

ONE LOVE

Gary Crosby and Janine Irons' Tomorrow's Warriors organisation has mentored a staggering 10,000 musicians over the past 30 years – Nubya Garcia, Jason Yarde, Yazz Ahmed, Shabaka Hutchings and Soweto Kinch among them. Jane Cornwell spoke to UK jazz's power couple (and some of the musical stars they've helped) about their achievements, plus embracing chaos and spreading the love...

"Love," says Gary Crosby, sitting at home in Harrow, North-west London, "Love is the basis of everything we've done. We've never been about conventional methods, regulations or dogma. We embrace the chaos, and let young artists discover the magic of music for themselves."

Thirty years ago, frustrated by the lack of opportunities for young Black British musicians, inspired by the notion of 'giving back', and of 'paying it forward', Crosby – a London-born electrical engineer-turned-double bass player and the nephew of Jamaican guitar hero Ernest Ranglin – put a long-held vision into action. With his partner Janine Irons, a photographer, singer and former banker, he co-founded a non-profit organisation that would provide young people of colour (and later, of all races) with musical training free of charge, regardless of economic background.

They named it Tomorrow's Warriors.

"We wanted to conjure the idea of promise, strength, resilience and the willingness to fight for what you want," says Irons, seated to Crosby's left. "There was a lot to fight for. Black jazz musicians, especially the younger ones, didn't have any profile in the British media. The major clubs weren't booking them. There was no infrastructure to help facilitate any of that. I didn't have a marketing background," she continues brightly, "but I did have organisational skills. I just worked on instinct. Establishing jam sessions in London, Bristol, Birmingham. Booking gigs. Taking photos. Making press packs. Doing the driving."

Working from home, from the room they're in now ("We used to have date sheets pinned up right

across this back wall"), Crosby and Irons set about forging what is now the most successful jazz music education initiative in the country.

The organisation is the recipient of over 60 awards. Irons has an MBE, Crosby, an OBE. In July 2018 (seven months after suffering a near-fatal stroke) Crosby became the first jazz musician, and person of colour, to receive the Queen's Medal for Music – the pros of which, he decided, outweighed the cons.

"More than anything it [the medal] recognises the impact Tomorrow's Warriors has had on the many young jazz musicians we've worked with over the years," declared Crosby at the time.

To date some 10,000 young musicians aged between 11 and 25 have moved through the company's ranks, overseen by a staff of 11 working out of nearby offices in Harrow and – in keeping with an 'Each one, teach one' philosophy – mentors/leaders drawn from alumni including Denys Baptiste, Jason Yarde, Peter Edwards and Binker Golding.

Partnerships with the Arts Council, PRS Foundation and other funding bodies extend across the UK, but the financial pressure to stay afloat is relentless. That this Black-led – and indeed, *Black female-led* – organisation has consistently managed to raise half of its annual UK £200,000 running costs through private donations makes it even more remarkable.

Evidence of its efficacy is everywhere: reedsman Shabaka Hutchings on the cover of *DownBeat*; tenorist Nubya Garcia and her *New York Times* namechecks; keys player Joe Armon-Jones and his new Aquarri Records imprint; Zara McFarlane and Cherise, respectively 2018 and 2019 Jazz FM Vocalist of the Year. Then there are the shapeshifting collaborations between everyone from Binker Golding and Moses Boyd to Cassie Kinoshi and Sheila Maurice Grey, and others too numerous to mention. There's the diversity of the crowds, the visibility of female instrumentalists and the music that takes in the sounds of the UK including the diasporic backgrounds (Ghana, Nigeria, the Caribbean) of its players.

Kaidi Akinnibi, Daniel Casimir, Camilla George, Femi Koleoso, Sarah Tandy, Shirley Tetteh, David Mrakpor ... Name any artist from the 'British jazz renaissance' and chances are they're an ex-Warrior. While the current scene isn't all their own work, Tomorrow's Warriors was (and is) certainly the engine room, the space where chops were honed and life skills absorbed through a programme of master classes, workshops, performances and summer schools taking place (until the pandemic hit) at the

Photo: Fabrice Bourgelle