

Obituaries

JOHN DANKWORTH

One of the pioneers of modern jazz in Britain, Sir John Dankworth was a multi-talented alto saxophonist, composer and arranger. An early champion of bebop, he went on to lead small groups and big bands in the progressive jazz style and developed a successful parallel career in commercial composition, scoring for film and TV. He was also in the vanguard of jazz education in Britain, establishing a facility at his home in Wavendon.

Dankworth was born in Woodford, Essex on 20 September 1927 and became interested in jazz as a teenager, playing clarinet in semi-professional bands while still at school. That involvement continued after he successfully auditioned for the Royal Academy of Music in 1944 and was obliged to carry his alto saxophone – an instrument rarely countenanced in the academy in those days – in a case designed for another, more ‘legitimate’ instrument.

During national service in the army he spent most of his time playing in dance bands, developing a good grounding for the ship’s band on the Queen Mary. Along with Ronnie Scott, Tony Kinsey and many others he was a musical stowaway in what was known as Gerald’s Navy, bent on reaching

New York and hearing Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and other bebop giants.

The sound of Parker’s alto was a lasting influence on the young John Dankworth but unlike many of his fellow altoists he was never merely a Bird clone and developed his own smooth sound and style, somewhat redolent of Lee Konitz. Back in London, Scott and Dankworth worked hard at their modern jazz playing. There was little commercial demand for the music and they resorted to hiring halls with other young musicians to practise. Then in 1948 they hired a studio, formed themselves into two bands, started Club 11 and began charging admission. Modern jazz made them enough money to keep the club going for some years.

In 1950 Dankworth married the modern jazz combo with commercial viability. Inspired by the urbane sound of the Miles Davis nonet, the first edition of the Johnny Dankworth Seven featured Jimmy Deuchar on trumpet, Don Rendell on tenor saxophone, Bill Le Sage on piano, Eddie Harvey on trombone, Joe Mudele on bass and Tony Kinsey on drums. When Dankworth auditioned vocalists for the group in 1951 he was immediately impressed by the voice and delivery of the young Cleo Laine,



JD (centre) with (clockwise from top left): Eddie Harvey, Don Rendell, Jimmy Deuchar, Tony Kinsey, Eric Dawson and Bill Le Sage

known then as Clem Campbell, and sought the opinion of his trumpet player. ‘Do you think she’s got something?’ Dankworth asked Deuchar. ‘I think she’s got everything,’ the trumpeter replied without hesitation. Cleo Laine became the band’s vocalist in 1951 and the leader’s wife in 1958. By the 1960s Dankworth was focusing on arrangements showcasing Cleo’s voice. They toured worldwide, particularly in the USA, where they became extremely popular.

The Dankworth Seven had broken up in 1953 to be replaced by a big band. Dankworth’s skill as arranger, composer and bandleader came to first fruition in the popular *Experiments With Mice* (1956), in which *Three Blind Mice* provided the base material for parodies of jazz and danceband styles of the day. In 1959 the big band shared a week-long concert season in the US with the Ellington orchestra and thus Dankworth began a musical relationship that lasted until Ellington’s death in 1974.

In 1961 Dankworth had another commercial hit with his take on Galt MacDermot’s *African Waltz*. The arrangement brought further success in the US when licensed to Cannonball Adderley. ‘What The Dickens!’ (1963) marked a move into programme music and was followed in 1964 by ‘The Zodiac Variations’, recorded in New York with stateside luminaries such as Clark Terry and Bob Brookmeyer.

Jazz was not Dankworth’s only active musical outlet. He composed for *We Are the*



John Dankworth and family

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