

Southbank Centre by the Thames in central London, where they've been resident since 2010.

"I grew up on a council estate," says Crosby, the son of Windrush generation parents. "I discovered jazz at 15 while being grounded at home [he'd been arrested on suspicion of carrying weed during a police raid in Soho] and one night Ella Fitzgerald came on the TV. Her voice sent a rush of feeling through me. I wanted to explore that sound. It saved me."

It never crossed his mind to visit venues like the Southbank: "Some youngsters don't know these places exist, or else they find them too imposing to enter. It's the same with conservatoires, so we guide people to Trinity Laban if they want to follow that route. We're about demystifying, showing what's possible."

In the South Bank's basement Violet Room, at jam sessions at Rich Mix in Shoreditch and further back, at the Spice of Life in Soho and Jazz Cafe in Camden, teenage Warriors are encouraged to take risks, hold space alongside older established musicians.

"When I was 17, I came down from Birmingham for the Jazz Cafe jam and jumped onstage with the band that became Empirical," says Shabaka Hutchings. "For the first time I thought, 'I can do this!'"

Warriors get to dep in Crosby's longstanding outfit Jazz Jamaica, or join flagship ensembles such as StringTing, Female Frontline and Nu Civilisation Orchestra, which was established in 2008 under the musical direction of pianist/composer Peter Edwards. They form their own bands: Maisha, Nérija, KOKOROKO, Triforce, Ezra Collective. They play in each other's.

Buoyed by the renewed interest in jazz from a young, hip-hop savvy demographic into Ahmed Jamal and Sun Ra because J Dilla sampled them; by the parallel developments in African-American jazz (Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp A Butterfly* and Kamasi Washington's *The Epic*, both released in 2015, were crucial in reuniting jazz with hip-hop); and by Tomorrow's Warriors' discover-it-yourself ethos, the UK scene emerged from within a perfect storm.

"People who look like me and like clubs, grime and hip-hop are seeing musicians onstage who are the same as them," says drummer/producer Moses Boyd. "It's people doing what they do."

From the early 2010s young Warriors were referencing grime, broken beat and rhythms from the Caribbean and West Africa, and playing to rowdy crowds at venues such as Total Refreshment Centre in Dalston and nights including Steam Down in Deptford

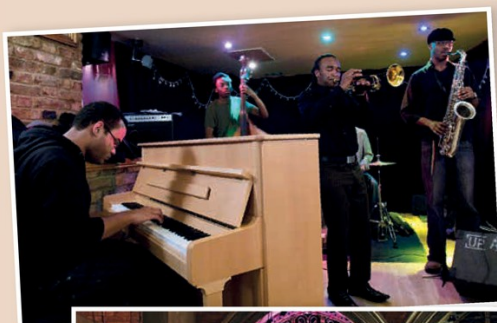
and Notting Hill's Jazz re:refreshed: "Most of our live acts were ex-Warriors," says the latter's Justin McKenzie. "They were a supply line of quality; we were like, 'Just bring us what you got.'"

The decades have only reinforced Crosby's belief that Black British players are blessed with a musical freedom denied young Black American musicians: "If you're living in the big cities in America the whole burden of the history of the music is on you. You have to engage with it. Here it's not much of an issue; the allegiance is more to the countries of the parents."

Which isn't to say that Crosby and Co. don't instil the Great American Songbook and its ilk into their charges. To be a Tomorrow's Warrior is to be familiar with Monk, Mingus, Ellington and Charlie Parker; to have Wayne Shorter's 'Footprints' on repeat in your sleep; to learn the scales, do the woodshedding. No matter if you don't swing or sight-read. What's essential is knowing whose shoulders you're standing on - on both sides of the Atlantic. From the get-go Crosby wanted to carry the baton of Black British jazz. To continue what began in the 1930s and 40s with the African and Caribbean musicians, citizens of the colonies, that flowed into London (and Cardiff and Liverpool), playing swing in big bands called things like Leslie Jiver Hutchison and the All-Coloured Orchestra, their size a buffer against racism, their monikers a riposte to exoticisation.

"I'd go to parties and there'd always be some old West Indian guys who'd been part of that scene sitting around a bottle, talking about players with funny names. I was more interested in the modernists of the 1950s, the Joe Harriotts, Dizzy Reeces and Harold McNairs," says Crosby, name-checking the bebopping Jamaicans that, by including the rhythms of their birthplace, helped fashioned a new Black British sonic identity. "But these early guys enabled them by letting them live with them and find work."

Harriott in particular informed the Jazz Warriors, the all-Black band that featured on Courtney Pine's 1986 opus *Journey To the Urge Within*. Subsequently aligned to Abibi Jazz Arts (another example of the key role played by community organisations in shaping the careers of marginalised artists), the Jazz Warriors became a 25-plus behemoth



Clockwise from left: a young Shabaka Hutchings and the late Abram Wilson at a TW jam; Gary Crosby beaming on the bass; and the TW Youth Ensemble performing at the Union Chapel, Islington

Photos: Gary Crosby and group top right this page (Tim Dickeson)



that gained agency from its size and showcased the early careers of a Who's Who of British jazz: Steve Williamson, Orphy Robinson, Cleveland Watkiss, Julian Joseph, Gary Crosby...

After releasing one album, 1987's ska-and-reggae-informed *Out of Many, One People*, the Jazz Warriors continued until 1992, attracting young guns such as Byron Wallen, Tony Kofi, Denys Baptiste and Jason Yarde along the way.

"I was 15 when I met the Jazz Warriors at the Shaw Theatre and went on to join the band," says Yarde. "In between I'd do a Sunday afternoon gig with Gary at the Upton Park Tavern, and got to know Tomorrow's Warriors when it was just an idea forming in his head.

"Gary was aware of the great impact made by the Jazz Warriors, but he felt there was any number of kids out there who wouldn't necessarily find their way into music without something to join. I was still young enough to fit the demographic for what Tomorrow's Warriors would become, so was among the prototypes. It was pretty much a group-based conveyor-belt thing then. I had the distinction of leading the first band not immediately under Gary's direction."

Both the Jazz Warriors (and their rivals-not-rivals' Loose Tubes) had practiced at the original Jazz Cafe, the tiny Newington Green venue owned by John Dabner – whose bigger venue in Camden employed Crosby in the house band and allowed him to use the large stage (with its famous 'STFU' pillar) for practice and weekend afternoon jam sessions.

"Dabner helped democratise jazz in this country," says Crosby, who in 1991 formed Jazz Jamaica and Nu Troop (variously featuring Denys Baptiste, Byron Wallen and Robert Fordjour as well as Crosby himself), an outfit that followed the Blakey and the Messengers mould of young talent led by an elder. Nu Troop became the nucleus around which the jam sessions revolved; as word spread, young players including Nathaniel Facey, Soweto Kinch and Tom Skinner became regulars.

"The potential of these young musicians was enormous," states Irons, who met Crosby in the same period. "I just knew we had to get them seen as professional artists. We started a monthly jam at Watermans Arts Centre in Brentford then established jams in Bristol and Birmingham, so that every weekend they were doing something."

After Nu Troop came the award-winning JLife – variously featuring Robert Mitchell, Andrew McCormack, David Okumu, Daniel Crosby and Julie Dexter – and the Denys Baptiste Quartet, followed by Robert Mitchell's Panacea. Each group received two years' worth of solid support to set them on their way.

"The challenge was that nobody was interested in young Black musicians," Irons says. "The scene was very male, pale and stale. Promoters were getting people to drive across the country for fifty quid and no dinner."

Gary and Janine founded a management agency, Crosby Irons Associates (CIA) and an imprint, Dune Records on which they released Nu Troop's 1997 album *Migrations*, a clutch of *Tomorrow's Warriors Presents...* recordings and four albums by Baptiste including his Mercury-nominated debut, 1999's *Be Where You Are*.

Baptiste's natural leadership abilities dovetailed with Crosby's, and as Crosby and Irons concentrated on audience development



Tomorrow's Warriors Female Frontline L-R: Izzy Burnham, Aleksandra Topczewska, Caroline Scott, Lettie Leyland, Jelly Cleaver, Kasia Kawalek and Alana Curtis

**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 for themselves //**

(an oversight that needed addressing), recruiting young female players (ditto) and reworking the Warriors' remit to include a diverse community ("The majority are Black but everyone is equal, with a common interest in music of Black heritage," says Crosby), Baptiste found himself increasingly in charge.

"The opportunities for Black musicians to play in the 'nicer' clubs [in the UK] just weren't there in the same way they are now,

and a lot of the youngsters don't really realise that," offers Baptiste, who is currently teaching two online classes per week on the Tomorrow's Warriors learning hub, which some 200 students have accessed through the lockdowns.

"People had just got comfortable with who they'd been booking for years. Gary saw what needed to happen to cultivate the next generation,

which was giving opportunities to play every week, to develop their craft in an apprenticeship with someone more experienced. This was how I learned to be a bandleader, improviser, ambassador. I took Gary's approach of not telling people what to do but to be encouraging in the same way that I was encouraged. So I talk. Let them sit in. Help them see their potential."

Thirty years on, its legacy intact and foundations strong, Tomorrow's Warriors continues its trajectory. The more successful its graduates, the more the organisation – and waitlist – has grown. All of which has vindicated the original vision of Crosby and Irons, both of whom intend Tomorrow's Warriors to continue for the next 30 years, and beyond.

"We'll continue to be a home for young people from different backgrounds who want to play jazz and may not fit into the formal structured approach," says Irons.

Crosby nods. "We're not the ones who are teaching wrong. Do you think Charlie Parker or Bud Powell would have been told what to do? These kids have a passion. Sometimes we'll give them the key to the practice room without me being there 'cause they've asked. When somebody has that energy, you don't mess with it. You allow them to say something, to add something to the story," He smiles. "You show them love."

**Jazz Jamaica All Stars: The Trojan Story is at the Royal Festival Hall on 18 July and the Nu Civilisation Orchestra's What's Going On at 50 is at the QEII as part of this year's EFG London Jazz Festival on 18 November**