mjf 2020 – jazz unlocked: our reflections

Summary

mjf delivered its first online festival from 21-24 May as an alternative to the planned but cancelled physical festival. mjf 2020: ***jazz unlocked*** was a bold, defiant statement of mjf's 25th anniversary and provided audiences and artists with a high quality, diverse and distinctive engagement experience during the height of the UK Covid 19 lockdown period.

It was delivered in partnership with Jazz North and United We Stream, and in addition to a wealth of specially-created content, pioneered the first staged live jazz ensemble performances in the UK since lockdown restrictions began.

Background

mjf 2020 (25th anniversary festival) had been planned for 21-25 May, and was launched to the public on 13 March. Due to increasing Covid 19 impact, the decision to cancel was made and announced on 23 March.

Following prompt investigation and discussions with team and board, a proposal was agreed to deliver an online festival in its place.

- Contracted artists were granted 100% cancellation fees; mjf requested their input into the online festival instead. Any other production-related deposits had to be written off.
- Most public funders pledged 100% of their funding, although all event sponsorship, projected box office and earned income were now lost, as was any potential surplus box office income.
- An intense period of planning, programming, production, content curation and marketing took place over a period of just six weeks.
- Most content had to be created from scratch and with little or no sector precedent or in-house experience of producing a virtual festival.
- Shortly into this planning period, we struck up two key delivery partnerships: Jazz North, Producing Partner, who would edit our filmed footage, co-ordinate streaming platforms and operate streaming platforms for two days of the programme; and United We Stream, who would stream the opening and closing days, and produce the 10 socially-distanced live performances from Bury Met theatre.

Ambition

In a virtual landscape quickly populated with online content of variable quality, mjf aspired to ensure that ***jazz unlocked*** reflected the organisation's vision and its ambitions for high quality and diversity, along with the desire to celebrate its 25th anniversary and to reflect its USPs of supporting commissioned work, northern artists and talent development.

Programme

mjf conceived themed strands that reflected the above ambition, creating new programmes that made as much use as possible of scheduled artists, our sector peers and little-seen archived material. These strands included:

- 10 performances of regional artists live from Bury Met
- Live and pre-recorded home concerts by national/international artists
- 25@25: illustrated interviews with previously commissioned mjf originals artists
- Roundtables: new releases by emerging artists reviewed by sector peers
- In-depth 'At home with' artist interviews/ masterclasses
- Topical panel debates with key industry personalities and artists: The Future of Live Music in Lockdown and The Future of Talent Development
- Premieres of new films, new releases and new work
- Film feature on our talent development programme mjf hothouse
- Best of mjf 2019: footage of performance highlights from last year's festival
- Features presented in collaboration with event partners Efpi Records, Matt & Phreds and NQJazz – including a 'Film Night' special, featuring live improvised music to archive silent films of 1900s Manchester.

The full programme listing is still available here and most of the broadcasts are still available to watch here.

Johnny Hunter, Graham South, Dee Byrne and Huw V Williams

Achievements

The entire project was successfully delivered with minimal additional spending, thanks to previously budgeted artist fees and the generous in-kind partnerships with United We Stream GM and Jazz North.

- 194 individual musicians participated; all live performers were paid
- 37 hours of content over 4 days attracted 38,277 viewers across all platforms
- Keychange: 58% of performing ensembles featured female-identifying artists
- Of all musicians, 74% were based in the north; 44% based in Greater Manchester

- Six premieres/performances of specially created material were given

- The entire project was successfully delivered with minimal additional spending, thanks to in-kind partnerships and previously budgeted artist fees

Thandani Gumede

Highlights

We prioritised quality over quantity – this was mjf's guiding principle. The broad programme offered everything from a 'family-friendly' feel to specialist topics.

- Live performances – the first in 3 months – evidenced the joy of music-making

- Quality of live event production by UWS was very high

- Programmes offered insightful, high quality music and discussion and were presented as if 'on TV' with continuity announcements

- We revisited the high quality previously commissioned work over the past 15 years in discussion with the composers

- Our talent development artists were given the opportunity to perform and shine through in adversity

- The online platforms offered what is occasionally perceived as 'difficult' music an unrivalled access to new audiences

Challenges

We encountered a range of challenges due to the limited timescale in which mjf *jazz unlocked* was produced.

- No available extra budget to produce the online festival

- Full programme was announced only days beforehand

- No time to preview pre-recorded material before broadcast

- Several programmes were not completed as intended: e.g. some had to be broadcast before music illustrations could be included

- Because of the audio-visual platforms used to present the festival, we were unable to use much audio-only content

- People who produce interesting artistic work are not necessarily the best 'on camera' advocates of their work

- Unlike a multi-venue physical festival, there was no event 'overlap': audiences had only one viewing choice, which sometimes encouraged new listenership but deterred others

- The team was learning on the hoof as it went along, often working outside of its skill areas

- Working with external partners under pressure provided little time to absorb different working practices of others outside the core team

- It was difficult to predict how much editing work would be required when making the programme recordings

- Data upload speeds and overly large file sizes affected some Jazz North broadcasts on the Friday and Saturday

Jenna G

If we were to do it again?

- Allow time to view and edit pre-recorded material

- Allow time to establish methods for data collection and analytics and to smooth out any technical issues with particular streaming platforms - make use of a Data Champion

- Fine-tune the balance of pure music content vs discussion-based material in favour of live music

- Make sure scheduling and timing of some programmes at certain times of day is appropriate - occasionally it was not pitched so well

- Not to record programmes in gallery view - this was not easy on the eye

- Make sure programmes are 60 minutes or shorter. Some were 90 minutes and is felt too long.

- Secure more detail in advance from streaming partners about what content can be shared

- A producer/production team would greatly enhance delivery

Marketing & Audiences

Solely delivering content online saw an increase in social media followers and engagement between May 1st - May 28th:

Facebook

◊ 6221 likes (+127), 6752 followers (+687)
◊ Post reach: 22,830 (+197%)

Twitter

◊ 16,165 likes (+48)
◊ Tweet impressions – 313,000 (+838%)

Instagram

◊ 1906 followers (+ 88 followers)
◊ Posts reach – 15,477 (+1175%)

YouTube

◊ 172 subscribers (+62)
◊ Total hours watched: 295.6
◊ Unique viewers - 650 (+507%)

- Good engagement across Greater Manchester radius

- Repurposed branding worked well online

- Restream, Facebook Live and YouTube were used simultaneously

- mjf website is now set up for live streaming

- Event listings were not as detailed as they would be for a physical event – this may not be a problem

- Jazz North's crossposting network of northern jazz festivals signed up, but it was too much content for some to share

Finance & Funders

Key public funders (ACE and GMCA) confirmed continuation of their core funding at the start of the COVID-pandemic. This enabled the mjf team to pivot to delivery of ***jazz unlocked*** with confidence.

The total delivery costs for ***jazz unlocked*** would have been c.£35k. The partnerships with UWS and Jazz North were key, with UWS supporting venue and production costs on Thursday and Sunday, and Jazz North contributing consultancy time for production of Friday's and Saturday's programme. Most artist fees were already accounted for, having previously paid cancellation fees in full.

What ideas can we take forward?

jazz unlocked was mjf's first attempt to produce and disseminate digital content at scale. With the possibility that social distancing measures will continue in some form for an extended period, digital or hybrid delivery is likely to be the only way for mjf to achieve its artistic and business objectives over the next 9-12 months. Thinking beyond the current COVID context, audiences have ever greater expectations for live events to be available digitally. This is a direction of travel that mjf looks forward to with excitement.

Areas/ideas we're keen to explore following jazz unlocked:

- How a hybrid streamed/physical festival could make the best of both worlds and reach new audiences: we'll explore how digital content could be used to stream in advance of the physical festival, as well as complementing the physical festival offer.

- How virtual content can generate income, including paywall events, event sponsorship, and pre-event crowdfunding.

Cameraman at Bury Met

- Using ***jazz unlocked*** content - and other content in the mjf archive - to populate and drive traffic to our YouTube channel. Programmes could be released monthly/ quarterly.

- New partnerships with venues affected by social-distancing, presented as online seasons filmed outside of festival time. How mjf's brand and programming knowledge can add value to these venues if live events continue to be restricted.

- Testimonials from artists, participants and peers have evidenced success, endorsement, reach and impact. We'll continue these conversations and we'll set up focus groups with audiences to inform our understanding of their engagement and demand going forward.

- We're keen to share and celebrate our pioneering story with others!

Testimonials

"The mjf online broadcast brought so much joy to the jazz community. It gave us all an opportunity to come together and enjoy what we love. It was such a relief to have something positive to focus on; it's felt as though our entire industry has been restricted but mjf came along and offered us all a lifeline."

Lara Jones (artist)

"The chance to play a gig during lockdown in a safe, socially distanced setting was incredible for me. As a musician who primarily connects with people through performing and also relies on live performance for creative momentum it was a real boost to have this gig to work towards and a way to share with audiences again during a very isolated and strange time."

Faye McCalman (artist)

"I was truly inspired by the flexibility and creativity of Manchester Jazz Festival. Steve Mead became a role model for many promoters who had to suddenly re-arrange their way of thinking about events. Manchester Jazz Festival provided space and possibilities for the artists trapped by COVID-19. Leaving the comfort zone and acting wisely, but fast, communicating with partners and being dedicated to the local scene deserves respect and hopefully will be followed by other organisations abroad."

Martyna Markowska (Institute of Culture, Katowice, Poland)

"A massive well done and THANKYOU! You guys really have made my last few days. Loved every minute of it!"

Julia Payne (The Hub, UK)

Faye McCalman

Thanks to our producing partners United We Stream and Jazz North, who helped make *jazz unlocked* possible

JAZZ NORTH
ENRICHING LIVES THROUGH IMPROVISATION

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mjf talent gigs festival

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