

## **MICHAEL BURGESS 1937 – 2020**

**In memory of one of the founders and the longest serving promoter at Jazz at the Fleece, Boxford, “East Anglia's premier jazz club”.**

We are sad to announce the death of Mike Burgess from complications following an operation to fit a pacemaker. Although he had not enjoyed the best of health in recent years his passing came as a shock to family and friends. The funeral was a private, family ceremony held in North London on Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> October. When things allow Fleece Jazz will hold a memorial concert in his honour.

Mike was a successful accountant who attracted many show business clients, but was totally discrete about his work. He was great supporter of Chelsea F.C. and a long term member of Essex County Cricket Club but his abiding passion was modern jazz.

Mike was one of five regulars who took over a Chelsworth Peacock booking when the pub abruptly closed. They persuaded Marilyn and Les Hayes, the new landlords of the Fleece Public House in the rural village of Boxford, Suffolk to allow the use of its upstairs function room to stage the gig. If you spent a lot of time and effort planning, it is exactly where you would NOT locate a jazz club, in a small, historic village on the edge of Constable Country half an hour's drive (on a good day) from any reasonable size centres of population. However on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1993 guitarist Mick Hanson and pianist David Newton played the relocated gig and Fleece Jazz was born hosting modern jazz just about every Friday until Covid-19 changed everything.

Before a second gig, Mike persuaded David Gasson to become Treasurer (a role from which he has never been able to escape) and shortly after they were joined by Carole, Mike's wife and herself a fine jazz singer. The emergent committee were not without ambition, or the ability to spot talent, although Mike always “complained” that initially they had to pay full price for admission! In the first year bookings included Bobby Wellins, Liane Carroll, Jim Mullen, Jimmy Hastings, Spike Robinson, Christine Tobin, Tim Richards, Theo Travis, Alan Barnes, Pete Oxley, Roger Beaujolais, Deidree Cartwright, Jacqui Dankworth, Gary Crosby with Denys Baptiste and Tony Kofi, Elaine Delamar, Matt Wates, Tim Richards, Derek Nash, Alan Skidmore, Peter King, Tina May, John Etheridge and Claire Martin, and two nights of Martin Taylor M.B.E..

Mike was at the heart of the committee and drove innovations including one to keep the village on board including supper dances raising funds for the village hall. The first featured The Flanagan Ingham Quartet. He chaired the committee for much of the following 27 years and even when not in the chair he operated what might best be described as a (generally) good humoured “paternal dictatorship” He consistently resisted moving from shows every Friday to once or twice a month and wielded the only veto but created the best jazz club outside of London. For more than 27 years and over 1500 gigs British Jazz and literally thousands of musicians owe Michael a debt of thanks.

He oversaw some exceptional bookings. Artists who appeared at The Fleece “before they were famous” included Liane Carroll and Claire Martin, Andy Sheppard, Frank Harrison, Clare Teal, Ingrid Laubrock, Jamie Cullum and dozens of others. Visiting foreign musicians also found a stage, like the young Antonio Forcione, Viktoria Tolstoy, Monica Vasconcelos and Tim Kliphaus. Moreover international stars were too welcomed, perhaps most notably Avashai Cohen, Sam Barsh, Marlene Verplanck, Lilian Boutte, Kyle Eastwood and even Mark Murphy!

Celebrity audience members were also quietly welcomed, including Bill Wyman, Jack Bruce, John Cooper Clarke, Jenny Eclair and of course Shakatak's Roger Odell one of who's drum kit attended almost as often as Roger. Mike revelled in the kudos.

Mike was immensely proud of Fleece Jazz, especially that it ran every week and of the intelligent,

attentive audience it developed. If a musician commented on the excellent listening crowd, Mike would say “we hand-picked them for your gig”. Getting this right he knew was so important and probably explains why Stan Tracey would not play an upright piano, but did so at The Fleece. He also revelled in the friendships with musicians developed over coffee and sandwiches after a gig as they joined the Fleece family. It is no surprise that he was absolutely delighted to visit the Houses of Parliament in 2009 for The All Party Parliamentary Jazz Appreciation Group annual awards, hosted by Paul Gambacini, where Liane Carroll, presented him with the award for Best Jazz Venue in the country. That shield was HIS coat of arms ever after.

Michael was always discrete about his own favourites and enthused about everyone who graced the Fleece stage but it can now be revealed that for him the top performers were the recently deceased sax player Peter King, superb vocalist Claire Martin O.B.E. and the wonderfully innovative pianist John Law. We have no evidence though that he ever liked the banjo!

As well as being “perpetual” chair Mike was also assistant treasurer, occasional relief sound engineer (a job he gave up with enthusiasm) and Master of Ceremonies, which included being in charge of the raffle. His style perhaps owed a little to Ronnie Scott. At the start of most draws he would refer to it as the “highlight of the evening” and request that all the winners be in the room. The vintage of wine in the draw was always from the following year. If a green raffle ticket was drawn he would call out with glee “any one got a green one” and when an unsuspecting punter responded he would suggest a visit to the doctor. And after each gig he would heap praise upon the performers and then segway to introducing the next week's gig with the words “ How will we follow that?..... well we will, next we have....”. In this case: How will we follow Mike? .... Well we really do not know how we can.

Michael Burgess you truly deserve a life-time achievement award. On behalf of British Jazz, thank you Mike. Thank you for the music. Thank you for the fun and friendship. Thank you for helping keep modern jazz alive for over a quarter of a century.

John Anderson  
October 2020.