

JAZZ PUBLICATION OF THE YEAR

# Jazzwise

JULY 2010 ISSUE 143 £4.25

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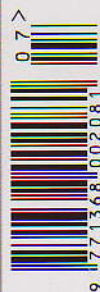
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# HOME RUN

After the success of *Bridgetower*, their first jazz opera together, composer **Julian Joseph** and librettist Mike Phillips team up once again this month for a new children's jazz opera, *Shadowball*, set in the world of the Negro Baseball Leagues. Ahead of the work's premiere, **Jack Massarik** talks to Julian about the inspirations that lie behind the work and the remarkable feat of performing with more than 200 children

**B**aseball and jazz have a great deal in common. The national summer game of the United States and the art form it gave the world are deeply-rooted strands of the American way of life, whatever that cosy umbrella term might signify. For some it means saluting Uncle Sam, singing the Star-Spangled Banner, celebrating Thanksgiving, eating mom's apple pie, kissing the Prom queen and getting your picture in the High School yearbook. For others it means social inequality, grinding rural poverty, race riots and inner-city ghettos terrorised by drug barons and their gun-toting gangstas. But from wherever you stand, baseball and jazz have consistently offered America a touchstone of national excellence, a precious route out of poverty for the poor and a sense of identity for all.

Baseball in the US is massive. Every major city boasts a major-league team and a huge stadium as its home. A hardball version of rounders, played over nine innings by two teams of nine, it is played by thousands and watched daily throughout the summer by millions, live or on TV and the Internet. Famous teams like the New York Yankees, Boston Red Sox, Chicago Cubs and St Louis Cardinals are followed globally. Pro baseball is also big in Japan, Cuba and several Latin American countries, and while yet to catch on in Britain, many of its terms, like "stepping up to the plate", "striking out", "pitching an idea", "giving a ballpark figure", "being a whole new ballgame" and "coming out of left field", have entered the lexicon of the wider English-speaking world.

Two Londoners to appreciate these facts, pianist-composer Julian Joseph and writer Mike Phillips, have just completed *Shadowball*, the world's first jazz opera about baseball. Set in the 1930s and 1940s, when baseball's sociological and

financial parallels with jazz were particularly close, it tells the story of how, like jazz, the professional sport embodied not only the American dream, its rags-to-riches success-stories, but also its nightmare, the long struggle against racism.

The period from 1920-1945 has been labelled the Jazz Age, a golden pre-TV era when live jazz packed the dancehalls and its stars, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Count Basie and Cab Calloway, dominated

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**– JULIAN JOSEPH**

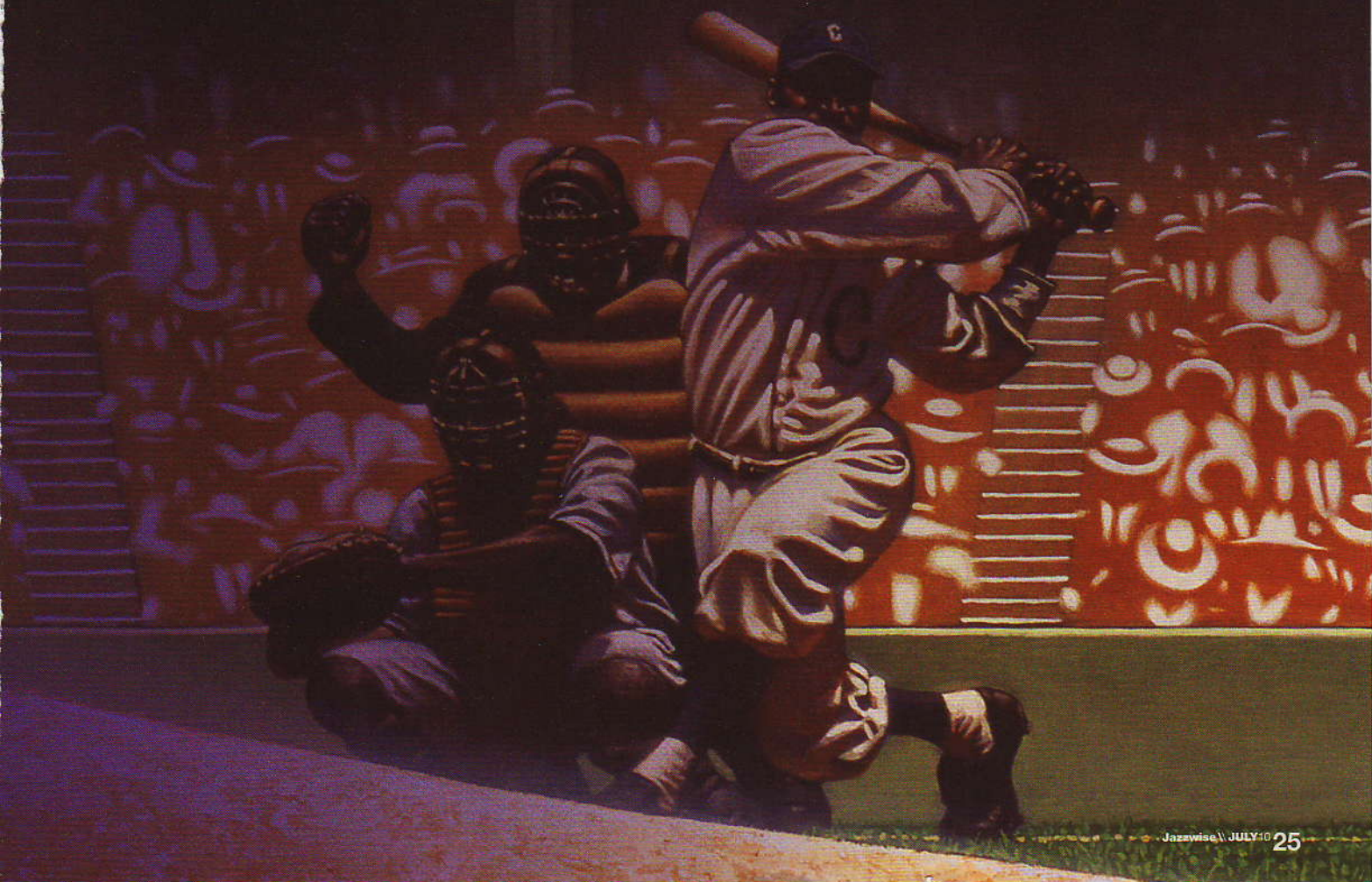
the music industry. Their toe-tapping, big-selling records were the soundtrack to a similarly golden age of baseball, when some of the greatest players the game has ever seen, Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Oscar Charleston and Cool Papa Bell, thrilled crowds in the Negro Leagues.

Seen through the eyes of ambitious youngsters, *Shadowball* examines the frustrations of segregation in sport and the harsh truth that the US professional game maintained an unbroken colour bar from 1890 until Jackie Robinson famously joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1946. Not

such a left-field idea for a jazz opera, especially since the titles of many jazz themes ('Two Bass Hit', 'Double Play', 'Caught Stealing') were directly named after moves on the baseball diamond. Yet any jazz opera remains a challenging artistic concept, a marriage of two worlds. Some would call it a shotgun marriage, though anyone familiar with the Gershwin masterpiece, *Porgy and Bess*, would disagree.

An obvious problem is funding, since costumes, sets, singer-actors, musicians, designers and directors all cost money. But a greater problem is finding a musician versatile enough to do the project justice. Not a simple task, but luckily for the producers in this case, they had Julian Joseph's telephone number. Few contemporary musicians are better equipped to write a jazz opera than this quietly-spoken 44-year-old Londoner. A classically trained pianist who has recorded works by Bartok, Prokofiev and Stravinsky, he is also a world-class improviser who leads both large and small jazz ensembles with a snap. He broadcasts jazz news and interviews on radio and takes an active part in jazz education, having introduced several jazz examination grades to the National Curriculum.

Not least, he had the right CV. Working in tandem with librettist Mike Phillips, he already has one full-length jazz opera to his name. *Bridgetower*, commissioned for the City of London Festival three years ago, was based on the life of a black violin prodigy at the court of the British Prince Regent (later George IV). The son of a Barbadian page, young George Bridgetower was lauded by Beethoven and fêted by eighteenth-century society, but driven into poverty-stricken obscurity and an early death after his father was jailed for refusing to sell him to the Prince. It's a powerful and true



tale, so when the Hackney Development Trust, a prestigious educational body, sounded out Julian about working on another neglected chapter in black history, he did not hesitate.

"When the idea for a jazz opera about the Negro Leagues was first pitched to me – no pun intended – I went for it straight away, because those issues and interests, including sport, jazz and the struggle against racism, are all close to my heart," Julian recalled recently over a working lunch at his local gastro-pub. "I told them I loved the idea but would want to collaborate with Mike again [pictured at the launch, to the left of Julian Joseph] because I liked his writing style and we'd worked so well together on *Bridgetower*. Happily, they agreed."

Delving deeper into the game's history, the two men uncovered several startling facts, one of which provided the opera with its title and the splendid artwork of its posters. "*Shadowball* was the name given to the extraordinary mime-show Negro Leagues players would put on before games," explained Julian. "It seemed like they were actually pitching, hitting, fielding and throwing, but the ball was imaginary. Some fans would think the game had actually started. This clever exhibition by the players was also a way of empowering themselves, sharpening their skills and showboating, which is a big thing among black sportsmen. They know how to showboat."

Competition was fierce, too, in those segregated times when jazz was the best-paid career option for black Americans, with gambling second and baseball a close third. Many big-name jazz musicians owned a team, which made sense because their bands were touring the same towns as their teams. "Duke, Cab, Basie, they all owned a team," said Julian, "you know, funding the uniforms, the kit, the gasoline, and trading with other Negro League clubs for the best players. There were a lot of details to be worked into the libretto and I think Mike did a great job with that. Let me tell you about him. He's a writer and novelist who came to Britain from Guyana as a child over 40 years ago. He's a kind of Renaissance man, a curator of festivals, of art, of many artistic things. He's also the elder brother of Trevor Phillips, longtime head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. I met Mike some years ago when we were both included in a book about *Black Britons*. During the launch we got talking and found we shared many interests and ideologies, like jazz, art and classical music."

Even better, they worked well together. "I found it a very natural process. Like me, Mike's not too precious about his work. He doesn't object if I want to change some detail and I don't mind if he wants to change something I've done. There's a very easy flow of ideas between us, it's no effort to accommodate one another. Also I like the way he writes – the detail and clarity he puts even into such complex subjects as sociological history and racism. You'll find that in his hands a script sounds very unbiased, not like the words of someone with an obvious chip on his shoulder."

Their aim, in creating a *Bugsy Malone*-style

production designed for children, was to keep the storyline simple. "There's only one adult character and that's Satchel Paige, played by Cleveland Watkiss. All the other parts, including the extras – players, umpires and sections of the crowd – are taken by children. In all we have 120 of them, aged nine and ten, from two Hackney primary schools, Jubilee and Kingsmead. The main child character, played by Jordan Lema, is a kid called Charlie who wants to be a pro baseball player. He follows the careers of Paige, Gibson, Robinson and Buck O'Neill, and that's what brings clarity to the story.

At the launch



The unusual stage set represents a baseball diamond, with the catcher at rear centre-stage and the pitcher centre-stage, with a commentary box and sections of the crowd in the wings. Without using taser guns, I asked Julian, how did he control 120 hyperactive kids? He laughed. "No, they're great. You might meet a bit of resistance at first, but the thing is, when you get them working, they're fine. Jonathan Moore takes care of all that, he a master director and actor, extremely musical and intelligent. I met him through composer Mark Anthony Turnage. He's white – he's Irish – he understands the struggle!"

Every opera must have its arias and Julian supplies over a dozen. "There are 14 principal themes and variations, and some good songs there – 'Sunday Afternoon', 'This Game is Life', the newsboy theme, 'Extra-Extra', and 'The Water's Deep'.

Abigail Graham, who plays Charlie's mother Cindy, sings 'So Faraway', one of the most challenging songs in the score. Cab Calloway, played by Samson Adeola in a zoot suit and false moustache, also has a big scene. Then there's a number for Ronnie Paterson as the entrepreneur

Branch Rickey, the clever ex-player who groomed Jackie Robinson for the Major League. Writing the music took me about three months. Mike had already come up with lyrics and ideas for the songs within the libretto, so that made my job easier."

Was it hard for the children to learn these songs? "Not really. I found another wonderful thing about working with schoolkids is that if you don't actually tell them something's hard, they just get on with it. I do take care to write the music so that it will sound natural and not cheesy, but I also can

recognise a problem, those moments when I do have to rewrite something. Mostly the parts are in unison, with some in two-part harmonies and some arranged as a canon, you know. The kids love that."

While providing a Jazz Age score to the onstage story, Julian's onstage group lays out its own jazz credentials. "We have bassist Mark Hodgson, drummer Mark Mondesir and trumpeter Russell Bennett, all from the *Bridgetower* orchestra, with Patrick Clahar on saxes. He plays tenor, alto and soprano, plus clarinet and flute. He doesn't get his critical due, but I think he's one of our most talented players."

As we went to press, rehearsals were going well, with everybody looking forward to the opening night, at the Mermaid Theatre in central London. "After that, we're going to take it on the road," said Julian. "It will play to over 200 schools all around the UK over the next three years. It will be out of my hands then, it'll become part of the National Curriculum. It's not overlong considerably shorter than *Bridgetower*, which was originally three hours long."

And it's a show with a happy ending. In 1947 Jackie Robinson shattered the colour bar and joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. Thanks to his courage in facing down hostile crowds and winning them over with his exceptional skill – the Dodgers won the league championship in his first season – he was soon followed by Roy Campanella and many others. Within 18 months, 150 black players were starring in the major leagues and the principal Negro League had disbanded for ever. Another of its stars was Don Newcombe, a Dodgers pitcher who looked so much like Sonny Rollins that Sonny was given the nickname "Newk". If you ever wondered why Sonny's celebrated Blue Note album is called *Newk's Time*, now you know.

Black and Hispanic players of today's major-league teams are multi-millionaires. Superstars like Barry Bonds, who retired after breaking the legendary Babe Ruth's all-time home-run record, Derek Jeter, CC Sabathia, David "Big Papi" Ortiz and Alex Rodriguez, who used to date Madonna, bank the kind of money that makes Wayne Rooney and even David Beckham look like benefit cases. And as for Bernie Williams, the New York Yankees' slugger who lists his hobbies as "playing jazz guitar" and recently appeared at the Rochester Jazz Festival, I reckon he's got it all. ■

**SHADOWBALL PREMIÈRES AT LONDON'S MERMAID CONFERENCE AND EVENTS CENTRE ON 29 JUNE, CONTINUING ON 30 JUNE.**