



Theo Croker performing live in 2025

there's something about the way he's trying. When he figures that out, this'll be cool." Then I signed up to school trumpet class at 11, brought home a rented instrument and told my parents I was playing trumpet now. They said, 'Okay.'

He studied music at a local school of the arts in his teens, going on to enroll in jazz studies at Cleveland's renowned Oberlin Conservatory (as did Kassa Overall), where his room mates included pianist Sullivan Fortner (who has played on several of Croker's recordings). Gary Bartz, Marcus Belgrave and Donald Byrd were his influential instructors: "Marcus is one of the most unique improvisers ever. His tonality, harmony and rhythm were virtuosic, real Charlie Parker-level phrasing. He came to our gigs, and he'd play with us for hours on end. Improv classes went for as long as they went. It was never 'Your time's up' with Marcus.

"He took me on tour in his Louis Armstrong band, and I wouldn't even know I was going on tour." Croker flashes a grin. "He'd be like, 'Get in the car, man. Let's go for a ride.' Three hours later, we'd be in Detroit."

Armed with Byrd's tips on composition ("[Donald] came from this mindset that we have infinite potential; you have to get out of your own way"), Croker took a six-month residency in Shanghai, China at the House of Jazz and Blues. It was the start of a seven-year stint that saw him playing across a range of bands playing everything from salsa to jazz fusion to Afrobeat, though as the first artist-in-residence at Shanghai's Peace Hotel Jazz Club he had a quintet that delivered straight ahead jazz ("Trane, Dizzy, Monk, month by month, hundreds of songs"), five nights a week for years.

In 2010 he met and collaborated with Grammy-winning vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, who would go on to change his life. Croker was intending to make a swing record. But Bridgewater - with whom he'd exchanged ideas, and who understood the sheer range of his artistry - talked him out of it.

"I remember I was touring with Dee Dee in France, and she was saying that straight ahead jazz had been done, that I should meld all the stuff I had, all the things she'd seen

and heard on an iPod of my live recordings, then take it to an international platform. That while it might take longer for doors to open in the American system, eventually they'd catch on and just expect me to be outside the jazz box."

Bridgewater duly produced and guested on Croker's third album, 2014's *Afrophysicist*, the precursor to an increasingly adventurous series of releases including 2016's *Escape Velocity* and 2019's Grammy-nominated *Star People Nation*, deemed "an album that gallivants from swirling, leftfield hip-hop beats to propellant swing to African percussion," by the *New York Times*. By then he had his custom-made Monette trumpet, an ergonomically efficient instrument that offered a solution to bad body habits ("I was playing trumpets that affected my posture and lips and gave me headaches"). He also forged a creative partnership with the producer D'LEAU, with the aim of bringing his production voice to life onstage, and since 2022 has used a DJ mixer, Ableton Live and record samples to interact with the live performance.

His live shows are different every time, which is as he likes it. When *Dream Manifest* at the Barbican hit an early glitch - a missing click track - his quartet featuring Overall navigated with a burst of improv. Being in the moment, experimental-friendly, creatively enabled, is what matters to Croker, whose many collaborators share his mind set.

The UK scene is a particular fecund source: aside from Scottish fashion designer Nicholas Daley, who outfitted the entire *Dream Manifest* line-up in natty bespoke textiles, London acts such as singer Ego Ella May, tuba maestro Theon Cross and trumpeter Sheila Maurice Gray dovetail with his vision, similarly finding gold in the margins.

"I find that London, the audience, the scene, the critics and the industry itself to be very supportive of new things. They lead the way. You don't get that type of support in America or even France."

The London scene's penchant for folding the traditional music of one's forebears - reggae, highlife, soca - into the porous jazz template rarely happens Stateside: "Those bands would have a hard time, particularly in New York, where the jazz industry is old school and protected and focused on swing. You'd have to go into R&B or pop to do something like that. The States chokes itself when it comes to innovation."

There are artist/musicians who continue to fly their freak flags. Who show that it's okay to groove, cross breed, break down barriers. Who maintain both the right to fail - the basic tenet of all experimentation - and the right to jettison jazz altogether. While Croker's current projects include producing the sophomore album for rising young New York vocalist Tyreek McDole - who voiced *Dream Manifest's* hymnal '64 Joints' - and a new recording for fellow maverick, NYC vocalist Jazzmeia Horn,

he has two as-yet-unreleased Theo Croker albums in the bag as well as this Brazilian album (not jazz) to finish.

"Which one comes next?" he asks himself, happily. "I don't know."

In the meantime, he'll be fine tuning his new quartet over 12 shows at Smoke in New York City before descending on the Southbank x Montreux Jazz Festival Residency.

"It's going to be fun," he says of Miles Davis: *Mixtape*. I'll be sampling live and doing a lot of electronics or beats, or whatever people call it, while we're playing. I'm excited to bring that element into Miles's music and use it as a springboard for what I'm doing."

He flashes a grin. "I'm embodying the spirit of Miles by being myself."

**Theo Croker's Miles Davis Mixtape appears at the Royal Festival Hall on 13 March**

# Mentoring in Montreux

**Jane Cornwell** travels to Lake Geneva in Switzerland to witness the shared Southbank-Montreux artist development scheme helping to shape the next generation of UK and EU jazz talent

October in Montreux, Switzerland, and the leaves are spiraling from the trees. A clump of fog hangs so low over Lake Geneva that it really might be smoke on the water. Music swirls - bass notes, deep grooves, modal enquiries. On the shoreline, inside the Petit Palais, a *belle-époque* gem, a host of musicians from different backgrounds are networking and learning, jamming and composing.

Both a festival and a live-in 'intensive', the Montreux Jazz Festival Residency 2025 welcomed established players, emerging artists and music industry-related speakers to four days' worth of showcases, workshops, jams, concerts and an all-stops-out closing night party. This sixth edition also introduced a Songwriting Camp initiative at the Villa Sylvia Wadilove, an elegant 18th century pile in nearby Villeneuve.

"Each of the emerging resident bands gets to give a concert in the evening," says Stéphanie-Alosia Moretti, curator/booker with the Montreux Jazz Artists Foundation (MJAF), a state-funded non-profit that supports new talent and music outreach. "In the mornings they're broken up so that artists get to work separately with musicians they don't know. This really helps them grow."

Eight fresh acts, four Swiss, four international - including French rap-funk collective Wet Enough, Berne-based singer-songwriter Aino Salto and London/Paris-based Cote D'Ivoirian soul-jazz diva WordsOfAZIA - were mentored by eight established artists, each an educator and a Montreux veteran.

Free to the public, stand-alone workshops by mentors including US pianist Christian Sands, British drummer Jas Kayser and US vocalist Lizz Wright offered peeks into process.

"Music is made up of melody, harmony, rhythm," says Sands, seated at a baby grand and answering questions from the floor. "Harmony tells us the environment, the feeling, the character it is in. I use harmony as a bridge to relate to people."

Each mentee I met was keenly aware of their golden ticket status. No wonder - Montreux is synonymous with top-tier jazz. Founded in 1967 by Swiss promoter Claude Nobs as an intimate gathering, Montreux Jazz Festival is now a behemoth, a two-week jazz (and rock, pop and blues) cornucopia every July. In 2014 came the Montreux Jazz Academy, a residency for seven 'fellows' in which their newly created compositions premiered in a final public concert with a 12-15 strong jazz orchestra.

"Now we have the Residency, which is similar except that

we have eight promising bands giving concerts," explains Moretti

MJAF has an associated residency in Venice, promoting cultural exchange between Swiss and Italian artists - and as of March 2025 with London's Southbank Centre. This year's edition will explore themes including 'What is jazz today?' with a programme of writing workshops, a late-night jam, a panel on the legacy of D'Angelo and a gig line-up including Theo Croker, Celeste and corto.alto.

In a showcase reflecting the MJAF's mission to champion emerging talent, Swiss-Palestinian drummer/composer Ramzi Hammad, 25, and his genre-crossing RH Collective will close the residency at the QEJH. A much-touted newcomer with a narrative-driven style and a 2025 EP, *Melting Pot*, Hammad and Co. are here at the MJFR, soaking up the vibes.

"It's all been such a human experience, so nurturing and inspiring," he says. "There is a lot to take in, especially with all the panel sessions, which ranged from health and wellbeing to intellectual property and music in the AI era."

Saxophonist Binker Golding, of UK jazz incubators Tomorrow's Warriors, is also here as a mentor. "The students are at the beginning of their careers and very advanced, so as a mentor it takes a bit more to deal with that. It asks a lot of everybody. For this week we had to hold each other's hands and climb to the top of the Swiss mountain peak. It's exhausting but so worth it."

Vox-popped in the green room, various band members agreed they'd had their aesthetics refocused and sharpened by mentor-generated tips and morning combo-playing sessions.

"All the mentors were incredible," says Luzius Schuler, keys player for Aino Salto (the *nom de plume* of singer Sonia Loenne). "We had [UK vibraphonist] Orphy Robinson talking about conducting an improvising ensemble using a series of hand gestures, and [Nigerian Afrobeat scion] Mádé Kuti coming in with a rap we then had to play around. We've talked about riffs, learned about business, heard different music, met so many musicians."

Showcases highlighted the work of artists previously supported by MJAF: Palestinian pianist Faraj Suleiman, whose 2018 Montreux concert was released as a live album; and Turkish psychedelic outfit Islandman. An evening in-house jam band led by a trio of London bassist Daisy George, Swiss-Cuban keyboardist Leandro Irarragorri and London-based Portuguese drummer Zoe Pascal helped exemplify the fruits of the morning's combo playing. Mentors including Sands (on keyboards) and Danish singer/bassist and former Prince collaborator Ida Neilsen took turns to join the busy onstage set up, to which trombonist Marius Rabbe, frontman of funk-rap-disco-electro phenomenon Wet Enough? (this writer's MJFR highlight) added insistent golden bars. UK-based DJ Tim Garcia, a residency speaker, soundtracked a closing party that continued into the wee hours, until the Alps were again visible above Lake Geneva.



Jazz mentee WordsOfAZIA

Binker Golding (left) gets hands on; Jas Kayser brings the beats (below) and bassist Ida Nelson (below right) shares her bassline secrets



Photos: Thea Moser

**London's Southbank Centre and Montreux Jazz Festival runs from 13 to 15 March - for more info and tickets visit [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk)**