

## Ian Mann - The Jazz Man, 26.04.23

Saxophonist and sometime vocalist Fraser Smith first came to my attention as the leader of the quartet Fraser & The Alibis, a group that also included organist Joe Webb, guitarist Harry Sankey and drummer Gethin Jones.

The band first came together when its members were studying on the Jazz Course at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama (RWCMD) in Cardiff. Following graduation the group re-located to London and began to gig prolifically, their itinerary including numerous festival appearances.

In 2017 Fraser & The Alibis released their eponymous debut album, a recording of which I said at the time; "Original tunes which take the virtues of 50s and 60s hard bop and soul jazz and infuse them with a youthful enthusiasm born of the 21st century". The full review can be found here; <https://www.thejazzmann.com/reviews/review/fraser-and-the-alibis-fraser-and-the-alibis>

Fast forward to 2023 and Smith has assembled a new quartet featuring the seasoned musicians Rob Barron (piano), Simon Read (bass) and Steve Brown (drums). His fascination with the music of the 1950s and 1960s remains undimmed and he names fellow saxophonists Dexter Gordon, Illinois Jacquet, Stanley Turrentine and Al Cohn as his primary influences.

Smith's new quartet differs from its predecessor by being an all acoustic group with the sound of the piano replacing that of the Hammond organ. Smith's earlier groups tended to feature organ or guitar but this latest line-up is less informed by the 60s soul jazz era and exhibits a stronger bebop and swing influence that sometimes harks back to the 1940s.

The programme features nine original pieces from Smith plus an arrangement of "Prisoner of Love", written by Russ Columbo. Smith's compositions are often contrafacts, with new melodies written above existing chord sequences, a common practise within the bebop / hard bop fraternity.

Smith and the quartet take a deliberately 'old school' approach to recording, with the music documented direct to tape by engineer Lewis Durham. The presumably tongue in cheek album title and the Blue Note style graphics and liner notes (the latter by pianist Fraser Urquhart with whom Smith sometimes works in the duo The Two Frasers) add to the consciously retro vibe.

The album kicks off with "Might Not", a spirited call to arms with a shuffling groove that acts as the launch pad for Smith's earthy, forthright tenor sax soloing. Barron, Read and Brown provide the necessary rhythmic impetus with pianist Barron also delivering a fluent solo. Read is also featured at the bass as we are introduced to the talents of the individual voices within the band. Brown is a driving presence throughout and is arguably the most in demand drummer in the UK when it comes to this style of jazz.

As its title might suggest "Iroquois" is a contrafact of Ray Noble's eternal bebop standard "Cherokee". The intro, featuring just Smith's tenor and Brown's brushed drums, finds the saxophonist wrapping his chops around some tricky bebop style phrases and the whole piece is something of a technical tour de force with Smith stretching out above Read's rapid bass lines and Brown's brisk drumming as Barron fills in any gaps. Eventually the pianist is also set loose on a solo of his own, his fleet finger work matched by Read's propulsive bass and Brown's skittering drums. The latter also enjoys a crisply brushed drum feature before Smith's tricky melodic theme re-emerges to take things storming out.

The title track is a contrafact that combines elements of George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" and Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose" in a Charlie Parker inspired arrangement with cogent solos coming from Smith on tenor and Barron at the piano.

The next contrafact, "Whadda Know", introduces a new melody played over the chords of Dizzy Gillespie's "Woody 'n' You". The combination of Read's propulsive bass and Brown's powerful, but highly detailed, drumming fuels dazzling solos from both Smith and Barron. There's also a dynamic drum feature from the

excellent Brown, plus a short cameo for the similarly impressive Read. This high energy piece is surely destined to become a favourite at the quartet's live shows.

An arrangement of Russ Columbo's 1931 song "Prisoner of Love" represents the album's only ballad performance. This reveals a gentler side of Smith's playing as he gives instrumental expression to the sadness of the unsung lyrics. Barron, Read and Brown offer sympathetic support with the latter's sensitive and delicate brush work a particular delight, and a total contrast to his fiery playing on the previous track. Read provides a deeply resonant and highly melodic double bass solo and pianist Barron is also at his most lyrical.

"Pip" is named for the Charles Dickens character from "Great Expectations". The tune itself packs an infectiously funky groove and features Smith at his most Turrentine-like. Barron adds a slyly inventive piano solo and there's some spirited sax and piano interplay towards the end of the piece, with Brown's drums also demanding the listener's attention.

The blues "Wardell" is dedicated to another of Smith's tenor sax inspirations, the late Wardell Gray (1921-55). It's an affectionate tribute to a sometimes overlooked figure with the rhythm section's crisp grooves fuelling pithy solos from Smith and Barron, while Brown enjoys a series of spirited drum breaks.

"Out Into The Daylight" is a contrafact based on the harmonies of Jerome Kern's "The Way You Look Tonight". It's delivered by the quartet at a particularly rapid clip, with Brown's drums again coming to the fore alongside sparkling solos from Barron and Smith. It's one of the fastest pieces on the album and serves as an excellent reminder of the quartet's collective energy.

As its title suggests "Bluey" is another composition in the blues form and its languid, gently swinging grooves inspire a suitably bluesy solo from the fluent Smith, this followed by further features for Barron and Read.

The title of the closing "Snow off Broadway" is not a reference to New York, but instead homages Broadway Market in London, once home to the Kansas Smitty's venue, where Smith had played one winter's night. The warmth of the bar Smith was ensconced in at the time is reflected in the sunny samba style rhythms of the piece and the joyous quality of the solos from Smith and Barron.

As Urquhart states in his liner notes "Smith doesn't re-invent the wheel, and doesn't want to", which is just fine, and on its own terms "Tip Top!" is a resounding success. Barron, Read and Brown share Smith's love of swing, bebop, hard bop and soul jazz and are on exactly the same wavelength. This is a very well balanced quartet that has developed an excellent rapport that shines through throughout these performances. One suspects that this group are also a compelling and highly exciting live act.

This is a hard swinging, unpretentious album capable of appealing to broad swathe of jazz listeners. One can imagine that fans of Dave O'Higgins, another saxophonist who frequently deals in contrafacts, would find much to enjoy here.

## **Jazz Views - 27.04.23, Chris Baber**

Everything about this recording – from the line-up the tunes to the sleeve design – puts the music into that era when bop had found its feet and was settling into a straight ahead style. There are musicians still playing on the UK scene who grew up in this era and continue to ply their trade.

But what is so exciting about Smith's quartet is the way that they have so completely immersed themselves in the rhythms and melodies that there is an authenticity to their playing what, for them, is 'historic' music. Recording 10 tunes to tape in a single day gives the music a freshness and directness that you find from the early bop sessions.

The liner notes mention a host of US sax styles, but there is much here that echoes the ways in which UK players like Ronnie Scott or Tubby Hayes would play exuberant solos against solid rhythm sections. When we get to 'Iroquois' (with more than a nod to 'Cherokee') Barron's piano solo glistens and he joins a frenetic Smith to shadow the melody line in the close-out of the tune.

The title track blends chords and aspects of melody from 'I got rhythm' and 'Honeysuckle rose' (albeit in ways that disguise the tunes and allow Smith and Barron to swing their own tunes).

As well as swinging on the bop-inflected tunes, the quartet can play delightful, smokey ballads such as 'Prisoner of Love', track 5, on which Smith's sax solo has a light vibrato and a depth of feeling. Play this recording to people who have little interest in jazz and they will immediately warm to its sound and its style. This, for many people, quite simply what jazz sounds like. The recording has the panache and vitality of bop and blends this with the respect that a new generation of players have brought to the music.

## **Jazzwise - 09.06.23 Peter Vacher**

Birmingham-born but a Londoner now, young Smith has found a tenor style that suits him, taking his inspiration from the likes of Dexter Gordon and Stanley Turrentine. In a 10-piece selection, with all but one item composed by him, he shows a predilection for extended, often fast-moving improvisations, each solo building nicely.

The opening 'Might Not' uses a shuffle rhythm, Brown keeping it moving, as Barron does what he does so well in all the contexts in which he appears, offering crisp bebop style piano. 'Iroquois', a contrafact for 'Cherokee', opens with a firm tenor statement, making me think of Wardell Gray who also figures on Smith's list of heroes, before Barron tears into the fray, his solo crowded with incident as Read and Brown light up the tempo, the final ensemble figure quite neat.

The title track is more leisurely, Smith relaxed, ahead of 'Whadda Know?' which would have pleased the 52nd Street crowd back in the day. The likeable 'Wardell' has a nicely intricate theme, with more fine Barron filigree and Brown and Read doing their stuff admirably. 'Out Into The Daylight' is a cleverly devised second glance at the harmonies of 'The Way You Look Tonight' and feels good all the way through. Smith is clearly a talent to watch, with a good sound, plenty of technique and bags of ideas. He has also had the good sense to enlist Barron, tip top himself in this context, as are Read and Brown too.

## **London Jazz News - 04.04.23 - John Fordham**

Fraser Smith says of bebop music: "I just love listening to that style, and playing with people who love it too. And I think the more you get into it, the more you learn about how to make those wonderful old sounds come alive again for a modern audience."

The Birmingham-born, Welsh-raised and now London-based saxophonist has a new album on Ubuntu Music. Release date 21 April. Launch gig 18 April at Pizza Express Jazz Club.

When Charlie 'Bird' Parker's genius first blazed across jazz's night sky in the 1940s, it was a visitation that had a seismic impact on the era's adventurous musicians and fans alike. The bebop revolution Parker set loose has since passed through countless changes down the decades, in the hands of many descendants and disciples, but the audacity and passion of his vision continues to mesmerise emerging jazz players all over the world.

This month in the UK, the young Birmingham-born, Welsh-raised and now London-based saxophonist Fraser Smith confirms that the legacy vividly lives on, when he launches his nonchalantly confident and very hard-swinging debut album, "Tip Top!" But though he plays a tenor saxophone and not Bird's favoured alto, and his heroes include such soulfully muscular Bird-inspired tenor-beboppers as Dexter Gordon, Ike Quebec, and Stanley Turrentine, Parker's phrasing and timing unmistakeably guide Smith's melodic sense and lie at the core of his playing.

Before the saxophonist and I talk on the phone for LJN, I find an old Parker-related memory is on my mind – of an interview I'd had with the late Ronnie Scott in 1985, in which the celebrated club-proprietor – a poll-winning tenor saxophonist himself – was recalling a Sunday afternoon in a Bloomsbury flat in 1947 when he had first encountered Charlie Parker's searing sound.

Scott and a group of jazz-playing friends – all in their restless 20s and bored with the commercial swing and dance-band scene on which they were making their livings – to some newly-imported American records. One turned out to be 'Red Cross', a hastily-composed tune written to fill out an incomplete recording session by the guitarist Tiny Grimes, and – like much bebop music of the period – it was a harmony-expanding recharge of a 1930s pop hit, 'I Got Rhythm'. But the real attraction was the horn-player on the session – a 26 year-old

Charlie Parker, flying over the stacked chords faster and more ingeniously than any saxophonist the young Brits had ever heard before.

From that moment on, for Ronnie Scott and his jazz generation, Parker's uninhibited harmonic conception and audacious updating of the blues became, as Scott would later put it, 'the obvious way to play'.

As it still seems to be, 76 years later in London, for Fraser Smith, who's tirelessly finding new avenues in that inexhaustible resource. 'I'm working on this pattern from a Charlie Parker tune called 'Diverse' at the moment – it's one of his that perhaps isn't so well-known,' Smith tells me when we eventually hook up. 'I've been playing it for about seven months now, just trying to get to the essence of it, and work it in to my playing and into different tunes more widely – but it still doesn't feel like it's done yet, you know. For the past eight years or so, I've spent hours and hours playing along with all those great records, trying to get into the details, and I'm constantly discovering new jazz that I didn't know about from this era. Last week I found that Fats Navarro album, *Nostalgia* – I'd never heard it before. And so that's another six months of listening, for all the influences that went into it.'

#### Album Cover

You might never guess how focused and intense Smith's meticulous studies are on a passing listen to the relaxed and freewheeling 'Tip Top!'. His gruff tenor sound and punchy accents on the infectiously grooving opener 'Might Not' cruises with such eager aplomb over the laid-back drums groove of Steve Brown (a British bebop maestro since the 1990s) that an old-school jazzier might imagine this is an undiscovered American classic they missed 60 years ago, while the young club audiences dancing to the Smith quartet today might conversely hear it as just another seductive component of the kaleidoscope of contemporary music.

The flying double-time bebop of 'Iroquois' (a nod to the classic bebop vehicle 'Cherokee', with Simon Read's thundering bass-walk powering it) is just as evocative, while the medium-swinging and ruggedly lyrical title track is infused with the enthusiasm these players express for a style conceived long before they were born. The only cover is 'Prisoner of Love' (a dreamy 1930s ballad reprised in the 1940s and '60s by Perry Como and James Brown) delivered by Smith as a vaporous Ben Webstersque reverie; while the funky 'Pip' is a showcase for Smith's harmonically serpentine yet always accessible melody-writing and Rob Barron's piano-improv fluency. 'Wardell' is an elegantly affectionate tribute to Count Basie tenor star Wardell Gray, and the stop-time finale 'Out Into The Daylight' takes this fine album out on a classically garrulous phrase-swapping exchange with Brown's vivacious drumming.

Fraser Smith came relatively late to the saxophone, but was studying it formally in his mid-teens, after he moved with his father from Birmingham to Wales. His introduction to jazz, however, was his own choice – mostly acquired from the budget-priced jazz compilations at the local HMV store. He considers that an Ike Quebec album acquired that way became one of his biggest early influences. Smith studied jazz at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (with sophisticated bebop alto saxist Geoff Simkins as an influential teacher), and then from 2010 on the postgraduate course at Trinity Laban in London.

'Going to Trinity was a real shock,' Smith recalls. 'All the practice rooms there are facing out into this big courtyard, so you can hear everybody going for it, fantastic techniques, and when you first encounter it it's a real gamechanger. They definitely weren't messing around at Trinity, and it upped my game a lot. I was already in a band that had formed in Wales around 2008, with Joe Webb on Hammond organ – he's a very sought-after pianist now – and Gethin Jones on drums, and we all moved up to London together and kept it going, playing a kind of Ike Quebec-inspired soul-jazz, until just before the pandemic, when different projects took us separate ways. From then on, I've found myself getting more and more into classic bebop and swing grooves – looking at the micro and the macro, sometimes on a single phrase for months, sometimes playing along with a song and really trying to get inside the feel of it.'

Recording session. L-R: Steve Brown, Rob Barron, Simon Read, Fraser Smith\_Photo credit: Leo Mansell) Fraser Smith unhesitatingly credits his partners on "Tip Top!" – pianist Rob Barron, bassist Simon Read, and drummer Steve Brown – with giving those meticulous pursuits such a vibrant charge of their own kinds of musicality.

‘I’ve looked up to Rob and Steve for a long time,’ Smith unhesitatingly declares, ‘from before I moved to London. When we were in Cardiff we used to drive down to the Ronnie Scott’s jam on a Wednesday night, when the singer Mike Mwenso was running it – and they were crazy sessions, went on till four or five in the morning. I remember Mike telling people to stop dancing so erratically, because they were accidentally knocking people’s saxophones out of their mouths and stuff. We’d hear great players like Rob and Steve then, but I never imagined I’d work my way up to be able to their level, which is why it’s been such a treat to have them with me on this album.’

The young Scottish pianist Fraser Urquhart, a keen admirer of Smith’s work, has rightly written that while ‘he doesn’t reinvent the wheel and doesn’t want to’, he’s a jazz original in his own way, a young man of ‘passion, humour and will-to-live which you’ll hear on this recording’. But before we part, I ask Smith whether he envisages the soundworld he inhabits so wholeheartedly now will always be enough for him, or whether the plethora of sounds and influences that make up contemporary music of all kinds might offer their own kinds of temptations one day?

‘Maybe to my detriment, I’m a bit of a purist now,’ Fraser Smith reflects. ‘I am interested in other musics, and I think other influences do come into my playing sometimes, but at the moment my listening is generally a strict bebop diet. It could be a phase, but it feels like a long one. I just love listening to that style, and playing with people who love it too. And I think the more you get into it, the more you learn about how to make those wonderful old sounds come alive again for a modern audience.’

## **The Guardian - Adrian Chiles, 26.06.24**

I went to watch some jazz and everyone laughed at me. Family, friends, anyone on the bus who heard me and my friend talking on the way there, all sniggering, scoffing, smirking. There ought to be a jazz standard called Sniggering, Scoffing, Smirking.

What’s so funny? I think that Fast Show sketch is partly to blame – John Thomson as Louis Balfour, host of a TV programme called Jazz Club, brilliantly, if unfairly, sending up an entire genre of music. Fans of classical music, opera, drill, grime, folk, punk or whatever don’t get this kind of treatment. If you’re into jazz you’re to be mocked, because you’re either an old fart, a fervent hipster or a chin-stroking pseud. Or possibly all three. I’m none of those, arguably.

Jazz was always playing in our house, and I grew to love some of it. Don’t get me wrong: at school I was more into Led Zeppelin, Van Morrison, John Martyn and whatnot, but on the quiet I was also entranced by Mose Allison, Bill Evans, Miles Davis, Count Basie and plenty more. The names on the spines of my dad’s records were irresistible. The saxophone player Eddie Lockjaw Davis, for example. Oof, what a guy he must be. He had me at Lockjaw. I was a fan before the needle touched the vinyl. I got a fair amount of stick at school for this. One lad, a big Deep Purple fan who wasn’t averse to a bit of air guitar, asked what jazz fans did instead of air guitar. He started dancing about blowing an air saxophone. Everyone laughed. I didn’t much care.

In a scene towards the end of Whiplash, one of my favourite films, the young jazz drummer Andrew, played by Miles Teller, is on the telephone to his ex-girlfriend asking her, without success, to come to a jazz concert he’s playing. OK, he concedes, it’s not for everyone. He can say that again. On a first date relatively recently, I cooked a nice dinner that we ate together, with Keith Jarrett’s Köln Concert playing in the background. The food went down well; Keith Jarrett less so. “Can you turn this bloody plink-plonk music off, please?” she said.

Back in the last century, the Birmingham Jazz Society used to meet on Sunday nights at the Strathallan Hotel on the Hagley Road. After seeing Meat Loaf or somebody like that, along with several thousand others on a Saturday at the NEC, spending the following evening with barely a hundred jazz buffs in a hotel conference room felt almost transgressive, like a secret society of which I was by far the youngest member. Some of the acts I'd heard of, some I hadn't, but the air of mystery was always the same. How had they made their way from around the country or – not unusually – the US or mainland Europe to be there playing for us? How could they make a living doing it? How and why had they got so luminously brilliant at playing stuff that relatively few people were into?

There was so much I didn't understand – including, frankly, a good deal of the music. I decided each piece came in three sections. In section one the musicians would all play the same tune. Then came section two, in which it seemed to me that, having started off playing the same tune, they went off on various tangents, together and separately. I'll be honest: there were times when it did sound to my untutored ear like a dozen or more players all playing whatever suited them. This middle section could go on for five, 10, 30 minutes. Occasionally someone would shout "Yeah!" for a reason that wasn't always clear to me – which was, in retrospect, a bit Fast Show. Often applause would break out, again for reasons unclear. I gave up trying to join in. All I knew was that I loved the beginning and was mesmerised as well as baffled by the middle bit. And come section three, when the musicians magically reconvened, returning to the tune they were playing in the first place ... well, that lifted me up into the air in a way not much else did, then or now.

When my dad saw Buddy Rich play in the 50s, he said Rich's drumming was 'like a power station starting up' I daresay I was, am, missing the point. Call me a dilettante – I don't care. Dilettante in the dictionary: a person who loves the fine arts but in a superficial way and without serious purpose. Yes, whatever. It makes me happy. And never happier than last Saturday night in the remarkable 606 Club in Chelsea. The Fraser Smith Quartet were playing. The eponymous saxophonist – from Birmingham, as it happens – was accompanied by piano, double bass and drums. Disappointingly, but encouragingly too, I'm no longer the youngest in the room. Now I'm one of the oldest. It's a mixed congregation. The relatively young are in attendance. Some of them really get it; others seem a bit bewildered to be there. I surmise a handful of couples are there on first dates.

On stage the musicianship is off the scale. Four players who I'd never heard of until that very day. Having tried, and failed, to learn the saxophone, I find every clean note that is blown miraculous, so I'm easily impressed. The double bass player is incredibly young-looking and prodigiously good. But his jacket is too big for him and I'm stressing that the sleeve is getting in the way. The drummer is much older – my age! – and I can't take my eyes off him. When I was writing my dad's eulogy, his mate told me that when my dad saw Buddy Rich play in the 50s he reported back that Rich's drumming was "like a power station starting up". That fits the bill here, for this drummer, Steve Brown – very well-known in jazz circles, it turns out, but elsewhere hardly known at all.

The same questions crowd in: how did these people get so good? Where do they live? How do they spend their daylight hours? What do they do when they're not electrifying the air in basement jazz clubs? It all remains a mystery to this jazz dilettante. Long may it stay this way.