

“I WANT THERE TO BE SURPRISES!”

Guy Barker speaks with Max Farrow on his musical journey and what's in store for tonight's show.



Clarke Peters, Kurt Elling and Guy Barker
at *Guy Barker's Big Band Christmas*,
11 December 2016

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It's a year since your first Big Band Christmas at the Royal Albert Hall - how does it feel to be back?

It feels really great! I've got some fantastic guests, and a lot of exciting music to play. I'm really looking forward to it!

Why do you think the Royal Albert Hall has such an appeal for you and other musicians?

When you perform in this beautiful building, you really have a sense of occasion. My dad first brought me here to see Benny Goodman when I was just 14, and even then I was amazed by this huge place. When you look out into the hall from the stage, it can feel quite mesmerising and even a little daunting. But when you start to play, the feeling onstage can be surprisingly intimate. It's a really unique space.

What tracks can we expect to hear tonight?

It's not all Christmas music; otherwise, by the time we'd played this concert three years in a row, we'd have run out of Christmas songs! We've tried to mix things up, but I do think they all work really well for a Christmas celebration.

They still have the same sense of fun, so hopefully we'll be able to give audiences a good evening of music. I'll only give you clues about them, because I want there to be surprises!

Clare Teal is one of my favourite people to work with. Tonight she is going to sing 'Cool Yule', which is such a great song. Clare reminded me of it when I was going through lots of recordings to find songs for this year's concert. The arrangement is very much based on Louis Armstrong's recording.

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CLARE TEAL

As well as being a great singer, Clare is a fantastic communicator. I love listening to her radio show, which is incredibly popular for good reason. I've collaborated with her on a couple of proms, as well as many concerts and recordings, and she's just fantastic to work with.

GEORGIE FAME

Georgie Fame is an absolute legend, whom I've had the pleasure of knowing for many years. When I was a little kid at Christmas, I wrote a letter to Santa Claus asking for Georgie Fame's 'The Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde'. I found his voice completely infectious; I wanted that record more than a train set! He's a truly great artist, and I'm really happy that he's going to be here with us for this concert.

The great **Georgie Fame**, who I have worked with for 25 years, will sing a few songs, including 'Boogie Woogie Santa Claus'. I recently discovered a brilliant recording by Lionel Hampton, and this is the version that we will be playing. Georgie's also going to provide us with a rendition of 'Saturday Night Fish Fry'. I wanted something that created the same kind of atmosphere that we had with Louis Prima's 'Jump, Jive an' Wail' last year, and 'Saturday Night Fish Fry' immediately came to mind. It's a great storytelling swing song that Georgie and I have played together for years and years.

Then we have Frank Loesser's 'What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?', which is just the most beautiful song. Last year, Clare sang 'That's What I Want for Christmas' (inspired by the Nancy Wilson recording). It worked so well that I knew I had to find something that replicated the same sort

of feeling we had then. And so, I came up with 'What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?'.

Giacomo Smith, the great clarinet/saxophone player from the Kansas Smitty's House Band, is performing 'Winter Wonderland' tonight. When arranging this one, I was originally inspired by the Ramsey Lewis Trio's version. I tried to keep that 1960s boogaloo feel to it, but then - well - let's just say I took it somewhere else!

Additionally, **Tony Momrelle** will be here with 'This Christmas', which we've based on Donny Hathaway's version. It was actually Giacomo Smith who introduced me to this one. I didn't know it, but Giacomo said, "If you're doing a Christmas gig, then you've got to do this song." Tony is a huge fan of Donny Hathaway and loves singing his songs. When I asked if he wanted to 'This Christmas', he immediately said, "I'd love to!"

'Merry Christmas Baby' will be sung by **Mica Paris**, and we've also got 'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town', which **Joe Stilgoe** is performing. I heard a great version of 'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town' by Woody Herman, so I'm merging that iteration into Joe's own recording of this song, which was arranged for him by Evan Jolly.

We're going to do two different versions of 'Jingle Bells'. I couldn't help myself! We've got the Count Basie version in the opening, but for the finale I'm going to do a mambo version taken from an

arrangement by Pete Rugolo. I was so surprised when I heard Rugolo's version. It wasn't doing what I'd have expected it to do at all! We couldn't resist putting both versions of this song in, especially the mambo version, since it is full of surprises.

'Jingle Bells Mambo' is within the medley at the end, along with 'Two O'Clock Jump', Harry James's 'Trumpet Blues and Cantabile', 'Bugle Call Rag', 'Air Mail Special' and 'Flying Home' - a whole load of flag-wavers!

I feel so fortunate that I get to work with such great musicians. The band onstage is full of truly great players and many of them are soloists in their own right. They're so generous, and they really want to get things to the highest level that they can, which makes everything so easy and enjoyable for everyone else involved. It's a very comfortable feeling working with people who are like that.

Which is your favourite out of these tracks?

It's impossible to pick out just one, but if I had to I really like 'Boogie Woogie Santa Claus'. There are a couple of different versions, but the one that Lionel Hampton does is just a really fun song. It gets the band roaring, and it's exciting.

You're one of the most prolific trumpeters, composers and jazz musicians in the country - where and when did your interest in music begin?

That was in my school. I was 12, and there was a school brass band. I remember seeing them when I was

sitting in the school hall and just being drawn to it. There weren't enough instruments for the amount of kids that wanted to be in the band, but the band leader - a guy called Eric Smith - had a very good routine. We had to do six weeks of music theory before we were allowed to even touch an instrument. So by the time that it came to playing, we had already learned how to read music, and we knew what the correct fingerings were on the cornets and the other valved instruments in the band.

At the end of the six weeks, we'd do a written test, and the instruments were laid out at the back of the room where we could see them. The band leader would then collect papers in, add up the marks, and whoever came first would get the first choice of instrument.

GIACOMO SMITH

Giacomo Smith runs a fantastic band called the Kansas Smitty's, who literally exploded into my life a couple of years ago. They are the most amazing band, who really understand the jazz music of the 1920s and 30s, but they have put their own twist on it. Giacomo is a great clarinet and saxophone player, and I wanted to have an inspiring instrumental guest just like I did last year with Soweto Kinch.

JOE STILGOE

The thing about Joe is that, like Clare, he's another great singer and communicator. And he's very witty too! When I first met him, I played on an album of his and he'd written a lot of original of songs that were really fantastic. He's an all-round talented guy.



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Was the trumpet your first choice of instrument?

No! I came second in the exam, and on that table I saw this flugelhorn, and I thought, "That looks really interesting." I want to play that! But the guy who'd come first went and picked up that flugelhorn! I got the cornet, and I was a bit disappointed.

But this was a blessing in disguise really. In brass bands, cornets have all the real hard stuff to play, so you have the biggest responsibility. So getting the cornet was actually the best thing for me. But the trumpet became my first obsession really. Later, when I was around 13 years old, my dad came home with two LPs: one was of Louis Armstrong, and the other was of a trumpet player called Rex Stewart. Rex played cornet in Duke Ellington's band, and he used to make really vocal sounds on the trumpet. He made growls and choked sounds on his instruments, and I

thought it was absolutely fascinating. I used to listen to all the records and to all the tracks on Humphrey Lyttelton's radio show every Monday night. That was where I learned so much about jazz. My dad also took me to see Roy Eldridge, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk at the Hammersmith Odeon. Then, for my 13th birthday, he bought me a trumpet. And that was that!

But I always wanted to write music. Fifteen years ago, I decided I wanted to do it properly, so I studied again with a great composition teacher called Jeffery Wilson, and he taught me a lot. I did a couple of composing/arranging projects that worked out really well, and I started to get calls to do more writing jobs. Then, one day, I looked at my diary and realised that I was getting far more writing jobs than playing, and it felt like my life had changed.

What is your favourite big band song ever?

If we had enough time, we could possibly get the list down to around 50. I can't give you just one. There's far too many!

You recently did a workshop at the Royal Albert Hall for young musicians - how important do you think it is to expose children and young adults to live music?

It's extremely important. Music is so beneficial because it's all to do with communication, working as a team, and finding a way to express yourself. I remember when I was 14 going to play with the Harrow Youth Jazz Orchestra. They set us up with the trumpets in a row, and the saxophones were facing us. We played a Count Basie piece called 'Splanky', and I remember that moment of hearing five saxophones playing in harmony. I just thought that was the most fantastic sound.

We live in a world where so much

music has been created by electronics, computers and synthesisers. It's great listening to music at home, whether it's on vinyl, CD or on our computers, but there's nothing like hearing and seeing it live. If it's being performed by real people - great musicians - right in front of you, I just think that live music is one of the most enjoyable and exciting things you can experience, for so many reasons. To give young musicians the chance to sit within a big band, hear that sound and feel that kind of thrill... I really think it adds to your whole life experience.

What advice would you give to any aspiring musician?

Practise every day. Have as much fun playing music as possible and enjoy every note that you play. I would also say that you shouldn't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone. Try and find your own voice. And be nice to everyone; don't be a diva!

What do you want for Christmas this year?

The best thing would be to have a great gig playing with all my favourite musicians. Otherwise, I want to have a really nice time with my family and friends.

What are your plans for 2018?

There's a project that I want to do with the Kansas Smitty's, combining them with members of my Jazz Orchestra and creating new arrangements of Jelly Roll Morton's music. I'm also working with Kurt Elling on a play with music, which will happen in 2019 at the Lincoln Center, so we'll be doing a lot of work on that.



Guy Barker and Vanessa Haynes at *Guy Barker's Big Band Christmas*, 11 December 2016

© Andy Paradise

In fact, there are a number of projects that I am already working on. Then, there's the annual Jazz Voice concert that opens the London Jazz Festival, and I'm halfway through writing a cello concerto, which I've got to finish soon! It's already looking like a busy year! I see these as good challenges though. I do feel very fortunate, as I don't get asked to do things where I'm thinking, "Oh, I don't really want to do that." All the things that I'm asked to do are things that I really want to do. I'm very lucky in that way.

Will you be returning to the Royal Albert Hall any time soon?

Of course! I'll have to try and squeeze in some time for us to work out what we're doing for next year's Christmas concert!

MICA PARIS

I heard her records years ago, and thought she was just amazing! We met many times and talked about working together, and we finally got the chance to collaborate a couple of years ago. Then, this year we recorded a couple of songs together in the studio with the orchestra. I'm very happy that she's here, working with me again! She's an incredibly powerful vocalist.

TONY MOMRELLE

I met Tony a couple of years ago, but I had heard his recordings a few years beforehand. He's done two or three big orchestral projects with me, and he's just an amazing singer. I really love his voice. He's got the job of singing Donny Hathaway's 'This Christmas', which I know will be a highlight of the night.