

Some thought from former members of the band.



I was the guitar player in the band for around 4 years between 2003 and 2007. This was very much the start of my enthusiasm for jazz, and all the tutors were very generous with their time and knowledge for us each individually. It was also the first time I had heard a lot of this sort of music, and it's had a lasting impact on me.

*Because of my experiences being in this band, I sought out a band in Manchester at university, and it was there I met a lot of the musicians I still play with today. I'm very fortunate that this led to me being in the Beats & Pieces Big Band, a 14-piece contemporary jazz ensemble that has played all over the UK, and received 5 star reviews in *The Times* and *The Guardian* for a gig at Ronnie Scott's jazz club in London. We travelled to the Burghausen Festival in Germany where we won the European Young Jazz Award 2011, which provided us with a large sum of money to record and release our debut album, to similar critical acclaim as our live shows. Before Christmas this year we are performing at the Southbank Centre for our third London Jazz Festival in a row, as well as travelling to play two shows in Paris. My love of music has also led to me composing several pieces for large ensemble for my recent *Masters in Music Composition*, for which I obtained a distinction.*

I can trace all of these accomplishments back to when I was first introduced to this style of music by Alastair and his team of excellent tutors. Without this initial step, I find it hard to see how I'd be managing to make a living as a professional musician today, and I struggle to think of anything else I'd rather be doing. I know of several other similar success stories from the band (indeed, I still play regularly with two of the members and run a small record label with one).

But it's not just outcomes like these that the band can be judged on, the experience at the time was a fantastic one, and helped me grow as a person as well as a musician. Meeting and playing with musicians such as John Dankworth and Steve Berry was equally inspiring. There was a really good atmosphere around the band, both supportive and fun, but also serious about working hard to make the music sound as good as possible.

There's something special about playing music with a large group of people, and especially when that music encourages individuality through improvisation as well. No other large ensemble setting simultaneously promotes teamwork and individual excellence like a big band does, and this balance is something that was missing, for example, from my times playing clarinet in classical ensembles. The Big Band taught me to play closely with my bandmates and gave me the confidence to stand up and take a solo too. This is still what I try to teach my own pupils to this day, to not just play the notes in front of them, but to be creative themselves.

Anton Hunter, former member, currently guitar teacher, professional musician and composer



I was very fortunate to be part of what I believe to be one of the country's finest youth bands for almost 4 years and it undoubtedly provided me with invaluable experience in all areas of music which helped to realise my career choice as a musician. The staff were always inspiring and particularly friendly, and I found the variety of musical material to be constantly challenging and exciting over the 4 years. Even just the opportunity to play with the staff who were there at the rehearsal was fantastic enough! It is groups like this and educators like Alastair McWilliam that keep music alive in all communities they encompass and make a really big difference to young people such as myself and many of my friends.

James Safiruddin, former member. Currently studying BMUS Piano at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama

For me, being in the Cheshire Youth MFL Big Band, helped me develop as a musician and as a person in so many ways. It was an amazing place to meet other like-minded young musicians, many of whom I'm still in touch / close friends with and playing with, and it was also incredible being around the people running the band, and hearing them play and learning from them. Some of those people went on to give me gigs once I'd left the band and became good friends as well as great teachers. MFL Big Band is great for making sure that everyone feels involved and that everyone gets to have a go at improvising and being featured in some way. It was a lovely environment to be in, and I owe a lot of the musicianship I now possess, to this band.



Sam Rapley, former member, currently in third year at Royal Academy of Music, London.



I work around the North of England as a professional musician and I consider the years spent in the Music For Life Big Band to have been most important in my development. Not only did I learn a huge amount about Jazz and improvisation by playing in this group, I also gained so much invaluable experience in ensemble playing and performing in public. As well as the tutors being among some of the best musicians around, we were also given the chance to perform with some of the biggest names in Jazz; playing with the late Sir John Dankworth was an unforgettable and incredibly inspirational experience. This ensemble gave me so many amazing opportunities—including tours to Spain and the Netherlands, and playing at various Jazz festivals and venues around the country—that I would never have received otherwise.

Also, during my years in the band, I met and got to know many other young musicians from around the area who I then went on to work with in other bands outside of the County-run ensembles. At the time, I had no idea that there were so many other people my age who were into this great music. So, on top of simply enjoying the rehearsals and gigs, I believe that the Music For Life Big Band had a huge impact on me, in both the friends that I made and in my development as a musician and as a person. **Jonny Hunter, former band member, professional musician**

Thoughts from professional musicians working with the band.

I was guest artist with Music for Life Big Band, performing two concerts with a number of rehearsals in the Summer of 2010. My overriding memory of the experience, other than the fabulous music, is of the great enthusiasm of the students. This, of course, was facilitated and enabled by the members of staff who were both inspired and inspiring. The well organised, welcoming, inclusive atmosphere, created by the staff, made the experience rewarding in the extreme. Rehearsals are professional, creative and instructive, with the focus always on the confidence of the students in negotiating the music, which was as challenging as it was fun. This atmosphere of encouragement made the concert performance a relaxed and joyous occasion. One of the ways in which this was achieved was by making the students feel that they could contribute at any and all points during the rehearsal process - it was not an outmoded teacher / pupil situation, rather more an exchange of ideas between like minded musicians. This was most impressively achieved through the expert guidance of Alastair McWilliam, who is one of the most committed and caring educators it has been my pleasure to meet.



The new music project run in partnership with Arts Council England is truly amazing and has both musical and social relevance. It will give young students access to modern music composed by a variety of contemporary jazz artists. To be associated with such internationally recognised and culturally significant artists as Mike Gibbs and Mike Walker is both an honour and an exciting opportunity for all involved.

It is so important that the significance of what this band has achieved is recognised, and that, under the direction of Alastair McWilliam, this group continues to receive the support it deserves to enable it to flourish and provide such incredible opportunities for the young musicians of the future.

Iain Dixon. <http://www.manchestermusicworks.co.uk/iain.html>



The CD sounds great! There is a great energy to all the tunes, and it's a great skill that the band has to be able to play confidently on so many different styles of Big Band music. The rhythm section provides a great propulsion, and the rest of the band play with an assurance that is very rare for such a young band. All the soloists already have a high degree of ability on their instruments, but more importantly play in a very musical way! It's clear a huge amount of work has gone into rehearsing and practicing and it's a great credit to not only the band members but also to everyone involved with the running and coaching of the band. Fantastic! I'm very much looking forward to them playing my piece!

Gwylim Simcock <http://www.gwilymsimcock.com/>

As a jazz educator and working musician, I feel very privileged to compose and work with such a fine youth jazz orchestra. The new (self produced) CD 'Live At Alexander's' shows maturity in ensemble playing and great enthusiastic improvised soloing. Music For Life! A real credit to Cheshire. **Dennis Rollins.** <http://www.dennisrollins.com/biography.htm>



It is clear that this is a really ambitious ensemble that is already performing on and off the stage at a really high level. The band provided me with a copy of their latest CD – recorded live which is notoriously risky for any band to undertake – and I was really impressed by both the standard of the individual and ensemble playing and the production of the CD.

To many young people, it is easy for jazz to be seen as a bit of an antiquated music that is not really relevant to themselves as teenagers in the 21st century – indeed that is a view that I myself held. This is why I think that forward thinking youth projects like the Music for Life Big Band (especially with their new commissions project) are really important to remind young people that jazz remains a vibrant, varied and fresh artform.

As a bandleader myself, I know that regular rehearsals are crucial to develop and maintain a band dynamic, and I'm painfully aware of the logistical nightmare involved in making these rehearsal sessions happen. I think its amazing that Music for Life has been able to bring young musicians together to rehearse regularly from all over Cheshire for almost 10 years now, and I very much hope that this real musical achievement will be properly supported to enable it to continue for many years to come. **Ben Cottrell.** <http://beatsnpieces.net/members/ben-cottrell/>

As co-director of the Cheshire Youth/MFL Big Band (up to 2009), with Alastair McWilliam, I have been delighted to see the ensemble develop rapidly, with performances in some of the region's best venues. The group's tutors are themselves highly experienced performers, who maintain a connection to the vibrant music scene centred around Manchester and the North-West. The current project to commission new works by UK composers shows that this is an ensemble which not only has an excellent track record, but also ambition, and direction for the future.



The Cheshire Youth Music for Life Big Band can proudly boast a number of former members who have gone on to further their training at some of the UK's most prestigious music colleges, including the Royal Academy, Guildhall and Royal Northern College, and indeed from there on into careers in music. I know they all valued their time with the band as a major part of their development as musicians.

Andy Schofield. <http://uk.myspace.com/andyschofieldmusic>



I have worked with the MFL Big Band on a number of occasions and have always been blown away by the enthusiasm and commitment of the band members. It has been a joy to work with such passionate students and very inspiring to see continuing development in their musical skills and their confidence, year on year. I am thrilled to be running a project with the band this year, providing the students with the invaluable opportunity of performing alongside leading international musicians, as well as performing original music, specifically written for them. I look forward to the band being able to perform this music in years to come and being able to share the commissioned works with other youth big bands.

Alastair McWilliam and the Music for Life staff members are committed to a friendly and professional approach to learning and clearly demonstrate that the best musical results come from a positive and welcoming environment.

Jo McCallum, New Music Project Leader for Music for Life Big Band 2012-13. <http://uk.myspace.com/jomccallummusic>