

Bobby Wellins

Now's the time

Bobby Wellins talks to MARK GILBERT about time remembered and time now – notably his new album *Time Gentlemen, Please* for Andy Cleynert's Trio Records label



The Time Gentlemen, Please session: Mark Taylor, John Critchinson and Bobby Wellins

Andrew Cleynert

At a time when jazz is more variegated than ever the release of *Time Gentlemen, Please* (Trio Records TR587) comes as a timely reminder of old jazz verities. We could take the title two ways – as a plea for more time-playing or an observation that gentlemen who play time are pleasing. The latter is certainly the case on this album, peopled by Wellins, John Critchinson (p), Andy Cleynert (b) and Mark Taylor (d). Logically enough, the last-named was the inspiration for the title. Andy Cleynert had done a gig with him, says Bobby, and was struck by his time-keeping, saying “He just swings so beautifully. It’s like a breath of fresh air sometimes, because most people avoid swinging.” (Taylor did reportedly take some exception to the inclusion on the album of *Quando Quando* – shades of the supper club – but it swings in its Latin way anyway.)

But doesn't Bobby always swing? He has a history of find fresh routes through the standard repertoire.

“More or less, yeah. That was my thing. I get a bit bored when time is broken up completely

on a regular basis – I don't find it interesting, I know a lot of people do, but I don't. I like the feeling of things moving along and ticking over, with a nice pulse going on. You can break it up, by all means, but just don't lose the pulse. That's what I like.”

The time connection goes way back in Bobby's history. His father, a pianist and saxophonist, and his mother, a singer, were on stage in Glasgow in variety and dance-band days, an environment where the appetite for ambivalence was probably limited to double-entendre. Rhythm would have been straight. They had ambitions to make it in London, but the second world war put paid to that.

“My dad was a super saxophonist. He had a far better musical intellect than I've ever had. He would have done very well for himself if it hadn't been for the war. If you're doing music for dances you have to dream up this amazing stuff while keeping the rhythm. Then he took up the flute and he became a wonderful flute player while he was doing his 9 to 5.”

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His dad's ‘proper’ job was at first upholstery, reflecting his background as a second generation Jewish immigrant from Minsk. But chest problems from the fabric business drove him to take the opportunity as an ex-serviceman to change his trade. He became immersed in the very mechanics of time-keeping, training as a watchmaker. He wanted Bobby to apprentice in the same trade but Bobby had other ideas about how to spend his time and went off to the RAF School of Music. It only lasted a year or so though and then he was back home.

“I had terrible agoraphobia. It was part of a nervous breakdown; that's the nearest I can get to describing it. I just cracked a bit. I'm not sure what was behind all of that. Dare I say it, there is an emotional imbalance and I have to be careful of that. As I get older, it's not quite as acute as it used to be.”

The muse called regardless, in the form of marching orders from his friend the trumpeter Ken Wilkinson. “I got this letter and a ticket saying that he had a gig for me, four nights a week at a Palais in London and saying ‘There's a ticket. Get here.’ And in a sense he was right because if I didn't make a move then, I would never make a move.”

There followed the well documented career in town, notably with Buddy Featherstonhaugh and later with Stan Tracey. The latter was, and remains, a special relationship. It first bloomed at the Flamingo club in Wardour Street, where Tony Crombie led the

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