



This page, from far left: the jazz acts Nubya Garcia and Fixity; and musicians on the streets of Cork. Right: Ella Fitzgerald, who played Cork Jazz Festival in 1980. Photographs: Gisela Jane Galan/Redferns, Darragh Kane and Chuck Fishman/Getty

WHAT'S GONE WRONG AT CORK JAZZ FESTIVAL?

The 2025 line-up is one of the most disappointing for years, with far too few true jazz acts. Ireland's leading celebration of the form needs to be a lot more ambitious

PHILIP WATSON

A painting in the arrivals hall at Cork Airport has long shown many of the greats who have played the city's jazz festival. Upfront are four legends of the music – Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins and Wynton Marsalis – while, further back in the gallery, you can spot such stars as Chick Corea, George Shearing, Buddy Rich, Jan Garbarek and Joshua Redman. The event, now in its 47th year, is by far Ireland's leading jazz celebration, and the image speaks of a long and proud tradition.

For many years the painting was given a prominent position – Cork Airport is among the sponsors of the festival – and would get noticed by people waiting to meet loved ones. More recently, however, it has become harder to find. A little while ago the painting was moved to a new spot, where it

was partly obscured by a large cash machine.

The last time I passed through the airport, the group portrait was nowhere to be seen. Its removal may have been a result of the current redevelopment of the arrivals area, but for many music fans and long-time devotees of the festival, it was hard not to see it as entirely symbolic.

There has been a debate about the amount and type of jazz programmed at the festival almost from its inception, in 1978, and it's true that the embarrassing bad old days of the inclusion of pop, rock and indie acts such as The Boomtown Rats, Gary Numan, Aslan, The Coronas and Picture This being shoehorned into the festivities have passed. Over the past few years, however, the actual jazz content has increasingly seemed in danger.

In fact, the line-up at this month's jamboree is one of the most disappointing and dispiriting for quite some time. A jazz-loving friend has taken to calling the

gathering "Guinness Cork Non-Jazz Festival". An Irish musician I know goes a stage further: he refers to it as the "anti-jazz festival".

Some of the more printable comments left on the event's official social-media posts have been equally damning ("a travesty", "a sell-out", "a jazz festival minus the jazz") and, occasionally, wonderfully cryptic ("In a way, jazz is like pizza: we all know what it is, lots of people put their twist on it . . . however, don't show me a kebab and call it pizza").

To get a sense of why there is such widespread dissatisfaction, you only have to look at the artists trumpeted at the top of this year's festival poster: apart from the London saxophonist and composer Nubya Garcia, not one of the other 20 headliners can truthfully be described as a jazz act. This matters, as these performers are not just giving the flagship concerts that help to define Guinness Cork Jazz Festival's core values: they are also the musicians who

should set jazz fans' hearts racing and pulses quickening.

Perhaps some of the main acts can be termed, at a stretch, jazz-adjacent. I'm thinking of the "techno-meets-jazz explorations" of the American DJ Jeff Mills; the "dreamy alt-jazz" of the upcoming English singer-songwriter Sienna Spiro; and the fiery "psych-jazz, funk and hip-hop" of the perennial festival favourites Hypnotic Brass Ensemble, from Chicago.

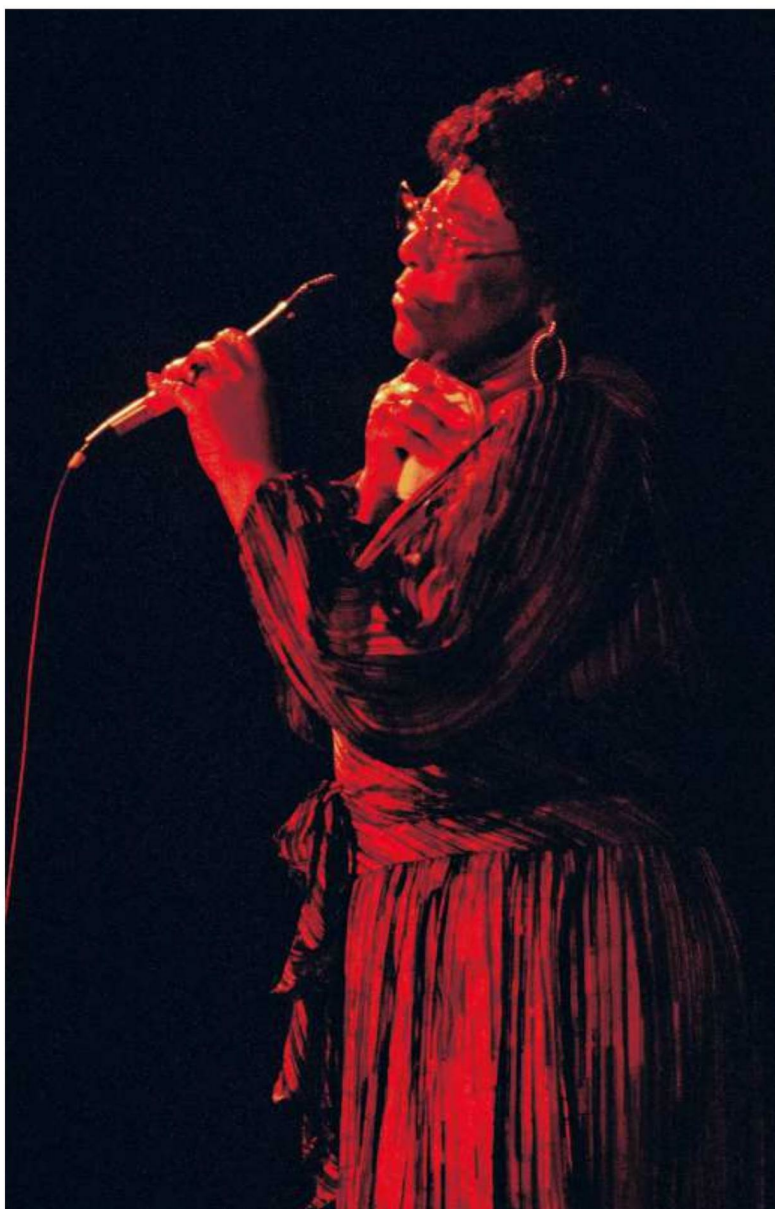
But look deeper and the programme seems both "jazz-remote" and backward-looking. Cymande are a British funk, soul, reggae and Afrobeat band who were most popular in the early 1970s. JP Cooper is an English soul singer-songwriter who had a couple of pop hits nine years ago. Orchestra Baobab, a Senegalese band who have been recording and touring since 1970, play west African and Afro-Cuban music. And The Pharcyde are a Los Angeles hip-hop group who "will revisit their 1995 album *Labcabcalfornia*".

There are also extremely slim pickings further down the poster. Daniel Herskedal is an acclaimed Norwegian jazz tuba player who integrates elements of classical and folk music into his quietly mesmerising music, but his concert at Triskel Arts Centre was programmed not by the festival's director, Mark Murphy, and his team but as part of a tour of Ireland organised by the Arts Council-funded promoter Music Network.

Murphy has slotted into Triskel over the bank-holiday weekend the retro Irish jazz and music-theatre singer Stella Bass and the groove-based spiritual jazz saxophonist and flautist Chip Wickham, but the most compelling jazz acts at the centre are the result of creative programming by Triskel's artistic director, Tony Sheehan.

Spotlighting artists closely associated with the estimable German label ECM, Sunday at Triskel features a triumvirate of intriguing concerts by the British singer Norma Winstone, the Swiss pianist Colin Vallon and the duo of the English guitarist Rob Luft and the Albanian vocalist Elina Duni.

Of the almost 30 remaining acts advertised on the festival poster, right down



to “Europe’s ultimate” Fleetwood Mac tribute act, who “return for their fifth year”, none is remotely a jazz act. Instead of proudly supporting and unreservedly campaigning for the music, Guinness Cork Jazz Festival is a jazz festival in name only – and the 2025 edition represents a new nadir.

In some ways the argument around “when is a jazz festival not a jazz festival?” is as old as the sometimes thorny issue of what is and what is not jazz.

A generous and malleable music that has always reached out beyond race, culture and nation, and beyond doctrine and dogma, jazz has in recent years increasingly become a broad church – Nubya Garcia, for example, thrillingly marries improvisation with dub, reggae, cumbia, broken beat and classical – and attracted a new, young and diverse audience. Jazz in Ireland, Britain, Europe and the United States has rarely been in such a healthy state.

Faced with what they perceive to be a small and finite jazz audience, however,

festival organisers have often looked outside its generous borders – and programmed accordingly. The long-established Montreux, North Sea and New Orleans jazz festivals have for many years scheduled musicians such as Van Morrison, Sting, Robert Plant, Seal, Elvis Costello and Paul Simon. Motörhead headlined Montreux in 2007.

One rationale seems to be that, in a festival setting, these mainstream acts encourage dedicated music fans to sample jazz acts to which they may not have otherwise been exposed.

“If you compare the Guinness Cork Jazz Festival to similar festivals in cities around the world, it seems we’re not doing anything wildly different,” says Murphy, who has been the festival’s director since 2021, and who owns Choice Cuts, the independent concert and club-night promoter, and the Sugar Club, the primarily soul, funk, hip-hop and dance-music venue in Dublin. “I don’t think the

market’s big enough to programme purely jazz acts, and the festival needs to be inclusive, not exclusive.

“My whole mantra is to turn people on to something they haven’t experienced before, for them to get deeper into the music by seeing a live performance, and seeing the musicianship in jazz, for example, and going, ‘Wow, this is amazing.’ Hip-hop acts like The Pharcyde and Q-Tip got my generation into jazz, because much hip-hop, soul and funk is influenced by or has its roots in jazz. It works both ways, as well: it would also be great to turn a jazzhead on to some house music that’s influenced by jazz.”

This policy works commercially. Several of this year’s headline shows have already sold out, and Murphy says ticket sales for concerts programmed by the festival are more than six times what they were in the past, up from as few as 3,000 to more than 20,000 last year.

The event has also been estimated to attract up to 100,000 visitors and generate €50 million in hospitality-related revenue. The clue is in the first part of the name: Guinness Cork Jazz Festival is good for business, especially that of its lead sponsor’s owner, Diageo. It puts bums on seats and pints in hands.

There are other positives, too. I live in Cork, and I admire the dynamic spirit of the weekend, the way the city so fully and joyfully embraces the festival. Streets become alive with parades, brass bands and free family-oriented concerts on the festival stage in Emmet Place, as well as, under the banner of the Guinness Music Trail, gigs in “nearly 80 pubs and venues”.

But if a second rationale for scheduling more mainstream acts is that increased ticket sales from these concerts help fund the programming of less-commercial jazz acts in smaller spaces, the blindingly obvious retort to this year’s festival line-up is: where are they?

It’s not as if the opportunities don’t exist. A quick look at the website of just one leading concert-booking agency, Saudades, in Austria, shows that many world-class US-based jazz acts are touring Europe around the time of Guinness Cork Jazz Festival.

They include a power trio led by the renowned bass player Dave Holland; the quartet headed by James Brandon Lewis, the hottest and most exhilarating post-Coltrane tenor saxophonist in jazz; and the all-star New York sextet of Mary Halvorson, probably the most acclaimed jazz guitarist and composer of her generation.

Any of these musicians would stratospherically raise the jazz festival’s credibility. But Murphy confirms that none was approached and that he is not in contact with Saudades. The festival’s director plays to his undoubted programming strengths. But it is not unreasonable to question whether one of those qualities is a crucial knowledge of the range and richness of contemporary jazz.

A second riposte would be: where are the Irish jazz acts? Cork Opera House has commissioned the trombonist and local jazz hero Paul Dunlea to schedule four smart late-night Green Room concerts at the venue, which feature such Irish and international talents as the vocalist Laoise Leahy and the many-sided ensembles

Estratos, Fixity and Next Experiment. The programme of the official festival, on the other hand, in no way reflects the quality, energy and diversity of the Irish jazz scene.

A critical third comeback is: where are the women? Many leading European jazz festivals, including London, Berlin and Norway’s Molde, have signed up to the Keychange initiative, which campaigns for greater access, opportunity and equality for women jazz musicians, and in which organisers pledge to a 50:50 gender balance in their programming. Guinness Cork Jazz Festival is not a participant, however, and has always fallen far short of such a target.

Of the acts listed in this year’s line-up, only one, Garcia, is a female instrumentalist. The nine other women on the programme (which makes a total ratio of 10:50, or 20 per cent) are all singers, a fact that, many argue, only reinforces the tired yet stubborn gender stereotype that women sing and men play the instruments. Again, Cork should be doing much better.

Festivals of all kinds thrive on a fragile



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though fundamental balance of authenticity and integrity. (Look at the continuing success of Glastonbury, one of the world’s largest music festivals.) But compared with, say, Cheltenham Jazz Festival (held in a city about half the size of Cork but with a reputation 100 times greater), or similar festivals in Edinburgh, Umbria and San Sebastián, and even the small yet perfectly formed annual jazz gathering in Bray, Guinness Cork Jazz Festival lacks both creative ambition and contemporary relevance.

“I’m trying to remodel the festival, to incrementally move it forward, but I take all criticism on board,” Murphy says when I put some of these points to him. “There’s loads of room for improvement, and my whole thing is that I welcome everything. I’m not here to say no to things.”

Guinness Cork Jazz Festival more than adequately honours three of the words in its title. But it uses the name of jazz, with all its accompanying artistic and intellectual credibility, and its certain sense of offbeat style, without duly and properly honouring the music. Mark Murphy and Diageo should say yes to immediately addressing such a deficit and setting in place significant change. It’s the least they can do for Ella, Dizzy, Sonny and Wynton. ●

Guinness Cork Jazz Festival 2025 starts next Thursday and runs until Monday, October 27th