

Programme Notes By Philip Watson

James Mainwaring, saxophone, electronics

Chris Sharkey, guitar

Luke Reddin-Williams, drums

Saxophonist James Mainwaring – one-third of much lauded Leeds-based band Roller Trio – is explaining the genesis of the group’s name.

“Well, we had a gig before we had a name, so we had to come up with something in a bit of a rush,” he says. “There were three of us, so it was always going to be a trio, and we wanted something more general to reflect the collaborative nature of the band.

“I think we all smoked roll-ups at the time, and I remember we kept describing our approach to the music we were playing as, ‘This is how we roll’. So I think that’s how it came about. We certainly didn’t intend to perform on stage wearing roller-skates or anything.”

In the seven years or so since the trio formed in 2011, the band has rolled a good distance musically, quietly (and sometimes not so quietly) revolutionising the newly buoyant British jazz scene, snowballing and gathering pace along the way.

A three-way exchange between tenor and soprano saxophonist Mainwaring, drummer Luke Reddin-Williams, and guitarist and producer Chris Sharkey – who last year replaced original Roller Trio guitarist Luke Wynter – the band has made a big impact, both at home and abroad.

An integral part of the vibrant and progressive Leeds music scene, with its fiercely independent DIY aesthetic and admirably pluralistic attitude towards genre, Roller Trio has gigged hard and kept an admirably open musical mind.

“In Leeds you end up playing with all kinds of musicians, and when Roller Trio first started we were playing any gigs we could get – we’d share the same bill as singer-songwriters, garage rock groups, alternative punk bands, all sorts of stuff,” says 29-year-old Mainwaring (pronounced “Mannering”).

“We didn’t even know if we were jazz or not, but eventually the jazz scene seemed to clock on, and that’s pretty much our home now and the scene we seem to appeal to the most. At the same time we’re attracting people who say, ‘I didn’t know I liked jazz until I heard you.’”

“I really believe in not trying to do anything in a certain way, in just internalising as many techniques and ways of music making that you can – and then playing in a kind of free associative way”

James Mainwaring

Having won the Peter Whittingham Award – a prize given to musicians under the age of 26 making their mark through “innovative projects in the field of cutting-edge jazz” – and chosen for a BBC Introducing Showcase, both in their very first year, Roller Trio’s spectacularly swift and sudden rise was sealed in 2012 when they were nominated for the UK music industry’s highest-profile gong: the Mercury Prize. The band had been playing together for just 18 months; their self-titled debut album had been released just a few weeks earlier.

Roller Trio didn’t take home the prize, of course, like many “token Mercury Prize jazz acts” before them – Courtney Pine, John Surman, Soweto Kinch and GoGo Penguin included. Yet the smack of their punchy and spirited performance on the night of the awards, and their trumpeting by jazz tastemaker and BBC 6 Music DJ Gilles Peterson as “the new sound of UK jazz”, meant Roller Trio had arrived.

“We played ‘The Interrupters’ off our first album and I think we brought a different energy to the whole evening,” says Mainwaring. “It kind of grabbed people and worked them up a little bit. Yeah, it just went down really well.”

Nominations for MOBO Best Jazz Act and Jazz FM Newcomer awards followed, as did interest from English singer-songwriters Lianne La Havas and Ben Howard. Mainwaring subsequently collaborated with British art-rockers Django Django.

Since then Roller Trio has released two further highly praised studio albums (Fracture and New Devices), two powerful live CDs, and an improvised soundtrack to Promise/Threat, a film (mostly shot in Dublin) directed by Northern Irish writer and artist Ray Kane.

The trio has also headlined the groundbreaking Arena stage at the hip Love Supreme festival; sold out London's leading jazz club, Ronnie Scott's; played the prestigious Cheltenham Jazz Festival; wowed audiences in clubs and venues across Europe; and even toured as far afield as Sudan and South Korea.

What audiences seem to passionately respond to is open and egalitarian modern group music that "sidesteps every pigeonhole" (the Daily Telegraph) and "resonates with listeners who have never darkened a jazz club door" (The Times).

Important influences on the trio stretch from rock bands such as Nirvana, Guns N' Roses and Afghan Whigs; to jazz players such as Tim Berne, Herbie Hancock and Brad Mehldau; heavy metal groups System of a Down and Slipknot; and hip-hop adventurers J Dilla and Flying Lotus. Ska-punk band Sublime, experimental electronic music pioneer Aphex Twin, and art-rock provocateur St Vincent are in the mix somewhere too.

British experimental jazz groups such as Polar Bear and noughties "punk-jazz" innovators Acoustic Ladyland have also had a strong impact on the band – in fact, Chris Sharkey was a member both of Acoustic Ladyland and, vitally, of legendary Leeds "thrash-improv" trioVD, a primary force on Roller Trio.

"Some of us listen to things the others won't, but in terms of influences they all have the same type of energy" Luke Reddin-Willians

Many of these dizzyingly disparate forces come through unashamedly in Roller Trio's music. The philosophy seems something like: listen to everything, then create something singular.

"I really believe in not trying to do anything in a certain way, in just internalising as many techniques and ways of music making that you can – and then playing in a kind of free associative way," says Mainwaring.

"Basically we're all interested in improvisation, and the jazz world is a pretty free place to explore, but we didn't want to forget the bands that got us into music in the first place," he continues. "We wanted to make sure that we kept playing the stuff that we were all listening to before we started playing songs like 'Autumn Leaves' at recitals."

“It’s kind of a backlash thing too after playing lots of jazz – let’s go and play something really loud and rock out!” 29-year-old Reddin-Williams told Jazzwise magazine in 2012.

The resulting sound – like the hybrid and Hydra-headed forms that populate much creative modern music – brilliantly embraces the uninhibited fire and spontaneity of improvisation; the powerfully propulsive riffs, rhythms and melodies of rock; the tightly-wound grooves, samples and soundscapes of dance and electronic music; the offbeat time signatures and metric modulations of contemporary composition; and the cut-up collages and wilful experimentation of art music.

“The way we play, and the technology we use, gives us the facility to take risks and switch roles” James Mainwaring

To label Roller Trio’s music “jazz-rock”, for example, with all its unavoidably bombastic and excessive 1970s’ overtones, is undeniably to reduce it, to filter out much that makes it compellingly complex and composite in the first place. Genre, in fact, is the least interesting way of thinking about this music. It is post-genre. It is rhythm and force and energy and sometimes volume. It is music at once adventurous and accessible.

If there are common denominators in the trio, they are a connection to the jazz course at Leeds College of Music – Mainwaring and Reddin-Williams met there in their first year; Sharkey, now 40, had already completed his studies and was on the teaching staff – coupled with a desire to work dynamically and collaboratively: in terms of the band’s use of samples, loops and electronics to expand its sound; in the process of group composition; and in the way individual functions can move around the trio.

“The way we play, and the technology we use, gives us the facility to take risks and switch roles,” says Mainwaring. “So on saxophone I can suddenly become a more harmonic instrument, and Luke can play melodically on the drums, while Chris on bass is holding down the groove.”

There is also a mutual commitment to very visceral music-making. “Some of us listen to things the others won’t, but in terms of influences they all have the same type of energy,” Reddin-Williams has said. “That is a common thing we all share.”

Nowhere is that commitment more evident than in the trio's live performances, when some of the compositions take on a denser, darker feel, as if the band have discovered further dimensions to their music. There is a strong sense of a body of sound filling a room. Of music more edgy, more playful, more prog, more rhythmic, more skronky. And, inescapably and refreshingly, of Roller Trio decidedly not being a band from London.

"Maybe there's a slight bit of attitude that we're not going to do anything that sounds like anything else," Sharkey told Jazzwise magazine recently. "If I'm totally honest, going back to the trioVD days, there was something oppositional about what we were trying to do."

Reddin-Williams has also talked about the Leeds music scene "having more of a sense of humour about it, and it's a bit more raw".

It's all a very long way from the traditional jazz trio – of a standard set-up of acoustic piano, double bass and drums. Some videos on YouTube even show the band in full "power trio" mode, surrounded by stacks of speakers and swirls of dry ice.

Is that what Irish audiences can expect?

"Well, I'm not sure what the venues on the tour have in store for us, but hopefully, yeah," says Mainwaring, laughing. "As well as hearing the music, we want the audience to feel it physically. We kind of want their chests vibrating.

"Hopefully we'll give audiences an energetic performance and a new experience. Does that sound good?"

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