

Clarinet on the hoof 1

Published in Clarinet and Saxophone Magazine, Summer 2007 and Just Jazz, April 2009

by Michael Meadowcroft

The small square packet whizzed through the letterbox. It was the shape and size of a CD and it bore the colourful stamps of Benin. Who on earth in this small West African country would be sending me such a missive? Having been there for some four months on behalf of the United Nations, assisting the presidential elections, I assumed that it must be a CD-ROM containing voting results and reports, but no - under the wrapping I found a music CD bearing the scrawled title: "Cotonou - the illegal gig."

Daylight suddenly dawned: as ever I had taken my clarinet with me to Benin. Wrapped in a towel, and carefully placed in my suitcase amidst the socks and shirts, it has accompanied me on electoral missions to over a score of countries in the past fifteen years. In almost every country one finds musicians with whom to play - a band one can sit in with or otherwise a pianist with whom to play duets.

The universality of classic jazz is amazing. A remarkable number of those of us who started playing in the late 1950s when "trad" was at its apogee, and when the Beatles were the interval band between the jazz groups at the Cavern, still struggle on. It is a style of jazz that is very accessible and whose exponents welcome visitors. There is a code for "sitting in" that is well understood around the world amongst both bands and visitors. The visitor chooses the first number so that he can warm up with a familiar tune; the second number is determined jointly and the third is chosen by the bandleader - in order to test the guest! Then the visitor leaves the stand and awaits, hopefully, a later invitation to rejoin the band.

Alas, the process doesn't always go smoothly. On one occasion, sitting in with a band in the south of France, the leader called "Sweet Georgia Brown." Now this is a well known standard tune which for forty years I have played in the key of F. It goes like the clappers and the leader tapped his foot to launch the race. Within two bars I realised that only I was playing in F! It took me two choruses to realise that the rest of the band was in A flat and at this precise moment the leader pointed in my direction for a solo chorus. With a slow blues there might have been a chance to work out the chords but at full speed neither my ear nor my transposition skills were up to it. The result was the most embarrassing racket imaginable.

However, there was no band to sit in with in Cotonou but towards the end of my mission in Benin was I put in touch with Rob Baker. A curious combination of evangelical missionary, teacher at the English school and jazz pianist, he knew the classic jazz repertoire and, after an evening rehearsal at his home, it was clear that we would just about survive in public. Rob knew the lobby pianist at the Sheraton Hotel and suggested that we took over from him when he finished at 9pm.

The first such night went down well, particularly with the crowd stuck in the lobby awaiting transport to the airport for their overnight flight to Paris, but on the second night, just before 10pm, as we reached our last number, an arm-flailing manager came rushing into the lobby shouting at us to stop immediately. We had no permission, he said - which was perfectly true - and must cease. Rob, with somewhat un-Christian defiance, stated that he was "probablement" the best jazz pianist in Cotonou and the hotel should be grateful for the free gig! I rather liked the "probablement."

As gently as possible I asked the manager whether he had had complaints. No, he admitted, but he would have! We gave up, packed up and left. I reflected on the old jazz musician who in response to a similar situation in a scruffy downtown jazz haunt in Chicago, told the owner that he'd been "thrown out of better joints than this." It wasn't true in Cotonou. The Sheraton was by far the best joint I'd ever been thrown out of!

And the CD? On our first evening there had been an American visitor to the hotel who was a jazz enthusiast and who had a small tape recorder on which he had recorded the "illegal" gig. Very kindly he had given a copy of the recording to Rob who had then mailed another copy on to me as a souvenir of a suspicious occasion!