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LONDON SWINGS AGAIN

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Young, gifted, black and white, jazz combo Ezra Collective is ushering in a rebirth of the cool in the British capital, writes **Jane Cornwell**

Ezra Collective is one of the hottest young jazz groups to come out of London in recent years. So it makes sense that its management has arranged for us to meet in one of the capital's hippest, buzziest hotels, an Instagram haven towering above Euston Road, opposite the Eurostar terminal in Kings Cross.

The playlist in the hotel restaurant is as on-trend as its retro-modern decor. I've only just sat down with three of the band's five members — powerhouse drummer and bandleader Femi Koleoso, his bassist brother TJ and tenor saxophonist James Mollison — when a keyboard-driven tune comes meandering through the speakers, meditative at first, then increasingly exuberant and adventurous.

Femi, 26, holds up a finger as he listens over the chatter.

"Hey, this is us, man," he says with a grin.

The other two pause. "Yeah," they say, smiling.

"It's us."

The track, *Philosopher II*, is a work for solo piano composed and played by Joe Armon-Jones, who like trumpet player Dylan Jones isn't here today. It's a tune from Ezra Collective's 2019 debut album *You Can't Steal My Joy*, an acclaimed, mostly instrumental collection that has groove at a premium and influences from rock, reggae and hip-hop to ska, grime and Afrobeat at the ready.

Rapper Loyle Carner and singer Jorja Smith are high-profile features on two of its tracks. But it's the music — kinetic, vibing, distinctly London — that lingers.

Underpinning everything the band does, live and on record (there are also two self-released EPs, 2016's *Chapter 7* and 2017's *Juan Pablo – The Philosopher*), is that great black American art form: jazz. Much has been made of the flourishing London jazz scene over recent years. The likes of the BBC, *The New York Times* and indeed, *The*

Weekend Australian Review have noted the emergence of a tight-knit clutch of players buoyed by a grassroots infrastructure involving independent labels, online radio stations and jams and gigs in pubs and clubs.

It's not new, exactly. Jazz has always had periods of stagnation followed by assimilation and growth. This current crop is another incarnation. Here are musicians whose allegiance to the originators is evidenced by blistering solos that quote Sonny Rollins or Duke Ellington, but who include the sounds they heard growing up, often as second-generation black Britons, and the dance and hip-hop beats that inform their lives.

And just as jazz was originally a come-one-come-all art form, so do this lot bring in crowds for whom categories are irrelevant.

"We get whole families," says TJ Koleoso. "Black, white, mixed. Mum, dad, three kids. Everyone vibing to the same song. We love how different our crowds look."

The movement is both overtly and implicitly political, and Ezra Collective is at its vanguard. *While You Can't Steal My Joy* kicks off with a cover of the hugely influential Afro-futurist piece, *Space is the Place*, by late cosmic jazzier Sun Ra, whose manifesto includes the belief that an extraordinary realm exists for the black man outside the bigoted real world, the band's diverse line-up is also a riposte to various -isms.

The Koleosos are British-Nigerians, sons of a working-class pastor. Mollison is mixed race, middle class, born to an army officer and a veterinarian. Joe Armon-Jones and Dylan Jones are white Brits from musical families; the former was a pupil at one of the UK's most prestigious public secondary schools. Ezra Collective's manager is female, and white. Its male agent is Italian.

"You go to any Ezra Collective gig and there's not an ounce of bad bone," says Femi of a live history that includes sold-out tours of the US, Europe and Japan and storming sets at WOMAD UK and the Glastonbury Festival. "People are dancing and smiling. We're playing and smiling. It's all energetic joy."

He squares his shoulders. "We attribute this success to so many different things. You know that African proverb, 'It takes a village to raise a child'? I think it takes a village to raise a band, too.

"The five of us together are powerful, but the five of us combined with our parents telling their friends to see us, the amount of



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work our manager, Amy, puts in, our tour managers sorting visas, all of that ...”

Gratitude, they say, keeps them humble, in perspective. Giving back keeps them going forward. Awards such as Gilles Peterson’s Best Jazz Album and Jazz FM’s Live Experience of the Year, and honours including being personally chosen by iconic producer Quincy Jones to play at his birthday party in Montreux in 2018, regularly see the Koleosos thanking God on Instagram.

Christianity is in the brothers’ DNA. Their father, Pastor Tope Koleoso, runs the vibrant, non-denominational Jubilee Church in north London, where Femi and TJ helm youth groups, teach music, boxing and life skills, and play in the church band. It is the

Koleosos, you feel, rather than the laidback Mollison (“I’m not religious but I have my own ways of communing,” he winks) who have shaped the ethos of the group, from their band name to their espousing of jubilation, of joy.

“In the Bible Ezra was the guy who took from the old laws and made things relevant to the people, which is what we do,” says TJ, the younger brother by 16 months. “We listen to the masters of before and of today [their grab bag includes Herbie Hancock, Robert Glasper and hip-hop producer J Dilla] and mash it together to make us relevant and as real as possible.”

All three musicians refute the widely held notion that the London-centric jazz explosion is anti-establishment, that rule books are being ripped up instead of reformed. Their rebellion, they say, lies in flipping the script and presenting London as a happy place.

“We’re against the narrative that says all young men in London are depressed and angry. We’re all facing difficulties. As a young person Brexit makes it much harder to travel around Europe.” Femi gestures toward the window and beyond that, the Eurostar terminal.

“There’s rising rent, prices and tuition fees. But we’ve got this music, and each other.”

Ezra Collective came together in 2012 through Tomorrow’s Warriors, a multi-award-winning youth organisation set up in 1991 by husband-and-wife team Janine Irons (MBE) and Gary Crosby (OBE) with the aim of increasing diversity across the arts through jazz.

With its focus on those from the African diaspora and girls, and a reputation that facilitates entry to music conservatoires including Trinity Laban (which Jones, Armon-Jones and Femi all attended), Tomorrow’s Warriors is key to the current jazz boom. Virtually all the stars of the new jazz generation — saxophonist Nubya Garcia, drummer Moses Boyd, tuba player Theon Cross, thirty-something elder statesman and reeds player Shabaka Hutchings — are its alumni.

“We were still called the Tomorrow’s Warriors youth band when we got together for a competition at (iconic jazz venue) Ronnie Scott’s,” offers Mollison, who came to Tomorrow’s Warriors after Moses Boyd gave a workshop at his school, and they caught the same bus home. “We were just five friends having fun, then you look around and it’s Glastonbury, New York, and you’re like, wow!”

All these young players switch between projects. Joe Armon-Jones heads up his own formidable band, in which Dylan Jones — who helms jazz-fusion outfit Pyjaen — plays alongside Nubya Garcia. Mollison’s side hustles include spiritual jazzers Where Pathways Meet and rising prog jazz crew Cykada. And though he trained as a physiotherapist (“I tried to be sensible”), TJ is also musical director at Jubilee Church. Self-expression, and one’s roots, are what matters.

“Sometimes it looks like me and TJ are having this big musical conversation onstage when he’s saying, ‘Do you remember Darren from school, bruv? He’s in the front row,’” laughs Femi, who is the engine room for bands led by Nubya Garcia and Jorja Smith, acts with which he’s recently toured Australia.

Marketeers have been quick to capitalise on the street credibility of these young jazz Turks. In 2019 Femi was the face of the BT Sport X Champions League campaign, starring in an onscreen advert that saw him playing his drum kit in the middle of a deserted football stadium.

Brands including Adidas, Carhatt and Nike have aligned themselves with musicians, venues and festivals. Receiving unsolicited free merchandise

is something Ezra members are still getting their heads around; today they’ve each been given a box containing a digital watch, though they’re yet to find out where they came from, and why.

“Being sent free Air Force Ones in the post still feels mental to a working-class boy from north London,” the older Koleoso continues. “It’s about balance. You might need to use the big corporations so that someone in South Africa can have access to our vinyl. But no one is going to tell me what we can play.”

TJ smiles. “I give a lot of this stuff away. I don’t need it. I just think, we’re being blessed so that we can bless others. If you have that perspective going into everything, it means that now we’re rolling out to Australia” — where Ezra will play Golden Plains and WOMADelaide as well as some headline dates — “there might be a kid who needs a drum lesson, so let’s get them in before sound-check. That mentality is who we are.”

No one is going to steal the group’s integrity, adds Femi.

Or their joy. Right?

“Right,” he says, as the others nod. “Joy is who we are.”

Ezra Collective will perform at WOMADelaide on March 6-10, in Melbourne on March 6 and in Sydney on March 12.

Dan Medhurst



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London's finest,
Ezra Collective

Dan Marshall