

Interview Notes on Alan Barnes (born 1959)

(Born in Cheshire – mother an audio typist and father a nuclear energy engineer)

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Interviewer: Jessica Hicks Summary provided by: Lily Lambert and Charlotte Tomson

First inspiration “Stranger on the Shore” by Acker Bilk first inspired Alan, aged 12, to take up the clarinet. He really wanted to study saxophone, but knew it wasn’t on the cards just yet. He remembers opening his first clarinet box; the smell of the oils. He was instantly fascinated, spending many hours practising in his room. As a shy teenager, he also saw the clarinet as an instrument to hide behind. He enjoyed playing third clarinet in an orchestra. He then achieved Grade 8 aged 15, and was rewarded with his first alto saxophone, which he plays to this day - though the mother of pearl key inlays have all been replaced!

In pursuit of Jazz Though Alan’s first teacher Ann Walker was a classical clarinettist, not a jazz player, she continued to drive his interest in jazz. A dedicated teacher, she often secured tickets for her pupils and drove them to gigs in Manchester. Alan was determined to pursue music at Altrincham Grammar School, at a time when all the other boys were heading for careers such as medicine and engineering. Between 1977 and 1980, he went on to study saxophone, woodwinds and arranging at Leeds College of Music. At this time, he performed in many professional gigs, playing everything from Gilbert and Sullivan to the blues, in iconic venues, such as the Sheffield City Hall Ballroom. But Alan felt he was on a crusade to play live jazz - and so it was to London that he headed next.

Take off! Alan began “sitting in” and networking in London. It is at this time that his career as a saxophonist really took off. He met the guys from the Humphrey Lyttelton band, which he would go on to join, and remembers being offered his first live London gig at The Punch and Judy, Covent Garden. After playing with the Midnight Follies orchestra and touring with the Pasadena Roof orchestra, he joined the hard-bop band of Tommy Chase and co-led The Jazz Renegades. The 100 Club and Ronnie Scott’s were regular venues and Alan also composed and featured on numerous recordings. He became leader of the Pizza Express Jazz Sextet and toured America and Europe with Bryan Ferry’s band.

The West End scene Alan recalls musicians securing contracts in Archer Street, using something akin to a secret code. But, he says, this narrow Soho back street was an important social hub for musicians as well, as was Lewington’s Music Shop off Cambridge Circus. Ronnie Scott’s (which you could get into for a pound, if you were in The Music Union) was another core hang-out. In the 70s and 80s the music venues were crammed. Alan remembers playing at The Wag Club, people queuing around the street to get in. But it wasn’t only about the music. The Jazz scene attracted great characters too. Alan recalls Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud knocking around the clubs, and jazz enthusiast Harry Diamond deciding to take up photography, after thinking he had witnessed an angel on the Old Kent Road! The atmosphere was fantastic. “You could meet anybody,” says Alan. The pubs were all shut and off they would go in search of a drink. Drinking was a part of the culture. Almost a rite of passage.

Performing and Skills Beyond knowing hundred of tunes, Alan says to perform jazz you need to have heart. Presenting as well as playing at the Scarborough Jazz Festival, he talks to virtually everyone in the audience. He communicates. He never psyches himself up to go on stage. He just gets on with it! He is, he says, very privileged to be a part of it all and describes his life as a dream come true, adding, “I don’t know how I’ve got away with it!” Asked how he has adapted to the changing music scene, he describes himself as a “barnacle clinging to the rock”. In a career spanning decades, which once involved driving 55,000 miles a year, Alan describes a “knock out” moment as recording Stranger on the Shore with brilliant guitarist Martin Taylor. He felt that everything had come full-circle. Any advice on how to learn “improv”? Father figures are good. Players you can look up to. Here Alan talks about Dave Cooper, John Barnes and Art Themen. There are systems too, but these structures are only for practice. They should never become conscious thought, Alan says. When performing jazz improv, “It has to become part of you”.