

Jen Wilson – a short Biography

Celebrating 50 years in jazz in 2010

Some quotes over the years from the jazz police....

“You can't play that”

“One of the girlfriend's luv?”

“Play ballads, much more fitting”

“Wear high heels next time”

“She can't sing here in Doc Marten's boots”

“Girls can't play jazz”

“Your set is not what we usually have”

“You shouldn't have her on the bandstand, it's not jazz”

“There aren't any women jazz musicians are there?”

“What do you want to set up a women's jazz archive for?”

“You like Jerry Lee Lewis? I wouldn't mention that if I were you”

“Lovie Austin? Never heard of her”

“We won't offer a gig, but you can have an open mic slot”

“She's a manhater and she won't have men in her band”

“Wear a dress”

In 1996 I successfully completed an M.Sc (Econ) in Women's Studies from University of Wales Swansea, in order to understand why some people thought the above statements were necessary.

Jen Evans (Wilson) Letts Schoolgirl Diary 1959

- 04.03.59 Joined Swansea Jazz Club.
27.03.59 Arrived in London went to Marquee, Joe Harriott Quintet.
28.03.59 Marquee. Ronnie Scott Quartet, Jazzmakers.
29.03.59 Flamingo. Tony Kinsey Quartet, Don Rendell Quintet.
30.03.59 Flamingo. Carmen Macrae. 100 Club, Humphrey Lyttleton.
13.04.59 Karen left school today, job in record dept. Duck Son & Pinker.
17.04.59 Bought Charlie Parker record. Played sax in Kathy's party.
29.04.59 Jazz Senators in Mackworth.
14.05.59 I can play Walking Shoes on tenor.
16.05.59 Can play Sweet Georgia Brown on tenor.
17.05.59 Jazz Club at the Columbo, John owes me 10/-d.
08.07.59 We got picked up by two blokes outside the Mermaid.
29.07.59 Senators in Jazz Club, drum battle with John and Derek Morgan.
04.08.59 John's friend Wils called. Sailed from States. *
07.08.59 Cheeky Mother's Pride boy made passes at me.
01.03.59 Bought Milt Jackson record for John's birthday.
05.09.59 Played tenor with Jazz Senators.
07.09.59 Started back to prison, couple of new jailers, I'm in 5th form.
21.09.59 Got job down C&A. Start on Saturday.
29.09.59 Ma had to go up the school to see head because I've got a Sat. job.
08.10.59 Saw "I Want To Live" with Susan Heywood. Gerry Mulligan soundtrack.
04.12.59 Stomped** up St. Barnabas with guitar.
05.12.59 Stomped up St. James's with tenor.
11.12.59 Stomped down YMCA, then up St. Barnabas.
14.12.59 Mitched school, bought new dress black and red stripes.
16.12.59 Stomped on tenor in school concert.
17.12.59 Got skiffle group together in school, teachers doing their nuts.
18.12.59 Stomped up the club with gang of boys.
28.12.59 Arnie bought a stereophonic record player.

* I married Mike Wilson (ex merchant seaman) in 1965

** stomp n. lively jazz dance with heavy stamping

to stomp v. play instrument loudly in a wild and frenetic manner.

A Short Biography

I was born in Swansea in May 1944 and was two weeks old when my father Bill was part of the Royal Engineers Normandy DDay landings on 6th June. Haulwen, my mother already had John, age 6, at home, as well as gran and grandpa, dad's parents. The house was full of music from the 1920s and my parents loved to dance to the swing bands and also did a mean Charleston on the scullery floor tiles. John became a drummer having, from an early age, bashed everything in sight from biscuit tins, china, glass, cardboard boxes, and my mother's best cake stand with a saucer in it (it made a very good cymbal). We were relieved when he bought his first Premier kit on HP, then later the 1961 Ludwig kit. He learned his trade by listening to, and playing along with, Gene Krupa records, Barrett Deems, Cozy Cole, Buddy Rich, then later Tony Kinsey, and Art Blakey. He went on to run the Jazz Senators (a 10 piece which practised in our front parlour), and gigged in London with Joe Harriott, Don Rendell, Ronnie Ross and many others. He also drummed for the Swansea rock group The Fireflies which toured the South Wales rock circuit backing Joe Brown, Freddie and the Dreamers, Marty Wilde, Lulu, Emil Ford etc. I had piano lessons from the age of 6 but preferred boogie-woogie and blues. By the time I was about 10 I was boogie-ing on the parlour piano with John shouting "play louder, play faster" to accompany his marathon drum solos. I quit the piano lessons aged 12 as I discovered you were taught to play 2 pieces brilliantly and discouraged from experimenting.

Jazz and dance band music was on the radio at home during the 1950s and 1960s, e.g. in the breaks in the Goon Show, variety shows and sit-coms. Jazz was also broadcast late night from the London dance halls. I also tuned in to Willis Conover, the jazz DJ broadcasting from Voice of America where, at the age of 13 in 1957, I heard Mose Allison for the first time. I saved up pocket money and ordered Back Country Suite and then Local Color from the lady in the grey costume and permed hair who ran the record department in David Evans in town. They took weeks to arrive. At weekends I dressed in striped tight skirts and shirts, or a black poloneck and black pants with the intention of looking pale and interesting, much influenced by Juliette Greco and the existentialist movement. I wasn't sure what it was but the dress code was cool. I didn't fit in at school.

At age 14 in 1958 I was a hot shot at boogie-woogie. My fellow schoolgirls went to Elvis Presley movies and jived in the toilets to the Everly Brothers, while I had my first gig at the Glanmor Jazz Club as intermission pianist. John who had a gig there, had told our parents the club didn't sell alcohol. One rainy lunchtime at school I found the piano unlocked in the school hall and tentatively started on the boogie. I say "tentatively" because only Avril Thomas was allowed to use the piano as she was having opera and voice training. Within 2 minutes about 25 girls were jiving, and others starting to form a large circle. Suddenly, the deputy head appeared, everybody scarpered, down went the piano lid, the key was turned, I was deemed a "moral threat who lowered the decorum of the whole school" and went on to fail all my 'O' levels. I left at 16 in 1960 with excellent RSA secretarial qualifications and a thirst for musical knowledge.

There were no jazz courses in 1960, I taught myself by playing along with records, and building up a huge library of piano players and particularly homing in on rhythm sections. I also learned the basics on John's tenor sax and sometimes sat in on tenor with the Jazz Senators, playing easy riffs in Bflat. St. James's youth club also offered opportunities to show off. When John went off to London's Ronnie Scotts, The Flamingo, The Marquee, The 100 Club with his pals, I created such a scene he sometimes reluctantly allowed me to go on the odd occasion. I particularly remember a Ronnie Scott all-nighter when he said

“sit down, shut up and drink your pop”. We saw the Jazz Couriers, and I saw Stan Tracy for the first time.

I was “headhunted” at 17 to play with Tony Trumpet from Port Talbot. We did trad jazz with his trio, with me working from Tony’s chord book and improvising the rest. Tony loved Louis Armstrong, so I was safe there as John had all his records and I knew all the licks. We sometimes called the band Jenny and the Giants and we did a few gigs. Then I was quickly asked to join The Tempos which had an unusual line-up for 1960: 2 tenor saxes, guitar, drums and piano, when everybody else in town was trying to be Cliff Richard and the Shadows. We did Ray Charles numbers and got plenty of church hall and youth club gigs, with a residency at the Pines Country Club. The Pines didn't pay much (about 5/-d. each - 50p now) so having been refused a rise, we decamped to another residency at the Langland Court Hotel at £5 for the band, where we did 8pm-1am dinner dances with special rock and R&B features after the midnight hour. With never enough music to sustain a 5 hour gig we converted God Save the Queen and Silent Night into respectable waltzes; nobody noticed. Dave and Pete on the tenor saxes attracted the girls in their suits and quiffs. Mam had made me a band outfit of silver lame box jacket with short tight skirt with a slit. I put a pink wash on my hair and tried to get out of the house without my father noticing. The band's girlfriends gave me the cold shoulder.

A young smartass pianoplayer around town I much admired was Spew who was a big fan of Jerry Lee Lewis. A couple of years older than me Spew sat, besuited, legs wide apart, head back and launched into Whole Lotta Shakin', Great Balls of Fire and Roll Over Beethoven. I, too, loved Jerry Lee but Spew cut the mustard. I discovered to my cost that Spew could only play in the key of C. The Tempos had a gig in the Salisbury Club, and I discovered that Spew had been there previously and had had the piano tuned a tone down so he could play everything in Bflat with his band. I spent our gig transposing everything on the spot and cursed Spew. Somebody told me years later that Spew had become a bank manager.

Were these early years a better learning experience than attending a music college? I'll never know. Having had such a bad experience in music at school, I was too intimidated to investigate any of the jazz courses that eventually started appearing in the late 1960s. I finally got myself to the very successful Glamorgan Summer School at University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd in the late 1990s. I went with my great pal Sally White, a blues singer with a gut-wrenching authentic feel to her voice. She too had never had a lesson and we propped each other up. Sally disappeared into the voice section. With about 14 others I found myself being tutored by bassist Jeff Clyne for Small Group Work. On the first morning he sat listening while each of us had to do 10 minutes on our instrument. After my turn he said “great, now sit on your left hand until lunchtime”. Everybody fell about, and I learned not to swamp everybody.

Sally and I were both unorthodox, untutored, feisty middle-aged women within a sea of mostly young, gifted, and intense students. But we knew what we liked. At the jazz club sessions in the evening Jeff Clyne's students, me included, blasted their way to rousing cheers trying to outdo the other tutored groups. When it was Sally's turn from the voice students, she initially didn't want to sing. She had what she called a Guinness and fags voice, and had felt left out in the mostly be-bop / jazz standards voice section. However, she had desperately wanted to sing God Bless The Child and I was to accompany her. Somehow, I got her to the stage and we faced a rowdy, good-natured, boisterous, and excited crowd of students and their tutors. Sally was going to walk off. I said “stand your ground, we won't start until they settle”. After several minutes, people were starting to

get the message. It was quite a powerful feeling. When Sally felt right, she turned to me and I began the intro which was instantly recognisable to the audience and complete silence descended. Sally sang the most heart-rending version of God Bless the Child I had ever heard, because she sang it from her point of view, her heart. She had nursed Molly her severely disabled daughter, a twin to Ben, for all of her 12 years until her death. There was a stunned silence at the end, until the place erupted. Sally had made her mark. I occasionally got told over the years that white women can't sing the blues or successfully cover Billie Holiday numbers. Not so.

I was passionately interested in women's history and politics. I, together with Gail Allen, joined Swansea Women's History Group in 1982, which had been set up by Ursula Masson who had already got an MA in history. She taught us how to research and prepare material. We made video documentaries on Welsh women munition workers, women in the 1984-85 miners' strike, women in the suffrage movement and conscientious objectors. Becoming interested in the history of British jazzwomen, I found it very difficult finding any material and none at all on Welsh women. In 1986 I started researching British and Welsh women's contribution to jazz music, and conducting Oral Histories. I set up the Women's Jazz Archive which later became known as Women in Jazz. In 1989 I got a fulltime job as a Secretary at the Department of Adult Continuing Education (DACE), University of Wales, Swansea, and also developed and tutored jazz courses at the same time. In 1992 I applied for and successfully got the full-time post of Lecturer in Performing Arts at DACE, responsible for Music, Dance, Drama and Video Production and gathered a stable of excellent part-time tutors. I also began studying for an M.Sc. (Econ) in Women's Studies at the same time, which I achieved in 1996. From 1996 I worked as a freelance in the community taking the research work and Women in Jazz with me. With a great deal of support from the City & County of Swansea, Women in Jazz flourished with an office in the Maritime Quarter. Gaining registered charity status it successfully attracted Heritage Lottery Funding for a large consultancy brief which helped us to refocus our work. On the recommendation of the consultancies, the Board of Trustees of Women in Jazz relaunched us as Jazz Heritage Wales in 2009, which is now based at **Swansea Metropolitan University**. Paula Gardiner, Head of Jazz Studies at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff, is our Patron, together with Dame Cleo Laine, and Huw Warren. For information regarding the work undertaken by Jazz Heritage Wales, go to the website:

www.jazzheritagewales.smu.ac.uk

Research work on African American Music in Wales from the 1800s has been adapted for a schools touring project called **Before Freedom**, telling true stories of Welsh women anti-slavery campaigners who ran safe houses for runaway slaves in Cincinnati, and a runaway slave called Willis whom Swansea set free in 1836. These stories are told through music and screened images. This project has been funded by Arts Council of Wales, Heritage Lottery Fund, Awards for All Wales, and Swansea Council for Voluntary Service.

The Women in Jazz Allstars Swing Band received a Training grant from Arts Council of Wales 2009-2010. The Allstars now perform a selection of 2nd World War favourites, blues swing and jazz standards at charity and public events. Deborah Glenister is the bandleader, composer and arranger.

My forays into various forms of jazz and related musics have been greatly enhanced by the vocal support, skill and cultural encouragement I receive from Elissa Evans and Margot Morgan.

