



[Manchester Jazz Festival](#) : Preview 2012
in Manchester from 13th July to 21st July
by [Charlotte Starkey](#) July 2012

In just a few days' time the 17th Manchester Jazz Festival opens. Each summer for the past sixteen years Manchester city centre, at different venues, has come alive to the sounds of the saxophone, clarinet, guitar, keyboard, percussion and vocals – all the voices of jazz. Like the water that endlessly bubbles from the Jubilee fountain in Albert Square (marking Queen Victoria's sixty years), drawn from the ever-flowing streams that feed the great lakes and reservoirs of Cumbria, the rhythms of jazz pulse, whine, fill the air with waves of sound around Albert Square, St Anne's, the musical venues of concert halls and bars.

You can get married in the Town Hall, step outside and forget the expensive hotel you booked,

buy your drinks and food from the numerous stalls and enter into the groove; there's your reception laid on, inside and outside the big Festival Pavilion, shared by every passer-by drawn in, en route from the office, the shop, the train station, just like the wedding-guests of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, captivated by some haunting lonely horn.

Manchester, of course, has in its own right a tremendous musical tradition and reaches out, at every level, every age, every group, to audiences large and small. From the intimacy of Chets, to the acoustic grandeur of the [Bridgewater](#), from the frenzy of an open air rock venue or arena to the familiarity of a bar, and the historic roll-call of rock and pops greats – there is a huge choice of wonderful music; and, in July, it seems that the whole of Manchester city centre becomes an arena for jazz of all kinds.

This year the Jazz Festival runs from 13th to 21st July and it is sited in various venues across the city. As usual the Festival Pavilion in Albert Square is the central site where the whole square becomes a base for a vast range of performances by musicians from across the world and closer to home. Many of these events are free and there are food and drink stalls serving throughout the day, with tables and chairs for the performances. It's the transformation of the Square that creates the atmosphere. Gladstone, Albert and other worthies are bathed in the groove and audiences move in and out of the Pavilion as the music flows from one gig to another, with each performance having a substantial time slot usually within the spread of an hour. One of the great achievements of the Jazz Festival is to include and promote young musicians and among them this year, on Sunday, 15th June, at 3.00 p.m. in the Pavilion (Albert Square) Jambone, the North-East based youth jazz ensemble, bring their vibrant sound to Manchester.

By contrast, at [Matt & Phreds](#) on Tuesday 17th July at 6.00p.m., what appears to be a reflective programme illustrated with music aims to explore the relationships between jazz, black history and current racial dynamics. Clearly this is a central topic given the centrality of black

musicians to the creation and development of jazz and against the current diversity of jazz influences and styles, many on display at this festival, and against a complex history of racial issues more widely experienced. One is reminded how deeply modern jazz is locked into the great musical tradition of the trumpeters, vocalists, guitarists and pianists of Black America: Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Chuck Berry, Miles Davis, Ray Charles, the Cuban connections of some, and so many more amazing performers (and Gershwin listed there, too, as perhaps one of the first white composers to understand truly American music).

Then there is the magical sound of John Surman at the [RNCM](#) Theatre on Wednesday, 18th July, at 7.30 p.m. His musical journey began in earnest in the 1960s and throughout there is a distinctive quality of innovation with instruments (he himself is a multi-instrumentalist). His style defies any clear-cut category. He is a powerful improviser, has great depths as an instrumentalist working with voice, piano and sax and revealing influences that reach beyond and before jazz. For me he crosses those complex boundaries between folk, classical and jazz where composers have worked with harmonics and melody to create powerful, evocative impressions.



This preview is not a list of the Festival's performances: there are many great musicians here. It is more an attempt to encourage anyone who has not been into town during the middle of July, or who is wondering what to do to shake off the blues of the summer drenchings and floods, to take the trip, catch the bus or train, bring out the bicycle, and head for Albert Square. There you will find programmes, stickers, helpful stewards (all volunteers), Friends of the Festival, stalls, audiences, musicians and music. Some years ago, before I knew about this event, I happened to be in town and heard this pulsing, rhythmical wall of sound. Fascinated I turned the corner from Cross Street and there it was – the Pavilion, the Square, alive with the sound of jazz, over a week of seemingly unending music. There are people of all ages, all interests – listening, tapping, moving with the beat, with all these sounds around you to capture the imagination. Somehow Manchester turns into a musical emporium and the cobbled square is renewed, revealed as a place of beauty.

One of the advantages of approaching the Festival through the events at the Pavilion is that it is possible to hear a vast range of jazz styles and performers to suit many tastes. For those unsure of jazz it is a good opportunity to sample some of the bands and styles – blues and swing, European folk influences, gypsy rhythms, flamenco, modern improvisations, soloists, ensembles, the famous, the young musicians to note, guitarists, flautists, the flugelhorn, keyboard, vocalists, percussion, all are to be found. Jazz lives in the metropolitan areas of the world as much as it grew out of the Deep South of American blues. It finds its home and its audiences among the restlessness, the searching, the rhythms of the arteries of the city, and yet it can evoke pastoral tranquillity, echoes of folk music, plain chant of medieval and Renaissance Christianity (whose own Dorian mode is identical to that of jazz).

It may perhaps be relevant here to point to one venue, St Anne's Church in St Anne's Square where often the performance is both new and melodic. Often on a Thursday – this year about 1.00 p.m. – there is a performance that explores the acoustics of the instruments played as well as the acoustics of this impressive eighteenth century church where for me jazz seems to find a natural home. It is singularly appropriate this year because the performance on the 19th July comes just two days after both the church and the square, St Anne's Square, celebrate their three hundredth birthday.

The Manchester Jazz Festival has had a regular newly-commissioned programme over the years and some outstanding works have appeared as a result. In 2010 Neil Yates's *Surrounds* was played in St Anne's Church with musicians placed around the church at floor and balcony level, moving around to surround the audience with sounds evoking with enormous sensitivity and lyricism the 'surrounding' landscapes and city scenes of this region of England: tremendously impressive. This year, on Thursday 19th July, at 7.30 p.m. in the RNCM theatre a song-cycle by the Manchester composer-pianist George King will be performed. On Friday, 20th July, in the Pavilion at 6.00 p.m. there is an hour long newly commissioned work by Pete Moser – a totally committed and enthusiastic promoter of music, improvisation and performance across the age range.



A number of events are ticketed and it is always advisable to check the brochure and programme for details regarding these performances, including information about booking tickets. Some events are very popular and/or places strictly limited, and it is advised in the brochure which venues should be pre-booked to avoid disappointment.

This is one of those sponsored municipal events which truly brings many people together as one in a city notable for the big occasion. All I can say is I've never been disappointed and it is

wonderful to know that I can pop into town almost any time of day during the week of the Festival and be sure of hearing some fantastic music, some free, some paid for, but always inspiring. It's the mix of sound, the easy-going relaxation of the flowing music that makes this festival so special. Truly a celebration of music, making music, listening to music, being inspired by music. Everyone is somehow relaxed. The percussive rhythms and melodies work their spell and fill the air with unexpected beauty, exciting rhythms, something entirely new, mesmeric and lasting. If you love music, love jazz or just want to try it, have the time, have yet to discover it, then I think this is well worth a visit at some point in the week. Many would agree.

All the relevant information is to be found at <http://www.manchesterjazz.com> .