

# What is Jazz?

THE ESSENCE OF AN ART FORM, AS DESCRIBED BY THE UK'S LEADING JAZZ THEATRE CREATORS.

DANCE WRITER - KATIE WILLY INTERVIEWS THE JTAUK TEAM, AS THEY PROPEL INTO A NEW YEAR WITH THE EXCITING FORMATION OF JAZZ THEATRE ARTS UK.



As we propel into a new year with the exciting formation of JTA UK, things are looking up for the profile of Jazz Dance. The message is simple: **Jazz**, and the artists who create it, are long overdue an established place in the Dance Industry. We are uniting, and we are fighting: for the funding, the recognition, and the correct education of Artistic Jazz Dance.

I spoke to Jazz Dance pioneers from around the UK, to get a better insight into how they perceive their art, and where their personal visions are for their work in the future. Although highly individual in their creative processes, elements like true self-expression, synonymity with music, community, deep-rooted historical context and freedom to dance without limits were universally celebrated by all our experts.

**SO, WHO BETTER TO EXPLAIN WHAT 'JAZZ' MEANS THAN THE CHOREOGRAPHERS, CREATIVE DIRECTORS AND EDUCATORS MAKING THE WORK?**

**Dollie Henry** and **Paul Jenkins** are Artistic Directors of *BOP Jazz Theatre Company*, this year celebrating 25 years as the UK's leading Artistic Jazz dance company; *an exceptional achievement given the lack of support for independent companies in the genre*. A husband and wife tour de force, Dollie is a renowned choreographer and Paul a musician and composer, in many cases writing bespoke music which the company performs to. **Dollie explains ...**

*'Jazz goes far beyond the conformities and imitations we acknowledge today. Behind the old notion of 'Jazz Hands' lies a very deep, connective, spiritual and inclusive art form that asks for no boundaries, no perfection - just excellence in your ability to share your individuality freely.'*

*'I created BOP as a safe space to find my artistry, and have always kept the essence of the jazz legacy, which is community. A space to allow dancers, musicians, singers and artists to come through the BOP door, developing the jazz expression beyond the commercial framework it has been pigeon-holed into for years'*

When it comes to jazz music, Paul describes the trailblazing nature of jazz and what sets it apart as a movement.

*'Jazz is freedom from musical convention, freedom from structure, freedom from creative hierarchy. Most importantly, Freedom of Expression. In many ways, jazz music is a collaboration of international folkloric traditions, which through improvised exploration navigated a new path to artistic creation'*

**'THROUGH IMPROVISATION, JAZZ HAS REDEFINED THE CREATIVE EXPRESSION. BEFORE JAZZ, ARTISTS WERE CONFINED BY PREDEFINED STRUCTURES, CONVENTIONS AND CONCEPTS OF ARTISTRY'**

PAUL JENKINS



**Christie Lee Manning** and **James Harris** are joint Artistic



Directors of *House of Jazz* and sister company *Jazz House Theatre*, and are making waves in holistic dance education whilst producing daring theatrical works across Jazz Theatre.

**James says ...**

*'Jazz has always been, from its root, a resilient expression of the truth. It demands integrity. When I am immersed in it, every movement feels like an extension of who I am and my voice within it. I know who I am in Jazz.'*

*I aspire to tell stories within Jazz the way so many other styles of dance have been afforded to. The time has come for it to be given its rightful place alongside other forms - not just as a supporting act, but as the lead role.'*



**Christie** echoes this when I ask her specifically about the work she wants to create for Jazz:

*'I want to create a theatre production where jazz artists are not required to sing. I have never understood why jazz exists primarily and limitedly to musical theatre, and why we don't see it more often standing on its own. Why I should have to learn how to sing just so I can dance the way I want to dance? I plan to change that.'*

This manifests in the work they create together, and their aspirations for a Jazz Dance industry which truly respects the honesty of the artform.

**Lorraine Leblanc**, Head of Opportunities and Inclusion at the Institute for Contemporary Theatre, is a leading educator with an extensive performance career. **She says:** *'I would love to create Jazz dance works on Companies using UK Jazz musicians and dancers, to be performed not only for Jazz Dance Companies (not that we have any apart from BOP), but also performed by other UK companies out there such as Rambert, Phoenix etc, to put Jazz dance choreographers alongside their contemporary counterparts.'*

'JAZZ IS THE MOST INCLUSIVE OF ALL DANCE STYLES: JAZZ IS EVERY STYLE OF DANCE. IT IS THE PERFECT CONNECTION OF MUSIC AND MOVEMENT. JAZZ IS EXPRESSIVE, JAZZ IS INNOVATIVE, JAZZ IS UNCOMPROMISING. 'JAZZ DANCE IS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION' - LORRAINE LEBLANC

Representing Jazz Dance in the North of England are twin sisters **Melissa and Martina Gumbs**, who have together established their Manchester based company *MM Jazz Arts*.

**Martina says ..**



*'I aspire to be creative for the Jazz Arts Industry, something which is truly needed. My dream is to create a resident show with my twin sister here in Manchester, all based around Jazz dance, Music and Singing. I am my truest self as a dancer and human when dancing Jazz. It is an art form that will be around forever.'*

## What is Jazz?

**Melissa** emphasises the many influences that make up jazz as we now know it:

*'I aspire to dance in many styles of jazz personally, so I can learn different ways of moving, expressing different types of music and choreography. I also want to create a production show for dancers to perform Jazz styles in Manchester – to bring back Live music and dance to the North, for all to enjoy some toe tapping and hip shaking!'*

**Nahum Mclean**, Founding Director of *Africa Dance Diaspora Associates UK* sums up perfectly:



*'For me, Jazz is one of the most human art forms to exist. Jazz music just has such a way of making us all feel. It's universal, it's contagious: it's pure soul.'*

What is clear from this inspirational group of creators is that Jazz Dance in the UK, despite years of misrepresentation and underfunding, is a crucial part of the British dance landscape and in its real form is a totally unique flame of artistry.

It is thriving quietly, but deserves a much louder voice and much more visibility. **Jazz Dance Arts** is exactly the form of creative and artistic expression, which society needs in these particularly challenging and changing times.

**Katie Willy**

SCAN AND STAY CONNECTED TO JTAUK

