

The course of good jazz never did run smooth: Daisy Game catches up with Empirical's double bassist Tom Farmer ahead of the jazz band's appearance at the Bath Festival.

Jazz: it hasn't got the most likeable of reputations. Associated with a kind of intellectualism, the music is often considered a little showy: intent on impressing – as opposed to truly moving – its listeners. Cue Tom Farmer: double bassist for Empirical – and champion of jazz for the 21st century.

“I try and think of it like it's a team game”, says Tom: “you have to think beyond the edge of the stage. We're all in this moment together. We're all sharing in this thing. Even if someone comes in for a moment and leaves, they've still been part of it.”

But even Tom didn't plan on joining Team Jazz. It was only after some gentle encouragement from the members of his secondary school jazz band that the young musician dropped not only his original genre (classical) but also his original instrument (piano). A few years and a “very enthusiastic teacher” later, Tom enrolled to study jazz full time at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London.

“The Guildhall is a brilliant place”, Tom reminisces: “Everyone is there for the same reason: to play music at a higher level. London was like a massive campus for us: we went to all the jazz clubs and the venues.” It was a campus education which paid off. In 2005, Tom joined Empirical: a multi-award winning jazz band soon to make an appearance at The Bath Festival 2022.

Since settling on its four-man line up in 2008 – made up of Nathaniel Facey (alto sax) Lewis Wright (vibraphone), Shane Forbes (drums) and Tom (double bass) – the group have marched to the beat of their own (perfectly timed) drum: striking the fine balance between tradition, and innovation. Empirical, declares The Guardian, are “devoted to remaking jazz for a contemporary audience”. In 2016, the quartet lived up to their trailblazing reputation with the introduction of a Pop-up Jazz Lounge; lugging their instruments down (and down – and down again) to Old Street Underground Station, London, Empirical played for early morning office-workers and late night grocery-shoppers alike. Over the course of six days, 20 sets were performed for close to 3,000 listeners. The band have followed their first Pop-up with several similar above-ground events: playing in a London bookshop, a Berlin shopping mall, and – come May of this year – on the streets of Bath city centre.

The thinking behind Empirical's Pop-up Lounges, says Tom, is two-fold: “If you look into the history of jazz – in the '50s and '60s, when the music that Empirical are interested in was at its heyday – these musicians and bands would play three or four sets in a club for three weeks. That doesn't happen in the modern industry: you do one-off gigs. So we wanted to create a situation where we could play together a lot – not just rehearse, but also perform in front of people. So that was for our own artistic development”, the musician explains.

Not only do the Pop-ups allow the band members to spend more time with one another, but they also offer passers-by the opportunity to spend some quality time with jazz. “There are a number of barriers to people getting into jazz”, Tom admits, acknowledging that many listeners are put off by their (mis)understanding of the music as “highbrow and difficult”. It is this preconception that Empirical aim to tackle head-on with their Pop-up performances.

“We specifically wanted to target people who might not want to come to a jazz club”, Tom tells me, before explaining that, in his experience, a live set played in an unexpected location is the best way to reach the sceptics: “As soon as you hear live music out on the street, you immediately look to see what’s going on. Because it’s so unusual, isn’t it? You don’t expect to hear it. That was a big part of why we choose to do the Pop-ups in the underground, or in shopping centres”. As soon as passers-by turn to see what all the musical-fuss is about – “Then we’ve got you!”, the musician declares, triumphant, suggesting that “when you listen to a young band, it’s like – oh, this is cool! It’s not aloof at all”. The proof of his theory is in the pudding: “The number of times people have come into a Pop-up and said, ‘I don’t really like jazz – but I like what you’re doing!’, the double bassist recalls.

As for the small matter of understanding jazz – Tom is adamant that listeners needn’t worry: “There’s nothing to ‘understand’. You’re sharing a moment with someone; that’s the only thing. You don’t have to know anything about the technicalities of the music. You don’t listen to The Beatles and think about the construction of the songs. So I would say it’s a bit of a preconception – or a self-imposed barrier”, the musician muses.

The Pop-up Lounges do more than dismantle ‘self-imposed’ barriers: they also break through those of the financial kind. “Jazz tends to happen late at night in jazz clubs. Not everyone can do that, or wants to do that. It’s also often expensive to go to some of these places too – and sometimes it’s not a nice environment. We wanted to give people access to jazz”, Tom explains.

Each time we play, we decide in the moment: how are we feeling today? Is it going to be loud, or is it going to be soft? Is it going to be a gentle, reflective mood – or is going to be full on shouting?

Having addressed the ‘highbrow’ elephant in the room, I’m keen to talk about a second jazz-buzzword: improvisation. Free-form jazz musicians are known for their ability to make up and perform tunes on the spot: jamming their way through a set without any strict plan in mind. Or so the story goes; Empirical, Tom tells me, like to strike a healthy balance.

“Some of our pieces are very structured. We’ve practised them, and they have to be performed in a certain way for it to work”, he explains. On other occasions, however, things remain of-the-moment: “Large parts we deliberately leave open. The structure is like a skeleton – a suggestion of what the piece could be. Then each time we play it, we decide in the moment: how are we feeling today? Is it going to be loud, or is it going to be soft? Is it going to be a gentle, reflective mood – or is it going to be full on shouting? The

longer we play together, the more sophisticated we are at going after those things. We're really in tune with each other", says Tom.

But what happens, I have to ask, if Tom or one of his band mates gets player's block? Well – just as there was nothing to 'understand' about jazz, so too is there nothing to fear. More challenging performances simply act as a form of emotional education, says Tom.

"Of course, the natural reaction is to try harder – to try and do it better in the moment. But actually, that can be quite negative on the music. It's better to be humble, and say 'okay – that's not happening today. Tomorrow is another day'. They are opportunities for humility, those moments. 'This isn't going how I wanted it to go, so I'll pass over – I will accept in this moment that someone else can do it'".

It's the music's changeability – its unknowable character – which makes jazz so unique, Tom tells me: "Improvisation is a risk. Sometimes you'll be going in a direction you haven't been in before. You don't know whether it's going to be better or worse than it was yesterday. So that's why we always say to the audience – what you hear when you come and see us is a unique thing: it will never be like that again. It's a moment in time that you're experiencing that's just for us in this room."

Or – as in the case of The Bath Festival – just for us in this city. In May, Empirical will take to the streets of Bath with a new instalment of their Pop-up Lounge; "In between sets, we'll have some music playing, and it'll feel like a jazz club", Tom tells me: "It'll be a place to hang out and talk about music". Well – there's nothing 'difficult' about that.

In addition to their series of free performances around Bath city centre, Empirical will perform at Walcot House on 18 May at 7.30pm. bathfestivals.org.uk