms Apollonian and Dionysian, concepts which as a 20 year old I had never encountered.

Named for the god Apollo, the Apollonian aspects of art are characterised by thoughtfulness, order, rationality, poise and self control – all aspects of “higher” thought. The Dionysian (after Dionysus, also known as Bacchus) were instinctual, chaotic, emotional and even irrational. In Nietzsche's view it is the interaction between the two that makes drama interesting, and this was Ian's attitude to jazz. To him jazz was a music that spanned two aspects of human existence mixing intellectual, Apollonian music with the earthy Dionysian legacy of the blues to profound effect. What I learnt in those minutes about jazz, blues, and the arts, especially music and poetry changed my whole understanding. Experience for yourself two of Ian's passions: Louis Armstrong's West End Blues and WB Yeats' Crazy Jane poems.

It helps me now, over 40 years later, to understand music in general and Ian's in particular: his compositions for Nucleus often have long melodic lines which unfurl slowly, but which are underpinned by bass figures so funky and seductive that young people who were not born when the records were made are sampling them to use in their home music making and posting them on YouTube. The tension built up between the two elements - Apollonian melody and Dionysian rhythms – is what makes his music so memorable, and the ability and courtesy to explain it clearly and patiently to a young fan is what makes the man so memorable.

Ian's achievements are unparalleled: a brilliant trumpet player who won a battle in 1982 against colon cancer to continue playing; a talented composer of memorable pieces; an outstanding music critic who provides deep insights into the music of

others; a passionate spokesman for jazz and especially British jazz; a selfless teacher whose list of ex-students reads like a roster of rising young jazz stars

But this event can only scratch the surface. It would take a series of concerts to cover other aspects of his musical career: The Animals Big Band, his work with the New Jazz Orchestra and Neil Ardley, Poetry and Jazz with Michael Garrick, his Shakespearian pieces, work with George Russell, with the United Jazz Rock Ensemble, the London Jazz Orchestra. Then another series could show the impact he had on several generations of younger musicians in his teaching at the Guildhall School and the Weekend Arts College. And in addition to his music there are his achievements as writer and broadcaster to commemorate.

So let us remember Ian Carr tonight and begin to celebrate the generosity of his spirit, the enlightenment of his writing and the pleasure of listening to his music.

George Foster

Programme note for the 'Ian Carr - A Celebration of a Life in Music' concert held at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London on 23 February 2010, to mark the first anniversary of Ian Carr's death. Text supplied to this website by George Foster, with thanks.

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