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Everything comes naturally: Interview with JIM SIMPSON, founder of the Birmingham Solihull & Sandwell Jazz Festival

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On July 20th, the 34th Birmingham Solihull & Sandwell Jazz Festival launched at the Birmingham Library Marmalade. During the ten-day festival, more than 300 musicians travelled from worldwide and presented 234 performances at 115 venues in the Birmingham region, making it one of the best jazz galas for music lovers from all over the world.

At the same time as the festival, there was a rock star vintage photography exhibition by photographer Jim Simpson from 1964-1969. This photo exhibition features a collection of 15 photos of rock stars from the 1960s, including household names even known by audiences who are not familiar to rockers: The Rolling Stones, Black Sabbath, Nina Simone and so on.

The company that organised the festival is Big Bear Records, and the founder is the photographer Jim Simpson.

The first time I saw Jim was at the opening ceremony of the festival. This gentleman who I cannot guess his age had an open laughter, energy and passion, as if he himself was playing a piece of jazz. The second time I saw him was at Lee Longlands, where his photography exhibition was held. Jim introduced his photographs one by one, and started telling me his jazz stories.

Reporter Donglei Wang



60's rock star in the photo

The photos on display were taken in Birmingham and the surrounding area from 1964 to 1969. The artists include: Mick Jagger, The Rolling Stones, Black Sabbath, The Moody Blues, Spencer Davis Group, the founders of American rock and roll: Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, British singer Marianne Faithfull and American singer Nina Simone.



In the 1960s, Jim was employed as a photographer for Melody Maker, which was the first weekly British music magazine ever published, and was hugely popular at that time. As Jim himself was also a trumpet player and music producer, he built a comfortable and trusty relationship with bands and musicians which helped him when he was taking these photographs.

Although these photos were taken more than half a century ago, Jim remembered details very clearly. He stood in front of the pictures and recalled the scenes and the people in the photos.



"Jerry Lee Lewis, he was a great musician, and of course everyone is familiar with his nickname, The Killer." Jim recalled straight away when we saw the photo. "He may be one of my favourite musicians. His performance impressed me dramatically. When he had this photograph taken, he was just caught in a press scandal. At that time, he was only 19 and just married his 14-year-old cousin, which created a huge scandal at that time. But he came from an impoverished

white dirt-farmer community where this sort of marriage was normal in his hometown. I'm not sure that it is proper to sit in judgement on such things from such a distance in time and culture."



"Marianne Faithfull. In those days it was said that a girl could take a Beatle home to meet her mother, but not a Rolling Stone. Marianne worked with and fell in love with Mick Jagger, one of the original of Rolling Stones. Marianne was a "Posh Bird Gone Bad" the media shouted.

"I photographed her seven or eight times. Later, in the 90s, some thirty years later we met again when I booked her to appear at the

ill-fated Ronnie Scotts in Birmingham. When I gave her some of the early photos she looked at them carefully and told me, "Your Photography is good, but your delivery is awful!"



"Chuck Berry, I always believed that he might just have been the greatest American poet of the 20th Century, and he is really such an enigma as a person. He can be modest and courteous and suddenly become the most disagreeable man you could meet."

"Nina Simone, ... you should have heard of her, a really famous female jazz singer. But she is probably one of the most unpleasant people I have ever met. Look at her face, her expression says 'Can you take your photographs and then leave my dressing room immediately?' Another time, after she became well-known, she flew into Birmingham from Holland to attend the British Jazz Awards at The Grand Hotel and accept her Platinum Disc for "My Baby Just Cares For Me". The audience gave her a wonderful welcome, but all she would say to her fans was, 'Thank you, goodbye', and then she stepped down. Very ungracious.



"BLACK SABBATH"



"You were their first music producer and manager, and the media say that Sabbath became famous under your management. Is this the band you are most familiar with?" the reporter asked.

"Yes, this photo was one of first ever photos I took of them. It was taken exactly on the day when the band was named as Black Sabbath. I had been working with

them for two years. These guys! They practiced 6 hours every day at that time, and finally the music was engraved in their hearts. When they performed, the only thing they wanted to achieve was to make the audience happy, and were so well-rehearsed that they didn't need to worry about the music or what the other guys were doing. From that time on, the band created the hard rock style – Heavy Metal! – born in Birmingham created in Aston by four kids who were simply the best at what they did."





"The Rolling Stones, in 1964, this was their very early time. This photo was the first of a few sessions I did with them. It was taken in the dressing room of the ITV programme, Thank You Lucky Stars in Aston.

Look at this. Jim pointed to a single photo of Brian Jones. "He was the core character of the band. He formed it, recruited the musicians and selected the repertoire. Later he was forced to leave, and then died in a very mysterious situation. He was the most controversial figure in the band and a very troubled genius".

"How much troubled?" the reporter asked.



"He didn't mind having the photographs taken, but he wouldn't talk to me, never. You see this photo? It has been used in many places, because it just captures his personality. The characters of other members of the band were much better-very talkative."

In the process of recalling these photos, Jim mentioned to me several times that this person is just like himself/herself in the photo. It can be seen clearly that he hopes that his photography, whether on stage or back-stage, can present the most natural state of these musicians. He told me "I used to talk to them about music. It relaxed them and made them forget about posing, which would have been unnatural."

From photographer to the jazz festival: Frustrated with the British jazz environment

What makes me curious is that Jim, who had such a successful photography experience, what made him turn to a full-time music producer and organise such a large-scale jazz festival, especially for 34 years. We talked about this history.

The reporter [Donglei Wang]: You were a photographer in the early days. How did you turn from photography to running a record company?

Jim: This is easy to explain. My mother was extremely interested in photography. My grandfather used to work in photography before photo studios existed. On my 21st birthday, my mother and father sent me a camera as a birthday present when I was in the RAF in Gibraltar. It was a good camera, made by Zeiss from Germany. I took the camera and started photographing in Southern Spain which has such beautiful light. When I returned to England I worked as a trumpet player. So when I was in my 20s, I was both a photographer and a musician.

Slowly but steadily the obsession with music took over and my interest in photography faded but never died.

The band I led developed from Rhythm and Blues, to Soul and Rock Steady until we had the first Ska hit in this country, "Rudi's In Love" – that was The Locomotive.

I signed a breakaway band, The Dog That Bit People to an album deal with EMI. The environment of the recording studio has always fascinated me, still does. It is my favourite place. EMI asked me if I would like to produce the album in Abbey Road Studios. That was the first album I produced and a great place to start from. Since then, I have produced more than 200 albums.

In October of this year, it will be the 50th anniversary of my company, Big Bear Records. I think that we are probably the longest-established independent

record company in the UK, so we are busy producing seven albums, two blues, two rock and three jazz albums to celebrate our anniversary.

[Donglei Wang: Your jazz festival has been running for 34 years. 34 years ago, what made you start organising a jazz festival?](#)

When I left Locomotive to manage the band, I soon found myself looking after a total of four bands including Black Sabbath. When I lost Sabbath we had a number one album, a number sixteen album and a number two single. It seemed pretty obvious to me that there was little point in discovering and developing young bands just to lose them when they became successful.

Young musicians, like many other people, can be impatient for success and want to take the short cut to posh cars and fancy suits. It's easy to understand their thinking. Sabbath for instance were around 18 years old, had only recently tasted success and had little confidence that it would endure.



So I moved on and got involved in finding neglected American bluesmen, touring and recording them. For a long time at the start of the record company, the music I recorded was the blues, my original love. The singers

were all American, often legendary blues musicians. I started to arrange regular blues tours, often lasting five or six weeks, sometimes with as many as six American bluesmen playing through most of Europe.



After a while I started to work with rock bands again, notably The Quads from Birmingham who had a hit record on Big Bear and were named by John Peel as his favourite band of the 1970s. We also had success with a blue-eyed Soul band called Muscles, but at the same time, I found myself increasingly disillusioned by what was being promoted as jazz in the early 80s.

The great British jazz players were still trying to scrape a living, of course, but they were increasingly sidelined by a new generation of self-styled experts organisers who did not really understand the music, but were adept at filling in grant applications. Style had overcome substance. Something that is deemed fashionable today will inevitably be discarded as out-of-fashion tomorrow. Jazz got into the hands of academics who, as is their want, did their best to mystify the music and make it inaccessible to ordinary folk. University courses churned out a procession of jazz musicians, but for every Alan Barnes there were dozens of ill-equipped saxophone players all sounding like Michael Brecker and destined to fail to make a living as a musician. Many, of course, would go on to become lecturers in jazz at universities to help perpetuate the nonsense.

In 1984, in a probably futile attempt to make some sort of gesture and to demonstrate to all the joy and accessibility of real jazz, I recruited 12 of Britain's finest jazz musicians, and borrowed Eddie Condon's idea of organising a jam session with two four piece front lines, alternating and sometimes playing together over the four piece rhythm section. One front line was led by Humphrey Lyttelton, the other by Digby Fairweather, both destined to become patrons of the Birmingham Jazz Festival. With the sponsorship of a local brewery, we rented the outdoor Arena Theatre in Cannon Hill Park, attracted a sell-out crowd of 850 people, recorded the whole affair for an album on Big Bear that was named by The Sunday Times as jazz album of the year.

Before the dust had settled, Humph and the Brewery marketing manager had talked me into agreeing to do it again next year, only more of it. And that was how the jazz festival began the following year, and it's still here 34 years later.

[Donglei Wang: It is really successful.](#)

Jim: In this business, I think that survival is success. I believe that a person should be judged not on his achievements, but on his endeavours. Don't look only at his success, but try to see what he has attempted to do whether successfully or otherwise.

[Donglei Wang: From some perspectives, jazz is not a kind of music in which it is easy to survive.](#)

Jim: It's not easy, of course it's not easy. But if you are really interested in jazz, there may be a thousand ways in which to survive. When I was 10 or 12 I discovered and was fascinated by the name of the early jazz pianist Jelly Roll Morton. I was so intrigued that I learned to listen to his, sometimes difficult, recordings and became a fan. Music is not always easy at first to understand, but because I liked the name, I was very focused on learning. You just have to capture the imagination of the audience.

We have 234 performances in this year's jazz festival, of which 218 are free. But there are also many different strands, such as photography, sketching, jitterbug dance lessons, many of which children can attend. When you have 16 people of all ages in a Ukulele class, learning to play and sing a song together within an hour, albeit quite badly, you have probably sown a seed. It's very hard to prise a Ukulele out of a six year old's hands when he has been holding it for 90 minutes. I can't help but think that maybe he will be hooked and that it won't be long before his parents find themselves in a music store buying a Ukulele.

There is nothing wrong with the music. That is clearly demonstrated every year when more than 70,000 people are properly entertained at our jazz festival. What is wrong is the lack of exposure it gets in the media. TV seems to believe that it has done its duty by music in general by screening those hideously

amateur "Britain's Got Talent" shows and the like. The water is further muddied by the introduction of so many music forms as "jazz" when they have nothing to do with the real thing. Another triumph of style over substance.

A lot of our festival-goers will be jazz fans, but certainly not all of them by any means. We try to interrupt people's daily routines by confronting them with jazz performances. Their reaction is normally positive. We have folk who come to the festival every year but who would not describe themselves as jazz fans. They just enjoy the music and I would like to feel that their day was enriched by what they have heard. It's true, there is nothing wrong with the music.

[Donglei Wang: Then you must feel very strongly about the La La Land movie.](#)

Jim: This is a great movie. The characters are very good, the acting and dancing are absolutely brilliant. The musicians dialogue sounds real. Everything is fine except for the music. The lead character, every word he said about jazz sounded right, with passion and enthusiasm. But I don't understand why it was so difficult, in Los Angeles of all places, to find and involve someone who actually understands jazz. The musicians are talking about the excitement of jazz but the music they play is polite, no drive, no lift and nothing swings. If the producers had got the music right, not a difficult thing, it would have taken the film to a whole new level and served well to popularise jazz. As it was, film-goers must have wondered why everyone in the film was so excited about the music.

[Donglei Wang: How did you spend those bleak years with the catastrophic drop in physical sales in the record industry?](#)

Jim: Fortunately, our company doesn't just make records. In addition to releasing albums, we also publish a jazz magazine, operate an agency for jazz and blues musicians, run the jazz festival, and organise events countrywide. Individually these items are not very profitable, but together, it is enough for us to survive and develop.

One advantage we have is our huge back-catalogue of recordings, the majority of which have yet to be digitised, as well as our large archive of photography

which has never been scanned. All we need is to somehow find the time to properly exploit all these things.

We certainly don't have anything that resembles a good business model. Everything we do came about because of an enthusiasm for doing it. We never actually asked ourselves if it would make money.

I publish the magazine because I want to print my own and other like minded folks opinions on jazz. This magazine is now one of the three most important UK jazz publications.

After the interview, Jim invited me to the Brasshouse, a pub that is a famous festival venue nearby, to watch the performance of the British jazz band Digby Fairweather Quartet. It is a most typical British pub, the red sofas, the wooden tables, but there was a huge number of jazz fans listening to the band. Jim is selling the jazz festival CDs and distributing festival programmes. With his team and volunteers, he continues to be busy.



Rolling Stones Early Photo



Rolling Stones early member Brian Jones



Photograph of Black Sabbath at the beginning of its career



Independent music producer Jim Simpson



(Source: English-Chinese Times)

Reporter Donglei Wang

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