

INTERVIEW WITH JACK HONEYBORNE on 29th April 2024

Interview notes by Chris Firmin

Born: Thornton Heath, Croydon, South London in 1928.

Mother a Civil Servant, Father a Chiropodist

Started playing piano from only 5 years old, taught by a friend's mother, once per week.

Jack's father drummed at gigs and bought Jack an accordion – they both helped entertain people sheltering in tube stations in WW2.

Archer Street – Jack looked forward to it every Monday up to early 1960's but the 'scene' had finished by the mid 60's. Jack noticed this when he returned to London in late 1960s after 2-year visit to Canada.

Archer Street was great for catching up and socialising and for getting hired for gigs.

Occasionally police would clear the street. Reason for the 'street' – no-one had a telephone. Scores of musicians assembled there. Harry Morris was a 'fixer' for Club 11.

Kenny Graham recruited musicians for his new Afro-Cuban band in Archer Street.

Jack got a job at a Music Publisher's (Boosey & Hawkes) (though National Service intervened).

Jack started to gig professionally in 1940's.

Jack gigged 'all over the place' especially in the West End, mainly playing what became jazz standards by the likes of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin etc.

Café Paris had bands playing afternoon and evening every day.

Jack's influences were Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans.

"If you can't make a living in London, you can't make it anywhere".

J could remember names of all the budding bebop musicians (led by Ronnie Scott and Johnny Dankworth) who played at Club 11 in Great Windmill Street from 1949 to 1950.

Played at the Stork Club and at Giaconda in Denmark Street.

Different types of performance for different clubs.

All music was 'live' – no discos.

J went on the road with big bands, played in jazz quartets sometimes fronted by American stars, played at night clubs.

Some big bands played arrangements, some played background music (with crowds talking not listening!). When audience was 'into' the music they sat at the front but many more were there to dance, socialise and pick up women or prostitutes.

J did not suffer from stage fright. Sometimes he would break into a 'favourite tune' to please an audience.

Fights broke out sometimes, there were lots of self-styled gangsters though they tended to like musicians.

Drugs and alcohol: J says some musicians took drugs maybe in the interval but most, including Jack, stuck with alcohol. On the whole, fewer drugs and less alcohol now.

Live music has suffered a lot due to the advancement in electronics as a way of making and presenting music.

Musicians have to be more versatile such as playing in theatres.

Agents are around but not personal agents; it's mainly "every man for himself"

Jack – "I never wanted to be anything else but a musician" and "have never done anything else!"

Musicians Union (MU); good on advising on and improving the minimum wage but not so effective in enforcing them.

MU requirement that everyone has to 'read' music. MU sometimes fails to give legal advice to members. J has retained his membership – but it is not so compulsory as it used to be.

American and Canadian MUs are much stronger and stricter regarding membership. British MU sets minimum rates but these can be undercut by certain venues.

Treatment of women; Ivy Benson and later Kathy Stobart, ran all women bands without a problem.

Ethnicity ; sometimes black musicians were not accepted by hotels but worse than that in USA. Better now and more than 50% touring US players are black and get equal treatment to white musicians in Britain and Europe. Colour has become irrelevant – as it should always be.

Logistics : coach travel limited nowadays as many musicians choose to drive own cars.

Parking cars has become virtually impossible in the West End. Jack sometimes used to park in Archer Street itself!

No parking meters until late 1950s.

Jack went on a big band trip to Northumberland by coach – by the time they got back band members had only earned 4s 6d after paying share of transport costs!

A 'House Party' gig required electric connection to instruments as the band were to play at bottom of the large garden. Owner of the house said "can't you start without electricity?!"

J has played at Buckingham Palace.

Biggest fear? "Not being paid – it has happened!"

When does a musician consider retiring? Jack – "Never! If people want me to play I will"

Looking back – J-“as long as people appreciate what you are doing it feels good”

Jack played with celebrated London trumpeter Nat Gonella.

J played in bomb shelters during WW2 and his own family house was destroyed by bombing.

J once played 5 gigs in a day separately involving Max Bygraves and the Tiller Girls.

J once played a gig in New Zealand within 48 hours there and back!

J once accompanied Eartha Kitt who could be a bit loud and fiery towards musicians – Jack learnt that she enjoyed it when musicians had the guts to shout back!

J's favourite 'West End' gig was at the Royal Variety Performance where he accompanied Harry Secombe!