

# MAN ON A MISSION

Not content with releasing his latest album *BETWEEN THE LINES*, pianist **DAVE STAPLETON** has spent the last two years developing his own record label Edition into a force to be reckoned with. He tells **ROBERT SHORE** about the way he sees the UK jazz scene today

**A**s we enter the second decade of the 21st century, where exactly would you place the centre of the UK jazz scene? London, so rich in get-ahead DIY collectives and Noughties Mercury Prize nominations? Manchester? Leeds even? Or might it just be Cardiff, despite there being, as Dave Stapleton says, only "one decent jazz venue" there?

The reason you might plump for the Welsh capital is that it is home to Edition Records, the boutique jazz label pianist-composer-arranger Stapleton set up with photographer Tim Dickeson in early 2008 and that has quickly established itself at the top of the record company pile thanks to the quality of its artist roster – Troyka, Phronesis, Curios, Mark Lockheart – and sharp production values. An Edition disc is guaranteed not only to sound great but to look great too – not something you can say about the output of many labels these days.

"Slowly it's built to the point where loads of musicians are now contacting us, which is fantastic. The label's profile is growing," enthuses Stapleton. Not just in Britain, either. *Downbeat* has just been in touch to say they want to do a feature, and an article about the Edition phenomenon has just been published in a Greek magazine. Stapleton is properly proud of this publicity but unable to decipher what the Greek journalist has actually written: "I've no idea what they say – I hope it's good!"

It's been a steep learning curve for Dickeson and Stapleton – who's only just turned 30 and is still struggling to remember that he's no longer twentysomething – over the last couple of years. Things might easily have fallen apart for the label when its distributor went into administration in January 2009 – instead, it quickly found a replacement, Harmonia Mundi. In fact, the same month Edition went to the big music-industry networking event in the South of France, Midem, and returned in triumph: "We came back with distribution in about 20 countries. It was just astonishing." The label has recently struck distribution deals with Japan and China, nations that have the delightful and unexpected habit of buying discs outright, rather than on the standard sale-or-return basis, and even of paying for their own shipping. The numbers for each market remain small, but when you're exporting your product to around two dozen countries the figures soon begin to mount up.



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In terms of artist relations, Stapleton's philosophy is a simple one: "It's all about communication. Our aim is to get the best of British jazz, and the way to do that is to make our artists happy." But how does he decide which projects the label should take on? "In the first place I need to really enjoy the music if I'm going to spend a large part of my life listening to it and promoting it." And then there's the question of the artist's attitude. "You can tell from the way people approach you. I need to know that they're going to do something as well. It's a team effort."

For Stapleton, the rules should be the same for jazz labels as they are for pop or rock ones: "It's really hard to promote something if the buzz isn't there... Some guys are playing in everyone's bands and it's too much. You've got to focus on one thing really. Burkhard Hopper, EST's manager, said you've got to do your own project and nothing else if you want people to take it seriously. I'm sure EST wouldn't have been EST if Esbjörn had played in everyone else's band because the focus wouldn't have been on EST as a band. If you've got four or five musicians in each other's

bands it can be too confusing for the market to understand what the project actually is. Things need an identity." Experience has quickly taught Stapleton the need for focus. "That's another criterion for us, to know that that's what the musicians are going to be doing for about three or four months [around the release of the album]. It has to be like that."

Despite being a record label boss, Stapleton is realistic about the comparatively modest place albums occupy in the musical universe now. "CDs these days are more of a promotional tool. Money comes from touring and other work. They're really part of the way you grow your profile. Tom Cawley is a perfect example: suddenly he gets the gig with Peter Gabriel and he's playing at the Hollywood Bowl and the 02."

Why didn't Stapleton get the call from Gabriel ahead of Cawley? "Because Tom's a far better piano player!" he shoots back, laughing. In person Stapleton is a winning mixture of unassuming modesty and quiet determination. He certainly has plenty to be confident about, both as a label boss and as a musician. There are acclaimed recent projects that have seen him duetting with Matthew Bourne and writing for a string quartet. Then there's his new CD, *Between the Lines*, his third as leader of the Dave Stapleton Quintet, which is very good indeed, full of arresting compositional hooks and bold blowing from reedsman Ben Waghorn and trumpeter Jonny Bruce.

Stapleton admits that his new consciousness as a record company exec initially interfered with his natural writing process when he sat down to begin work on the new material. "I went through a period of trying to write what I thought people wanted to hear. I was wearing two hats – the writer's hat and the producer's hat. But it just wasn't working, so I had to forget about that, put it behind me and just trust my ear."

There's a strong 1970s influence. Stapleton cites early Joe Henderson as an inspiration. It's also highly ambitious. "I tried to write the album as though it was one long composition but split into 10 tracks, which is why there's a reprise of 'October Skies' in there on a different instrument [piano] to give it more dynamic and shape."

"The other main influence is the members of the band," he says. "I've written a track for each member. I wanted to write something to reflect their different personalities." Hence there's 'Horn' (unsurprisingly) for horn man Bruce, 'Wig Wag' for

Waghorn, 'Dry White' for bassist Paula Gardiner ("Because that's all she ever drinks") and 'Daz Lightyear' for drummer Elliot Bennett ("He always wears something white – that's the 'Daz' part of the title – and he looks like Buzz Lightyear").

Stapleton composed all of the material himself but by no means tries to hog the limelight as a performer. "It's more of a project for my writing than my playing," he explains. "I'm looking for a grittier sound, which is easier to achieve with a trumpet and sax, so it's not about me being the primary voice."

"I try to write lots of space for Ben and Jonny to blow," he says, and in truth it's the chalk-and-cheese combination of Waghorn and Bruce that helps to make the quintet's sound so special. "They come from very different places," the leader confirms. Waghorn has a strong jazz background and is immersed in the playing of Michael Brecker and Stanley Turrentine. Bruce, on the other hand, has a strong classical training, and brings to mind Latin legend Arturo Sandoval when he blasts off into the higher registers.

Stapleton may be a label boss as well as a musician nowadays, but the Edition phenomenon hasn't yet translated into the luxury of being able to buy his quintet more rehearsal time before they head into the studio. "The first time we played these tunes in full was at the album launch at the Vortex," Stapleton confesses, obviously relieved in hindsight that the quintet managed to get through without any hitches on their first live outing with the new material. There simply isn't the budget to be able to get the band together often enough to become completely comfortable ahead of recording with such densely composed numbers as the 10-minute suite 'Horn'. "Rather than trying to do the whole thing in a single take – which we'd never be able to do without mistakes because of the lack of time to rehearse – we chopped it into bits."

When Stapleton began his studies at the Welsh College of Music in Cardiff, his intention was to become a classical pianist. His encounters with Keith Tippett were a major part of what changed his mind about where his future lay, though the effect was by no means immediate. "I remember going to my first piano class with Keith. I'd never heard him before, and I was very much in the mindset of wanting to be a classical piano player – I was into Chopin and Beethoven, I was into technique. When I saw Keith talking about improvisation and I thought, what is this guy on? I wasn't into it at all. But slowly my understanding grew and by the third year my opinion had been completely reversed."

After graduation he refused to do the obvious thing and move to the Big Smoke. "I've never lived in London. I didn't really see the need to. There are so many people there trying to do the same thing. If you're doing something interesting outside London, in some ways it's easier. If someone asked me whether they should move to London from Leeds or Manchester, I'd tell them to build their scene up where they are instead." Stapleton has no plans to relocate to the capital, then. "I'm quite happy to stay out west. There's more peace and quiet and it's easier to concentrate on writing. I'm not one of those musicians who wants to do five or six gigs a week up and down the country for £40 or £50 a time." Rather Stapleton has got his sights set on a career as a composer-arranger-producer in the mould of Quincy Jones. "My big ambition is to do my own thing. Hopefully in five or ten years' time I'll be in the right place." Given his current rate of progress as both label boss and artist, you'd be crazy to bet against him realising his goal.

