

## JAZZ IN THE GARIOCH : 1982 – 2003

Jazz is an art form – “*The Classical Music of the USA*” – that has become a little bit less understood and less popular nowadays, since the strong support given to it by radio stations from the 1930s through the 1970s has largely faded away. People often ask for a definition of jazz, but attempts to define it are usually fruitless. As the great Louis Armstrong said, “*Man, if you gotta ask you’ll never know*”, and “*Jazz is played from the heart. You can even live by it. Always love it.*”

It would be an impertinence and an exaggeration to say that The Garioch was a jazz desert in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, until late 1982 there was no particular focus for the genre. Then, resulting from the success of a concert given by a local ensemble - The Sandy West Jazz Band - for jazz enthusiasts in Inverurie and the surrounding area, a meeting of local fans was held in January 1983 and The Garioch Jazz Club was born.

Douglas Benton, who had set up the original concert, was appointed President of the Club, whose membership at the time numbered 20. Some were professional musicians, some taught music and some others played as amateurs. All, however, appreciated jazz “from the heart”.

At the instigation of the Club, Douglas Benton said, “*We would like to ... have evenings when our members could listen to records, have jam sessions and travel to see bands elsewhere... We have more than 20 members just now and hope to something in the region of 100.*” It is interesting to note that, almost 21 years later, world-class jazz bands travel *to* Inverurie and the Club’s membership, at 240, is more than double Douglas’s prediction.

Looking back to those early days, the Club’s programmes of events seem to have an *ad hoc* flavour to them. Events happened on different days of the week, including Sundays: presumably determined by the availability of bands willing to travel to Inverurie. While only two events were held in 1983, in September 1984, there were two events spaced a week apart.

The Club was fortunate, however, to have the services of jazz-knowledgeable people. An early Club Secretary was Jimmy Brown, Inverurie writer and onetime bandsman, whose many publications include “Glasgow’s Dancing Daft”. Jimmy avers that he became Secretary only as the price of escaping from the room in which he gave a talk on Muggsy Spanier.

In the 1984 – 1985 session, the duties of Club President were taken on by Sandy Bryce. Of Sandy, Ed Douglas (a later Club President) said, “*It was ... under the leadership of Sandy Bryce that the Club made its major leap to the position where it has become a mecca for jazz bands from all over Scotland and the North of England.*”

And that is certainly true. Under the stewardship of Sandy Bryce and Ed Douglas, the Club’s session format took on the shape it has today: eight concert-style gigs from September to May (excluding December), each built around either a local band or bands invited from further afield – from Inverness, through Edinburgh, Glasgow and the Isle of Bute, to Newcastle-upon-Tyne. (And, in 1987, almost as far away as The Netherlands, when the Club came close to engaging the world-renowned Dutch Swing College Band).

“Built around” needs some explanation. It is part of the Garioch Jazz Club’s charter to bring knowledge, understanding and love of jazz to local youth. Thus, with the permission of the hired professional bands, the Club often invites youth or school bands to perform a set during an interval. Bands who have so performed have been the Jazz Bands of Inverurie, Kemnay and Cults Academies.

In addition to inviting school bands to perform, in 1996 the Club organised six evening sessions of lectures on jazz - “The Evolution of Popular Music” - in Inverurie Academy. The lectures were supported by Gordon District Council and Aberdeen University.

In December 1992 the Garioch Jazz Club celebrated its tenth anniversary, by means of a special event in the Banks of Ury hotel – see Photo1.

By the mid-1990s, the Club was starting to feel some problems of its success. The popularity of the gigs meant that available space for dancing was becoming increasingly scarce. To overcome the disappointment of the many keen dancers who attended Club gigs, the Jazz Club Barbecue was instituted, the first one being held in June 1996. This certainly allowed plenty of space for dancing. However, as the barbecues themselves become more and more popular, space at them is also becoming a wee bit constrained...

In recent years, the Garioch Jazz Club has been adopting the benefits of the “information age”. The present Secretary, Ian Jackson, has been persuading members to receive the Club’s monthly newsletter by e-mail rather than by post, thus reducing the Club’s not inconsiderable postage costs. At the beginning of 2001, the Club’s first Web site was created, thus enabling its activities to be promoted globally.

The Garioch Jazz Club, as it approaches its 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary in January 2004, continues to go from strength to strength. The opening gig of the 2003 – 2004 session, with Fat Sam’s Band (see Photo 2) had standing room only. The Club continues to provide first class jazz entertainment to its members and other visitors.

It is not only the audience who enjoy the gigs:

*“I thought I would just drop you a note to thank you for bringing Alex Yellowlees and his group to Inverurie last week. I enjoyed the evening's music immensely. Scotland's answer to Stephan Grappelli - no doubt about! Many thanks again. Alex G. Ingram.”*

- but also the bands:

*“The band were keen to write and thank you for hosting us last Friday. We thoroughly enjoyed the gig, and were very pleased at the turn out. The welcome and hospitality were superb.” – Struan Manson (leader of “Rooty Ma Toot”).*

And, of course, the “much-repeated comment by visiting musicians”:

***“You must ensure that this Club never closes – jazz in Scotland needs the Garioch Club.”***

– from Ed Douglas, past President of the Garioch Jazz Club.

The Club’s committee members – all hard-working volunteers – will continue to strive to ensure that the Garioch Jazz Club “never closes”. From its humble origins in 1982, the Club now robustly approaches its maturity in January 2004. Twenty-one years old, the Club is believed to be the oldest jazz club of its kind in Scotland that has been in continuous existence.

In certainty, it is the best.

***Author’s note:*** *this short essay is a condensation of a forthcoming detailed history of the Garioch Jazz Club. The full history will contain details of all the gigs and other events that the Club has hosted over its 21 years, together with information on its committee – and many more photographs. Currently in preparation, the history, provisionally entitled “Jazz in The Garioch – 21 Years On”, will be on sale in time for the Club’s 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary party. At the time of writing, plans for that party are still evolving.*

*The compilation of the full history (and so of this summary) could not have been achieved without the assistance of Club committee members, to whom the author is indebted.*

*Mrs. Eleanor Douglas kindly gave permission to reproduce Photo 1, from the collection of her late husband, Eddie.*

***Alan Jardine (President, the Garioch Jazz Club).  
Kintore, November 2003. Updated February 2012.***