

Jazz scene in Bangladesh



Robert Russell, Tanveer Haque and Towfiq Arifin of the Robert Russell Trio at International Jazz Day celebration on April 26 at Gulshan North Club | **Courtesy**

There are four leading jazz bands currently in Bangladesh: Robert Russell Trio, 42, Imran Ahmed Trio and The Seesaw Quartet. Two of these bands, Robert Russell Trio and 42, exclusively spoke to the **Dhaka Tribune Showtime's Faruque Ratul** to share insight about the burgeoning jazz scene in the country in the first part of a two part feature story

Jazz, a genre of instrumental music with a lot of improvisations, is increasingly being played more frequently around Bangladesh. Throughout 2018 and the first quarter of this year, there have been many jazz music nights in Dhaka, at locations such as Jatra, The Junction, Lounge Comida, Third Space and Le Meridien. Also, International Jazz Day was celebrated at Gulshan North Club, organized by Towfiq Arifin and ABC Radio, on April 26.

There are four leading jazz bands currently in Bangladesh: Robert Russell Trio, 42, Imran Ahmed Trio and The Seesaw Quartet. Two of these bands, Robert Russell Trio and 42, exclusively spoke to the Dhaka Tribune Showtime to share insight about the burgeoning jazz scene in the country.

Regarding the appearance of jazz bands in Dhaka, Robert Russell said: "I think a lot of these guys who come to play today, know each other. So, it is like a community. But I also think that a lot of these guys here have been listening, and they have been getting exposure to jazz. Some of them have travelled outside of the country to watch festivals and musicians. The musicians who are coming up in the country watched an international jazz festival abroad two years ago, and now, that is happening in Dhaka. I think that is a phenomenal experience for anyone. And that is a world-class event."

"I think there is growth there. I think there are a lot of new interesting music happening," Robert added.

What is jazz

Jazz is a genre that originated in the United States, but has strong roots in western African music. From the Jazz Age of the 1920s US, the genre kept earning popularity in the country of its origin. Post 1950s saw the emergence of "Free Jazz" movement that became popular in Europe. The popularity of jazz in the Indian Subcontinent can be attributed to the itinerant jazz musicians, who contractually played on many passenger ships and travelled to different parts of the globe. Some would disembark in India, and entertain the local crowds.

Tanveer Haque of Robert Russell Trio said: "Personally, I do not like to think of music as jazz or classical or specific to any genre. I found that jazz is something that helps to augment your musical abilities; it develops your hearing and playing tunes, and takes your playing ability to the next level. Jazz music is more about improvisation, and less about staying stuck on a specific genre. Jazz is also considered to be the genre that gave birth to a host of other genres."

How are jazz bands formed in Bangladesh

Such a liberating form of music should naturally thrive in a land of musicians. And Bangladesh is not short of musicians.

Regarding the jazz musicians of Bangladesh, Robert Russell told Showtime: "I think there are a lot of really cool Bangladeshi musicians, who are doing incredible stuff. I really do mean that. I have been living in Dhaka for eight years. I feel that the growth of the musicians I like to hang with or play with or watch play is exponential. Really! I remember seeing these bands years

ago, and now I am like_they really get better all the time. That is really inspiring. I am really inspired by the two guys I work with. Because they are just getting better. And they are getting really good. And I have got to keep up."

Robert, Tanveer and percussionist Towfiq make up the Robert Russell Trio. About the band, Tanveer said: "The band has been playing for two to three years, and I have been with them for one and half years."

Regarding how jazz bands get together, Robert said: "I think it is the uniformity of the language of music. A lot of jazz musicians share the same language of music. They can work together, play together, and communicate together through music, regardless of any language barriers, like the speaking ones. And it can also be described as a brotherhood, right.

"Whenever you run into improvisers, they tend to be able to get along with other improvisers really well. Improvisers tend to gravitate towards each other. So, I think that is the key thread.

"The amount of times I have been places, and have ended up playing with other musicians, and you know, we don't know each other, and yet instantly we become friends, from sharing that language of music. Jazz music, and improvisational music, or people who improvise, are easily able to fit in with all sorts of settings a lot easier.

"Everyone starts at the same time with a specific tune, and from there, they branch out of their influence, and they keep their eyes open, and I think, it has been morphing and changing, and developing, and I think you will find that a lot of the elements of jazz can be found in different styles of music as well. Like sometimes, when you listen to hiphop, it can really 'swing' and vice versa. So yeah, it is a language of music."

Regarding who calls the shots in a jazz band, Tanveer said: "I think it differs from band to band. As with the Robert Russell trio, we all have a say in what happens in the shows. It is very collaborative. There is a lot of teamwork involved. We are all just trying to play the songs as best as we can, and just have a great show.

"Usually what happens is Rob will write the songs, and send them to us beforehand. And then we spend some time with them. And we will just get together and play together and see what things stand out and what things have to be worked on. And then we just discuss it openly.

"Robert has been writing the music of the Trio for a long time. The compositions we play currently have been made over many years by Robert. We have these very long and intricate compositions. So at different points in time, I might have to play a very specific line that Rob has written for me."



Yameen Khan, Towfiq Arifin, Shaveena Anam, Apurba Mufasa, Xahid Ahmed and Rahin Haider of the band 42

Regarding the synchronicity of jazz bands, Yameen Khan of the band, 42, said, "That actually takes a long time to build up. When you become a mature musician, jazz is all about listening. When you truly become a listener, that is when you can become a jazz musician. So it takes a while for all of us to amalgamate into this jazz feel. And it is all about swing. Like rock is about straight up taking you down to earth, but jazz is about taking you up. It takes you up to heaven. That quality takes a while to achieve. There is a thing called 'pocket' in which jazz musicians play. When people play in the 'pocket', people know that the musicians are in the 'zone'_ if you would like to call it that. And then they play and improvise from it.

"It is not about playing at the same time. If everyone talks at the same time, it is gibberish. So everyone needs to compromise and balance it out. That is how we perceive the synchronicity. And we jam a lot, as we are a jam band. So that is how the synchronicity comes naturally over the years," Yameen added.

Original compositions and 'jazz' standards

Some of the original compositions by Robert Russell are "Jazzmin," "Jazz Crimes," and "Dancing Penguin". However, jazz musicians almost always cover some classic jazz pieces and improvise from jazz standards.

Regarding these jazz pieces, Robert said: "I think for a lot of people who are into jazz music, there is like a canon or a reliquary of music, that is out there. Every jazz musician sort of has to, at some stage, go through those tunes and everyone does that. And then they start to find their own voice or whatever.

"But I think, generally speaking, musicians who are trying to learn jazz would go to what they call the 'standards'. It is a real book, you know, and it is full of all the tunes that are great, because they stood the test of time, and they can be reinterpreted, and they are vehicles for improvisations. Everyone has a common ground, so they can work within a structure, I guess, and they can take it where they want.

"Generally speaking, I think that it is fairly a stock standard approach to it. Or, at least they listen to the same sorts of things you know. Everywhere you go, you hear that the same sort of tunes come up or same sort of repertoires come up among jazz musicians.

"So, when people know the tunes, they can join together very easily, right. If they know the same sort of stuff, right. Yeah, I feel like that is generally what the connecting thread is among jazz people," added Robert.

Regarding the improvisation in jazz, Yameen Khan of 42 told Showtime: "We play a lot of standards, but in the middle, the solos and everything are all improvised. We do jam sessions in the middle. The way we do it, is not the traditional jazz way. We try to blend it and evolve it with other genres. So that is how jazz has evolved over the hundred years. We play fusion jazz, and contemporary jazz. So I would say, it is 40% improvisation, and 60% of jazz standards and styles that we pick up."

Challenges of playing jazz

Regarding the challenges of playing jazz in Dhaka, Robert said: "I think it is a challenge to get venues to play jazz at. It is probably a challenge to make money out of it. It is really difficult, of course. There is a famous joke, and I think it rings true: If you want to earn a \$1 million with jazz, then you start with \$2 million. That is definitely true."

Regarding the money issue, Tanveer added: "The problem with these shows is that they do not always pay great money. It takes a lot of effort for the band to go there, and play these shows. But these shows are still very much needed to expose the music to the audience."

About the shows, Tanveer said: "Usually they are very well executed. The sound is great. We have great sponsors, if we can find them. National Music House or Planet X and all other organizers for jazz currently are great. That really helps to put these shows together, because that is another very important part of it—the sponsors, or the people, who are able to put up the money for you to play successfully.

"Going on just ticket sales is not always the best way to organize such an event for such a big crowd. If you have 200 to 300 hundred people, who are expected to come, it is hard to do without a sponsor. If you are playing in a small cafe, you are playing to a small crowd. But for bigger shows, you definitely need one sponsor," Tanveer added.



Yameen Khan, Shaveen Anam and saxophonist Rahin Haider of 42 during one of their shows

Dhaka crowd's response to jazz

Regarding the audience who usually frequent these shows, Tanveer observed: "My most interesting observation is that there is a very great mix of people who come to our shows. You will find people from every generation, from young kids to older people. It is a great mix, as people of all ages are there and it is a very communal thing. Everyone is there to enjoy jazz music. That is really inspiring to me."

As to whether there have been full houses, Tanveer said: "That really depends on the marketing. It depends on how much promotion have been going on beforehand. And it

depends where the event is. Usually on weekends, we have better shows, as more people can come out."

How to develop this scene even more

Regarding the development of the jazz scene in Bangladesh, Yameen said: "I think the best way to make jazz thrive in Bangladesh is by forming a community for it, sort of like a 'jazz community'. We already have one, like the four bands that exist already. We all know each other, and play with each other. So that is how we should expand it. We need to bring in younger kids, and people who would like to come into jazz. We should bring all of them in and build a community together. And then play together! Playing together regularly actually helps. We need more jam and open mike sessions throughout the city, like those that took place back in the day at Cosmo and Cuppa Coffee. So all these things, with more bands and youth musicians, will help jazz thrive.

"And then if we could have like a conservatory, or like a university teaching jazz, that can also help," Yameen added.

Tanveer's two-cent on the issue was: "I think the important thing is to have teachers. Good and educated people, who know music theory, and know how to read music. And that is really what is going to help the jazz scene here; if you can have some people who can teach you to read music fluently, and to listen to music, and figure out what is being played.

In regards to the future of jazz events in Bangladesh, Yameen said: "The number of jazz events should increase. It must. We do not have an underground scene. We do not have the metal scene, which we grew up listening to. I think newer types of music should come now. And it is high time that agencies come up to represent bands and young people who play the blues from jazz and newer types of music. I think it should grow now, and this is the right time."