



Shabaka Hutchings swaps his 'big metal horn' for a shakuhachi – and a fresh direction, writes **JANE CORNWELL**

Shabaka Hutchings last toured Australia in the spring of 2022, whipping packed crowds into frenzies as the tenor-wielding frontman of cosmic jazz trio the Comet is Coming.

Eyes squeezed shut, biceps straining, his rangy frame doubled over his "big metal horn", he'd improvise feverish passages of energy, working with musicians on synths and drums, he has said, to affect minds and change realities.

"The way I was chugging the saxophone was hyping me up and inspiring that intensity," Hutchings, 40, says when we meet in a hipster hotel cafe-lounge at King's Cross, central London, at the tail end of 2024.

"The sax was invented for military marching bands, so that blowing the thing creates a huge sound vibration. You don't need much core strength to make it resonate."

"Now that I've detached from it," he says, his short dreads tucked under a Rasta tam hat, his gaze steady behind wire-rimmed glasses, "I can really say that playing the sax is easy."

It's a bold statement, given the London-born, Barbados-reared Hutchings is widely regarded as one of the leading saxophonists of his generation and in the vanguard of the current British jazz explosion. But having disbanded his hyperactive, horn-heavy, Mercury Music Prize-nominated jazz quartet Sons of Kemet and after announcing (on New Year's Day 2023) that he'd be laying down the instrument with which he is most identified, he then set about winding up sax-led projects including Shabaka and the Ancestors, his alliance with several noted South African musicians.

He put similarly Mercury-nominated the Comet is Coming on an extended break. "We will return when the stars align and the planet needs us," the group declared on Instagram. His last official gig on saxophone was in December 2023, performing John Coltrane's A Love Supreme at Hackney Church in east London. This writer was there, experiencing Hutchings' take on the spiritual jazz classic as dynamic, tender, free and often thrillingly complex.

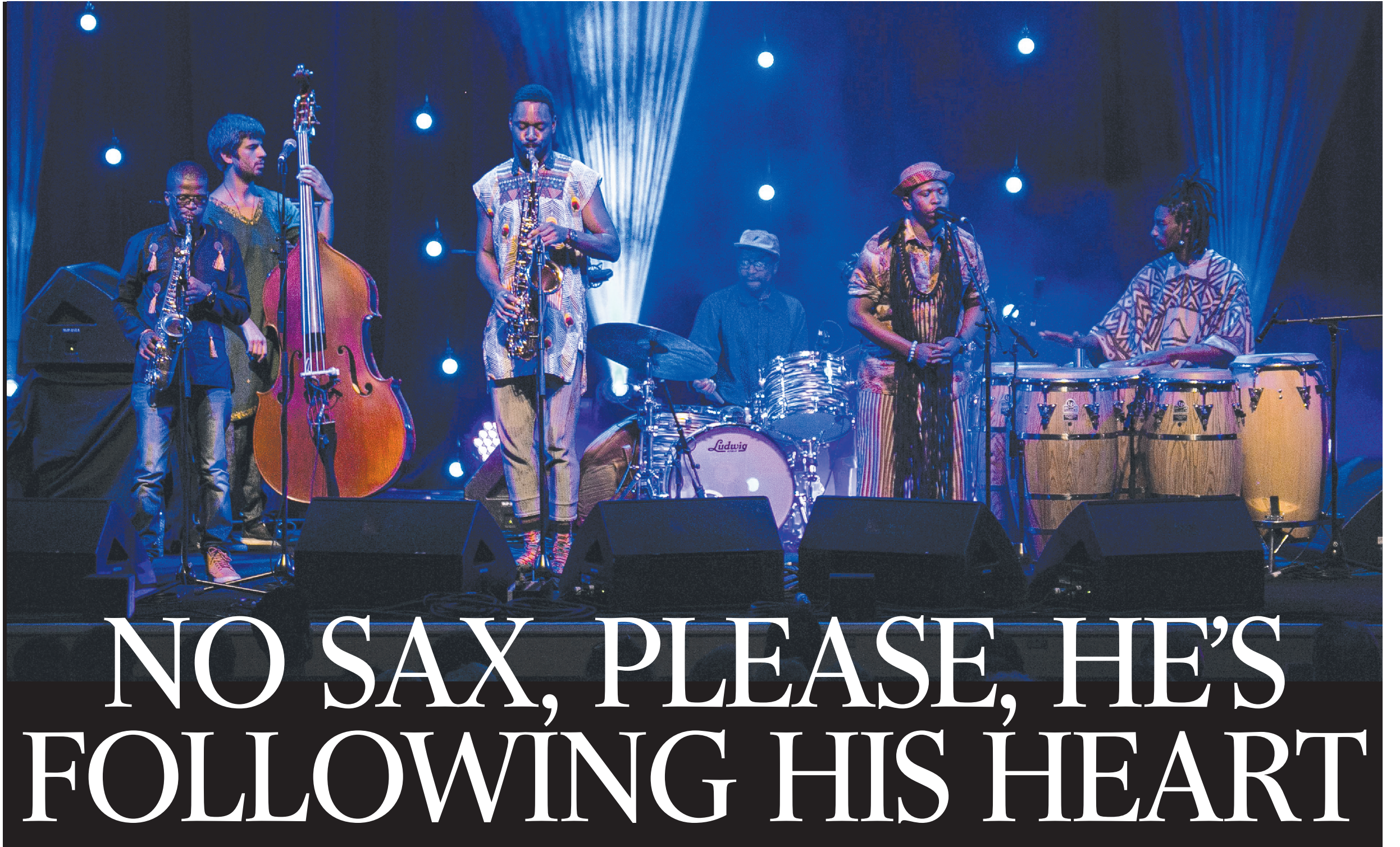
If playing the sax became too effortless, ultimately too unsatisfying, for the musician, bandleader and composer, this has much to do with his questing spirit, his commitment to facilitating change, garnering self-knowledge.

"You've got to keep moving with music and follow your heart," says Hutchings, the only child of a single mother, an English teacher, and a dub poet and graphic designer father with whom he reconnected in his teens.

"That's what typifies the heroes of the music that I really respect. And if that means changing instruments, then that's how it goes."

So when Hutchings returns to Australia in March, playing dates including the WOMAdelaide festival (which runs March 7-10), it will be in a fresh new guise.

Presenting simply as Shabaka, he'll lead a band of American musicians on drums, trombone, piano and harp – the same line-up that featured across his six-night residency at Blue Note New York in September 2024, not the British-based outfit with which he has just finished touring China – to deliver tunes from his acclaimed debut



NO SAX, PLEASE, HE'S FOLLOWING HIS HEART



Shabaka Hutchings, main, and far right, on saxophone with Shabaka and the Ancestors in Sydney in 2018; left, Hutchings in London in April 2024 with the Japanese bamboo shakuhachi flute; and right, Hutchings' idol Sonny Rollins.

JAMIE WILLIAMS, DAVID CORIO/REDFERNS



kick-started and dominated the London jazz renaissance of the mid to late 2010s, jamming in pubs and pop-up clubs, interacting with crowds, smashing fourth walls, folding elements of grime, hip-hop and Afro-Caribbean rhythms into a free jazz template.

Hutchings, a former BBC New Generation Artist – a program that supports young musicians at the start of their international careers – and at that time almost ubiquitous as a sideman, was frequently cited as the scene's unofficial figurehead, despite his outspoken rejection of the jazz label and being a good six to 10 years older than everyone else. It irked then and still irks, sort of, now.

"There was a whole school of musicians my age and above that got completely sidelined by the London jazz thing, as were (noted avant-garde) bands Polar Bear and Acoustic Ladyland because their references weren't Afrobeat, Sun Ra or spiritual jazz, whatever that is meant to be."

Hutchings muses on possible definitions: music that animates. A genre that connects a bunch of music within a particular canon. He cites saxophonist Albert Ayler, for whom spiritual jazz was illogical, healing, heart-level music.

"Anyway," Hutchings says, coming back to the main topic, the London jazz thing. "It was all very strange."

Nevertheless, he is determined to be a role model to younger musicians.

"I think it's important for performers or artists with visibility to make sure the young generation don't necessarily continue repeating the same cycles," says Hutchings.

He founded a record label, Native Rebel, to ensure acts such as trombonist Chelsea Carmichael, another Warriors alumnus,

don't have to think twice about releasing a record ("I think the thing that psychologically separates me from a few younger musicians is that I think, 'Why is the album not there? Let's book a studio, do it tomorrow and put it out!").

He's producing these artists, as well as his current work, using portable recording and mixing equipment he keeps on his phone or in his backpack, and learns about via the YouTube videos he watches each day.

This suits his current nomadic lifestyle – home, he has said, is where his flutes are – which takes him and his Moroccan-born partner around the world, next to China, then Barbados (where his mother is) and Australia after that.

He shows photos on his phone of the artwork he practises regularly, sometimes on an iPad – the video for To the Moon has one such psychedelic abstract – and which will illustrate the book he's been writing for three years.

Letters to a Young Musician, its working title, is a memoir in which Hutchings addresses his youthful self through a collection of thoughts that have struck him as he has toured and that have resonance in his musical life. He hopes it will offer inspiration to any younger musician setting off on their own musical journey, who wants to be free to think in ways unrestricted by industry or societal forces. Who wants to get to where he is. Just doing his thing.

"I'm also thinking of including some basic art where readers can do their own colouring in," he says.

Outside the lines? He flashes a grin. "Outside the lines," he says.

Shabaka will play in Australia March 6-12, in Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Fremantle.

solo album, *Perceive Its Beauty*, Acknowledge Its Grace.

His main instrument? The ancient, end-blown Japanese bamboo shakuhachi flute. As career shifts go, this one is as surreal and as serendipitous as they come.

"The pandemic was a big factor in changing people's directions," Hutchings says. "I had a lot of time at home to reflect on what it means to progress. I'd bought a shakuhachi in Japan and would go to Richmond Park – the largest, wildest park in Greater London – to just sit, make sounds and understand dynamic rationality. I'd play the same notes for hours, creating a pressurised environment for my body and the smallest opening in my mouth for the pressure to be released," he adds, embarking on a long monologue that takes in Zen Buddhism, the sonics of bamboo and the breathing techniques of his sax hero Sonny Rollins, who

was at peak fame when he stepped back to hone his craft in the 1950s.

Hutchings immersed himself in the musical cultures of Japan, Morocco and South America, learning an array of traditional flutes including the Andean quena, the Brazilian pifano and the shakuhachi, three of which he made after harvesting bamboo from a forest outside Fukuoka in western Japan.

While Hutchings was steadily cultivating the prowess that would allow him to craft *Perceive Its Beauty*, Acknowledge Its Grace in ways introspective and collaborative, spacious and poetic ("The tools change, the vision evolves, and one of our finest musicians might just have achieved a higher state of artistic consciousness," as one reviewer wrote in popular music magazine Mojo). Andre 3000 of Atlanta hip-hop legends Outkast was working towards his own flute-forward album of in-

strumentals, 2023's *New Blue Sun*. Coincidence? Synchronicity? The zeitgeist?

Hutchings smiles and shrugs. "It might be that there's certain cues in cultural society that will result in a sound or a visual aesthetic that artists pick up on and their work might then take directions that suggest a particular form without realising that other people have taken those same cues," he says enigmatically.

"We'd have to do some deep digging to understand what those cues could be."

Andre 3000 features among the clutch of guests (including bassist Esperanza Spalding, singer Lianne La Havas, electronics wiz Sam "Floating Points" Shepherd and Hutchings' father, spoken word artist Anum Iyapo) on *Perceive Its Beauty*. He also features on *Possession*, Hutchings' new EP, playing Mexican Teotihuacan

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SHABAKA HUTCHINGS
 BRITISH MUSICIAN AND COMPOSER

drone flute on *To the Moon*, a track through which crickets chirrup, a digital keyboard canters and flutes overlap with vibraphone and guitar.

Other tracks find Hutchings on soft, plaintive clarinet, the instrument he started playing in Barbados aged nine, practising to bars rapped by Tupac and Notorious B.I.G., and for which he received a classical music degree from London's Guildhall School of Music.

He was 16 when he moved with his mother to Birmingham, northern England, and began commuting to London for workshops hosted by Tomorrow's Warriors, the multi-award-winning jazz education organisation aimed at young people of colour and girls.

Dozens of Tomorrow's Warriors alumni from saxophonist Nubya Garcia and trumpeter Sheila Maurice-Grey to Mercury-winning quintet Ezra Collective

Could bringing back a cultural elite save us from our illiberal selves?

JAMES MARRIOTT

The "cultural elite" is so widely despised at the moment that even quite unlikely enemies of entrenched privilege such as billionaire businessmen feel able to scorn them without fretting unduly over the appearance of hypocrisy.

Recently in London's Financial Times newspaper, Silicon Valley financier Peter Thiel – co-founder of PayPal, net worth \$22.5bn – took a swipe at the "Distributed Idea Suppression Complex", sinisterly acronymised as DISC, which he defined as "the media organisations, bureaucracies, universities and government-funded NGOs that traditionally delimited public conversation".

Sweep away this sinister

apparatus of professors, television producers and newspaper editors, and citizens will be free to seek the truth for themselves.

Though Thiel's rhetorical thunderbolts arrived veiled in clouds of pretension and obscurity (his anti-elite tirade begins, ironically enough, with a meditation on the etymology of the ancient Greek word *apokalypsis*), the core of his argument is nowadays blandly uncontroversial.

The right loathes the cultural elite as patronising and out of touch; the left worries that it excludes "marginalised voices".

The idea that society requires a class of people who promote certain values and "delimit" public conversation has few adherents nowadays. But it is a view to which I am finding myself increasingly sympathetic. As Thiel writes, the

internet has radically democratised our culture. Facebook and X have broken the power of the mainstream media. Access to "the public conversation" – once restricted to the handful of people allowed to express their opinions in the *Newsnight* studio and on opinion pages – is now virtually unlimited.

In many ways this is a good thing. More voices and points of view are heard than ever in history.

It is undeniably true that the old "cultural elite" was flawed in many ways: biased, snobbish, self-satisfied and all too obviously shaped by vested interests. And those who rage against "the mainstream media" are not wrong to point out that traditional media companies have never reflected every view under the sun.

But it is also the case that our



Peter Thiel

newly democratised culture has not, to put it mildly, heralded the arrival of an egalitarian paradise of reasoned debate.

As is now well documented, the advent of social media platforms has brought about rising political extremism, metastasising conspiracy theories, growing hostility to science and the shattering of the mainstream into a thousand different realities that are increas-

ingly alien to one another. Modern citizens differ on matters that once seemed so obvious they were hardly worth discussing – who won the American election? Do vaccines work? What is a woman?

True, many more views are heard. But the result is chaotic. The problem is that a successful society requires a shared moral and cultural reality.

A democracy whose citizens are divided not only on policy but also on fundamental questions of what is and isn't true will grow increasingly dysfunctional, as anyone who pays attention to US politics will have noticed.

The version of reality believed in by the complacent and sometimes self-serving cultural elites had many shortcomings – you miss a great deal surveying the world from the senior common

room or WIA, home of the UK government. But it did at least provide a common world view in which citizens could share. A chastening discovery of the 21st century is that a flawed consensus may be preferable to anarchy.

Indeed, the "public conversation" in the age of social media has revealed that many people are not as keen on liberal democratic values as the old cultural elites might fondly have imagined. Anyone who has spent much time on X will have noticed that values such as free speech, equality and tolerance simply do not seem to make much intuitive sense to many people. Given half the chance, an awful lot of people (even those who think of themselves as liberals) would prefer to silence and abuse their enemies rather than tolerate views they dis-

agree with. Many of the endless petty campaigns to censor books and silence speakers are in essence populist movements that would have struggled to get the same purchase in the more elitist cultural environment of the 20th century.

Even more alarming is that support for democracy among young people has been falling since the advent of social media.

We should be grateful anti-democratic sentiment was one idea effectively suppressed by the elites who ran the DISC. Avowed enemies of democracy would find it hard to get a position reporting for the BBC or teaching at a British university. But plenty of people with those views have found huge and influential platforms online.

It may be that liberal and democratic values do not arise naturally from the mass of the

population when they are thrown together online. Liberalism has always been a counterintuitive creed that appeals more to the intellect than the emotions. A lot of people do not find it natural to treat their hated enemies with respect and tolerance. We may discover you can't have a tolerant and democratic liberal society without a cultural elite imposing those strange ideas from above.

I hope it is clear that my defence of cultural elites is the result not of gleeful snobbery but of rueful pragmatism. I am no special fan of elites and I would very much like to believe in a world in which all voices could be heard equally and all value systems constantly granted a hearing.

It is simply that I am not sure that utopia is possible.