

EMPIRICAL

REVIEW SUMMARY 2007 - 2022



Empirical: Like Lambs review (4/5*)

Selwyn Harris, Jazzwise

July 2022

Empirical is a kindred quartet that equally values both tradition and exploration, and the current line-up has been dedicating themselves to the cause since 2008. While they might have already had their moments in the sun, winning accolades and a bucket-load of awards, among them the 2010 jazz MOBO, you always had the feeling they were in it for the long haul. Out of the spotlight they have continued to refresh their progressive brand of jazz that weaves together intricate contemporary grooves, unfamiliar compositional forms and open-minded post-bop improv.

Like Lambs, the title of a new four-extended track EP, is their first studio outing since the start of the pandemic. Although they pride themselves on being democratically-run, it's the drummer Shaney Forbes who's written all of the tracks here, and it's a seriously impressive little set of extended pieces. It starts with 'Giants', an exhilarating opener, driven by angular yet head-nodding grooves drawing from electronica, hiphop to Caribbean-Latin-ish inflected rhythms and compelling solos from the painterly vibraphonist Lewis Wright and intensely lyrical alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey.

Forbes' titular two-movement suite starts with ominous arco bass-vibes chamber sounds with Wright's slight variations on a thematic motif continuing through 'Part 1'. Improvisations tend to feel more a part of compositional development than solos as such, and there's a shift into more free-jazz territory on 'Part 2'. 'The Garden of Beginnings' cools things down a bit with a haunting blend of Coltrane-esque cosmic jazz and MJQ-like chamber-noir. Give the drummer some for some seriously good writing as well as his undemonstratively supple drum work, while bassist Tom Farmer's succinct movement and tone ensures a seamless dialogue.

Here's evidence that Empirical is still a reliable touchstone of contemporary British jazz at its most sophisticated.

Edmonton Jazz fest closes on successful notes: Memories of blissful moments, explosive energy

Roger Levesque, Calgary Herald

30th June 2019

...For those who find the spirit of jazz in the intimacy of club sets, a series of top drawer acts filled out the festival, most often at the Yardbird, inspiring some raucous crowds.

London's quartet Empirical delivered it all, with the tight, explosive energy of Shaney Forbes' drums stoking Nathaniel Facey's sax solos, and more contemplative moves from bassist Tom Farmer and Lewis Wright on the seldom-seen vibraphone. This was the height of contemporary jazz from risk-taking players with real commitment.

Live review: Empirical – Purcell Room Southbank Centre

Athena Kam, When the Horn Blows

21st November 2018

The London-based jazz quartet kicks off this year's EFG London Jazz Festival in style, celebrating their new EP with a memorable launch show at Southbank Centre's Purcell Room.

Since forming in 2007, Empirical have been dazzling with their improvisatory melodies and flourishing virtuosity. 11 years on, the band still charms with an unbridled creativity, rife with fervour and unmistakable passion for the music, driven by an unpredictable energy which keeps audiences at the edge of their seat. When they perform, the four musicians come together, working as one cohesive organ to pump out some heart-soaring jazz. Watching the band perform is always a delight, and Friday evening was no different as they delivered a special launch show of their newest EP 'Indifference Culture' on the opening night of the EFG London Jazz Festival.

The evening passed by in a flurry of notes; saxophonist Nathaniel Facey creates a gorgeous tone on the alto saxophone, often leading at the forefront of cascading melodies. Vibraphonist Lewis Wright offsets the rich sound of the saxophone with translucent touches, which sparkle through the texture with its sweet timbre, as demonstrated in 'Celestial Being'. Tom Farmer's dynamic bass playing creates an ever-present spirit, driving the music forward and maintaining the momentum even during more tranquil moments such as those found in 'Persephone', and Shaney Forbes is a master of the drums, with every hit carefully thought out so that they all add something to the music. It's clear that jazz is a shared passion between the quartet, and the focus and intensity translates well into an encapsulating performance which will retain your attention from the first note to the last without any sign of the concentration breaking.

The way the band performs conveys a sonic fluidity, despite the occasionally angular melodies and technically challenging passages, and you can't help but be impressed by the ease at which they tackle moments of extreme virtuosity like it's a piece of cake. Never complacent, the band teases with complex rhythmic and melodic sections, constantly staying on their toes. Setting a high standard of the performance for the rest of the festival to follow, they've managed to exceed and further push expectations with their unique sound, and even if you're not an avid fan of jazz, you'll find something within their music that will make you want to discover more.

London Jazz News Musician/Band of the Year

Graham Roberts, London Jazz News

22nd December 2018

Empirical: A beautiful combination of instruments – saxophone (Nathaniel Facey), vibraphone (Lewis Wright), bass (Tom Farmer) and drums (Shaney Forbes) – is brilliantly deployed on a range of original material that seems, to me, to touch all the jazz bases. They achieve an almost perfect balance between lyrical, reflective playing on the one hand and the high octane delivery of their thrilling, fast tempo pieces. And it is not often that it can be said that some of the best live jazz of the year was performed in November in the unpromising surroundings of Old Street underground station, where Empirical set up shop during the London Jazz Festival.

Eight London Jazz Festival highlights: The tube station gigs

Rosie Hanley, TimeOut London

13th November 2018

Fancy checking out one of the UK's hottest jazz bands, for free, on your commute home? Course you do. Creating their now legendary pop-up jazz lounge at Old Street station, Empirical perform across six days to

bring jazz to the underground. Comprising saxophonist Nathaniel Facey, bassist Tom Farmer, vibes player Lewis Wright and awesome drummer Shaney Forbes, Empirical are exactly what top-class modern-day jazz should be – trailblazing, yet also wholly respectful of tradition. Drop in for a whole set or just stay for one tune; either way, it's a brilliant way to dip into the festival.

Leipziger Jazztage – Empirical on opening night

Ulrich Steinmetzger, Leipziger Volkszeitung

13th October 2018

...Much applause and then it gets very British – four Sharp Dressed Men, the quartet Empirical.

Everything starts with a double bass solo which segues into an acoustic groove, soon heightened by the drums. The band is complete, once the alto sax and vibraphone join in. What follows is a lesson in jazz. It's a stylish affair and one can't escape the sense that this band has been together for more than ten years. If their concert seems like business as usual to begin with, it certainly doesn't stay this way.

In traditional form, which at first glance appears nostalgic, the band layer their musicality together to a casually light but utterly convincing sound. Elements of Cool Jazz, Bebop and Third Stream transform into something new. With enthusiasm but full of understatement, the songs pull in the listener thanks to the undeniable skill of the musicians and their evident joy at playing together.

The first piece, entitled 'Distraction Tactics' is a reference to today's politics and the festival motto ('Brexit'), as alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey explains. In an up-tempo number of breakneck speed, he will later demonstrate why he has studied Charlie Parker. This seemingly conventional, often film noir referencing music is completely of today.

Their precisely calculated excursions, intricate layering and playful take on musical traditions amount to a sublime urban club music, which knowingly disregards current trends, but is honest and entertaining – perfect, just like the quartet's dress code.

Empirical among the imperious at Jazzfest Berlin

Martin Longley, Jazzwise

8th November 2017

...One of the most ecstatically received sets was played by **Empirical** on the main stage, making their Blue Note rooted 1960s-style jazz sound almost revolutionary, with its direct proximity to the classic American style. So many other Jazzfest acts had been taking the music to satellite zones, but these be-suited Londoners delivered a show of tightly-controlled post-bebop complexity, using the old guidelines as a basis for launching off into their very 2017-style soloing extremities. Empirical flirt with nostalgia, while living on the edge of experimentation. Negotiating a nervous, twitching, runaway 'Anxiety Society', they not only reflected Brexit struggles, but also cut through the morass of generally downer global news developments, wriggling triumphantly out of this messy sphincter of woe...

Empirical: Connection review (5/5* Music & 5/5* Production)

Tilman Urbach, Fono Forum (Germany)

January 2017

Does good jazz have to be complex? Surely not. But it doesn't hurt if not all aspects of the musical structure reveal themselves immediately. On the contrary: it makes one alert and curious.

This is how, over the years, Empirical have consistently made a name for themselves and it is not surprising that they have been nominated as 'Best Jazz Act' at the 2016 Urban Music Awards.

Their current CD 'Connection' presents a melding of styles with an appealing blend of cool bop and free jazz. While the band only rarely allow themselves any elegiacal meandering, when they do, they are able to revel in it almost unrestrained, especially vibraphonist Lewis Wright.

Most of the time, the layering of different and opposing rhythms dominates, occasionally being reminiscent of minimalism. This is where everything depends on having a collective of musicians who are able to move tightly interlocked along the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structure. Drummer Shaney Forbes shows himself to be particularly adept at this.

The band cheekily borrows from jazz history, conjuring up nervously jumping rhythms: as if Monk were on speed.

But most of all: this band has a recognisable signature sound. They don't get caught up in a thicket of their own improvisational energies, but always maintain a lightness and transparency even in the freest of improvisational moments. Every break from the structure has solid musical foundations.

It's not without reason that the incorruptible Guardian newspaper credits Empirical with the renewal of '60s hard bop and free jazz - transposed into the reality of the 21st century, naturally.

Tradition dusted off: Two impressive days at the 26th International Jazz Festival at Münster Theatre

Hilmar Riemenschneider, Münstersche Zeitung (Germany)

8th January 2017

The second day of the festival concludes in a cheerful mood, but doesn't let one forget the opening act: the British quartet Empirical opened the three-day event and stays in listeners' mind as the festival's great surprise.

The four smartly suited and booted musicians dust off the tradition of modern jazz and hard bop and define a new up-to-date variant of it. That the band has been playing together for ten years is noticeable in each of the compact original compositions – genuinely artful quartet playing. The ease with which Lewis Wright on vibraphone and alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey bounce the musical motifs back and forth between each other is fascinating. A great listening experience.

Musikfest Bremen: The British Band Empirical at the BLG-Forum Complex forms brilliantly played

Christian Emigholz, Weser Kurier (Germany)

1st September 2016

The concert at the BLG-Forum begins with a rhythm being tapped out by bassist Tom Farmer on the body of his instrument while the other members of the quartet join in with handclapping that runs counter the first rhythm. Only slowly do they turn to their instruments, retaining this complex metric until it is punctuated by a short sharp, almost screeching cry of the alto saxophone. The opening piece to their continuous one-and-a-half hour set at the Bremen Musikfest set is called *Initiate the Initiations*. This young formation, who have nevertheless already been playing together for ten years, espouse a playful style of jazz that is full of surprising changes both rhythmically and melodically and, at times, reaches an almost merciless intensity – but is consistently marked by an exceptional technical brilliance.

British jazz has a long-standing tradition, but having been eclipsed by the growing popularity of rock music since the 1960s, British musicians have been able to have the greatest impact in experimental jazz. It took until the 1980s for a new generation – to name Loose Tubes as but one example – to find a new approach. Since then the British Isles have frequently produced surprises such as saxophonist Tim Garland's furious Lighthouse Trio. Empirical continues this search for new forms of expression. The quartet of Nathaniel Facey, Lewis Wright, Shaney Forbes and the previously mentioned Tom Farmer espouses total equality. While the alto sax and the vibraphone keep breaking out of the group sound with exposed statements, leading to intensive dialogues, bass and drums are rarely relegated to delivering a supporting beat and any such short passages resolve rapidly. This is illustrated by the second piece of the set, *Stay the Course*: after an intricately geared into the structure of the extensive piece keeps on dissolving momentarily, punctuated by vibrato-less truncated statements by Nathaniel Facey whose playing appears to be strongly influenced by Ornette Coleman. Lewis Wright reacts with soft cushioning comments from the vibraphone until his contribution becomes equally wild and virtuosic. Bass and drums switch from providing a tight pulse one minute to ranging completely free the next. But Empirical are no one-trick pony: they also possess a deep lyricism as in the beautifully arranged *Lethe*, which is almost characteristic of a ballad and only references bop-structures from far away. A fascinating and highly focused performance by Empirical.

Empirical: Connection review – uninhibited freedom from jazz innovators (4/5*)

John Fordham, The Guardian

17 March 2016

Mobo winners Empirical continue on the upward path their first lineup embarked on eight years ago. The long-running UK band remains enthusiastically devoted to remaking jazz for a contemporary audience, and *Connection* – recorded for the adventurous American label Cuneiform – is a break from the group's recent pattern of genre-bridging collaborations with guests. Alto saxist Nathaniel Facey's vocalised sound and respect for Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, coupled with the bebop-disciplined fluency of vibraphonist Lewis Wright, are at the core of the quartet, and bassist Tom Farmer and drummer Shaney Forbes are as secure on Empirical-brand thematic intricacies as they are uninhibited in its collective freedoms. Wright's *Mind Over Mayhem* is a hip mix of knotty composition and bop-fuelled swing and *Lethe* is a haunting fusion of luxurious vibes chords and soulful sax laments. The rhythmically layered, fitfully spiky *Stay the Course*,

meanwhile, powerfully showcases Wright's grace and Forbes's inventively supportive drums. This fine set is a significant renewal of Empirical's commitment to giving 1960s hard bop and free jazz (probably still their deepest loves) a 21st-century identity.

Empirical: Connection review – never a dull moment (4/5*)

Dave Gelly, The Observer

20 March 2016

Empirical are among the most admired and individual-sounding bands in contemporary jazz, so it's strange that this, their fifth album, should be the first to feature just the four of them, without guest players added. As anyone who has heard the band live will know, their approach is so fresh and their sound so appealing that there's never a dull moment. Much of this is down to the instrumentation of alto saxophone, vibraphone, bass and drums, which has the lightness and clarity to convey quite adventurous ideas without losing the listener along the way. All four have a hand in the compositions and, rather like the revered Modern Jazz Quartet of the 1950s, they seem to anticipate one another's thoughts.

Empirical – Connection

Peter Bacon, The Jazz Breakfast

18 March 2016

This is Empirical's fifth album and finds drummer Shaney Forbes, bassist Tom Farmer, saxophonist Nathaniel Facey and vibraphonist Lewis Wright further refining their already distinctive music.

Last month the band preceded the release by creating a pop-up jazz lounge at a London underground station for the entertainment of commuters, which shows their determination to move forward creatively isn't limited to the music.

The compositions are, as always, all original, and will please a retro-'60s jazz ear as well as a thoroughly 21st century one; the arrangements balance the hot alto saxophone against the cool vibraphone, with the rich double bass and constantly inventive drums bustling beneath.

Farmer's *Initiate The Initiations* manages a New Orleans parade groove filtered through a cool, clean makeover, while his *Anxiety Society* is as edgy as an office-load of target-driven, over-mortgaged sales reps. In contrast, Wright's *Lethe* places a reflective, gentle coating around an intense centre. The vibraphonist's *Mind Over Mayhem* could be the band's general philosophy; it's also a great percussion-bounced rhythm with Wright providing alternate cushion and pulse, and Facey dancing above, which then lowers the lamps for a slightly spooky noir section and a peach of a bass solo before the original bounce is back.

The timbral delight of Facey's bubbling alto line against a heavily-reverbed, stainless steel sheen of a vibes chord is just one among many. Farmer's bass lines manage to combine solidity and creativity in equal measure, while Forbes is just such a musical drummer in addition to achieving that deep groove.

Empirical are a prime argument in favour of a band that stays together down the years, honing their group empathy and common cause. Their strengths grow with each addition to the catalogue, and this is not only the band's most mature work to date, but probably the best as well.

Empirical, Connection (Cuneiform) (4/5*)

Mike Hobart, Financial Times

11 March 2016

The UK sax, vibraphone and rhythm quartet model their tight-knit, loose-limbed collectivism on the freewheeling modernism that was the Blue Note label's cutting edge in the early 1960s.

Their fifth CD, the first not to feature a guest, captures that music's shifting rhythms and sense of existential crisis through studied cymbals, solid bass and titles like "Anxiety Society" and "Mind over Mayhem". A fresh attack and contemporary references keep revivalism at bay, and the interplay between ripe sax and cool vibes bares a strong personal stamp.

Jazz in the Round, Cockpit Theatre, review: 'a special occasion'

This concert bade farewell to BBC's Jazz on 3 in largely successful style

Ivan Hewett, THE TELEGRAPH

1 March 2016

Three great jazz acts in one evening; it seemed a promise of heaven for jazz fans, at a price which – as presenter Jazz Nelson pointed out – makes Jazz in the Round the best musical bargain in London.

The Cockpit Theatre, then, was bound to be packed, but this was also a special occasion. These Jazz in the Round gigs are always broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in "Jazz on 3", which – after a wonderful 18-year run – is coming to an end. Thus the unusually starry line-up, and the emotional atmosphere.

It would be pleasing to report the evening was a total triumph, and it undoubtedly had its wonderful moments. [...] The evening's blazing highlight, however, was the set by quartet, Empirical, made up of numbers from their new album Connection.

Everyone was as sharply stylish and immaculately turned out as the players themselves, but the dexterity was more than just fast finger-work. Their music darted back and forth between sassy post-bop energy and a tender inward lyricism, without missing a beat. It opened up a fascinating expressive territory, which is theirs alone.

Empirical/Django Bates/Evan Parker review – jamming tribute to Jazz on 3

Cockpit Theatre

John Fordham, The Guardian

1 March 2016

Radio presenter Jez Nelson's final BBC recording brought out a fizzy line-up of British talent to bid his influential show farewell

February's edition of the Cockpit's monthly Jazz in the Round performances had a special resonance, as it was the last recording for the BBC's Jazz on 3 series, winding up after 18 years and 900 shows. It was an emotional night for Jo3's devoted presenter Jez Nelson (although his own new slot on Jazz FM is imminent), but an all-star cast of British jazz luminaries could hardly have made it a more upbeat tribute.

The crisply disciplined and just as crisply attired quartet Empirical opened the three-set show with a time-juggling handclap pattern that was stirred by saxophonist Nathaniel Facey into muscular avant-swing and poignant tonal nuances. The grooving and floating flexibility of vibraphonist Lewis Wright's *Mind Over Mayhem* (veering between tight arrhythmic games and the composer's flying bebop virtuosity) and bassist Tom Farmer's Ornette Coleman-esque Card Clash furthered the impression that this fine group's long-cultivated empathy keeps on growing. [...]

Jazz on 3 final show/Jazz in the Round at the Cockpit Theatre

Geoff Winston, LondonJazzNews

1 March 2016

The last ever *Jazz on 3* was not so much a wake as a celebration of all that is vibrant and artistically rich in the broad church of jazz and improvisation today. Jez Nelson, introducing this live recording from the Cockpit's beautiful theatre in the round, said his voice might break from a mixture of his cold and emotion on the occasion which closed the door on 18 years of broadcasting and around 1,000 shows as the BBC's flagship contemporary jazz platform.

In a carefully balanced programme, affirming the quality and diversity in the British scene, each in Nelson's 'dream list' of musicians had accepted the invitation to perform in front of the full house which included many from the business, as well as friends and family, who had come to show their support for this most vital of platforms for the best in the left field of British and international contemporary jazz.

Empirical, soon to celebrate ten years as a quartet, still maintain the aura of tightly disciplined, creatively-driven firebrands and, as Nelson commented, in their formal suits, are still the best dressed combo around! Hot from a week as a pop-up 'jazz shop' at Old Street, the award-winning band previewed numbers from their new album, *Connection*. Kicking off with syncopated hand-clapping which ticked the spirit of New Orleans, they shifted gears in to a demanding, nuanced mix of Lewis Wright's shimmering, softly-hued vibes, Nathaniel Facey's Dolphy-esque alto sax tensions and rolling, bounding bass and drum rhythms from Tom Farmer and Shane Forbes. [...]

Jazz in the Round

Richard Williams, thebluemoment.com

1 March 2016

Jez Nelson's monthly Jazz in the Round nights at the Cockpit Theatre in Marylebone are as good a way to hear improvised music in London as anyone has yet devised. A couple of hundred listeners settle themselves down in mini-bleachers on all four sides of the floor, where the musicians set up to face each other, creating an unusual degree of intimacy radiating through 360 degrees. As a member of Empirical — I think it was Nathaniel Facey, the alto saxophonist — told last night's audience, it makes you play differently. In a good way.

Facey and his colleagues kicked off what turned out to be a special night even by the standards of this excellent series. The evening was being recorded for transmission (on March 28) as the last-ever *Jazz on 3*, which Nelson presents, and after 18 years he was understandably emotional as he introduced a bill handpicked to represent the programme's philosophy over the years. After Empirical came Django Bates, who gave the solo performance that traditionally separates the evening's two bands, followed by a set of free improvisation from a multi-generational quartet assembled specially for this event: Laura Jurd (trumpet), Alexander Hawkins (piano), Orphy Robinson (marimba) and Evan Parker (tenor saxophone).

Empirical were coming off a week of thrice-daily gigs in a pop-up revue at Old Street tube station: a wheeze that apparently worked as well as it deserved to, attracting crowds of passers-by intrigued by what they heard. They're an exceptional band and they played a fine set of striking new compositions by each of the four members, ending with "Lethe", a quietly beautiful slow tune by the vibraphonist Lewis Wright. I've heard them play it before, and it stuck in my head. I was delighted to hear it again, and to discover that it's on their new album, *Connection*. [...]

Empirical open up underground with Old Street jazz lounge

Kevin LeGendre, Jazzwise online

1 March 2016

Walk down the slope of subway 4 to reach the belly of one of east central London's busiest thoroughfares and the noise of late night traffic gives way to the sound of a horn. Nathaniel Facey's alto saxophone pierces the incessant din of voices and footsteps that furnishes the soundtrack to every underground station in the city. But the articulation and complexity of the phrasing cuts way above the standard of most buskers, the bulk of whom heard banging out a Beatles staple on the network are mostly guitarists or singers.

However, there is no hat on the floor tonight. Empirical have set up a 'Jazz Lounge' in one of the small shop units on the central corridor of the station and thus turned the current fashion for pop-up venues very much to their advantage. A packed Friday night is the culmination of a five-day run that has seen several gigs and workshops a day in a setting that makes for a genial hybrid of club and living room. The lighting is tasteful and the décor — framed pictures of the quartet's record sleeves — offers a snapshot of their progress since 2008.

Anyway *Connection*, their current album, provides the material for a short but potent set whose relative brevity — in concert terms — chimes effectively with the bustling novel environment. 'Anxiety Society' is a highlight in this respect, as the terse, tightly compressed phrases from double bassist Tom Farmer and drummer Shane Forbes' punchy, busy backbeats and skipping snare lines create the kind of adrenaline-spiked rhythmic foundation that convincingly evokes the subject of modern day stress and strain. Facey's alto, which has been growing in tonal power and harmonic accuracy since 2009's *Out 'n' In*, sounds quite

glorious, un-amplified at such close quarters, and the interaction, above all the split second timing to nail long and winding choruses, does not leave the late night commuters unmoved.

Then again people do slip away, only to be replaced by more passing trade and this makes the Jazz Lounge more akin to a Jazz Drop In, which is not necessarily a bad thing, as the audience ebb and flow brings a festival-like informality to the whole experience. Without intended irony, 'Stay The Course' locks listeners right into deep concentration by way of its clever switches between hard, tough staccato breaks and floating hypnotic theme in which Lewis Wright's vibraphone is as subtle as it is explosive elsewhere. When he lets fly at various points in the set, such as 'The Two Edged Sword', the thrill factor ratchets up a notch because of the combination of fluency and verve in his line construction. Yet as much as the improvisations from all members of the band impress what defines the quartet is a genuine ensemble voice, one that strikes a good balance between intricacy and power, and that equally acknowledges the compatibility of the more rigid, primal stomp of machine-based music such as hip-hop with the flighty quality of swing.

However, the brilliance of their performance is not Empirical's crowning glory tonight. It is the fact that they have created something from nothing, taking an anodyne setting such as a tube station and turning it into the place to travel to, not through.

Empirical's Pop-Up Jazz Lounge, Old Street Underground (4/5*)

The experimental quartet's plan to bring jazz to the people comes off

Thomas Rees, TheArtsdesk (www.theartsdesk.com)

26 February 2016

"I can't believe it. Free jazz in Old Street tube, how cool is that?" It's a relief to hear this kind of thing from passersby, because Empirical's attempt to bring jazz to the people, to reach new audiences and develop their music through an experimental, week-long residency in a London tube station, could so easily have gone wrong.

When I spoke to bassist Tom Farmer about the project, the MOBO-winners, due to release their fifth album, *Connection*, in March, seemed well aware of the risks. Commuters might hate it, or worse, keep their heads down and ignore it altogether. ("Don't make eye contact!") It seemed touch and go whether the band (jazz night owls to a man) would turn up to one of the performances, scheduled for 8am on a Tuesday, and there was also the distinct possibility that a jazz pop-up might tip Old Street over the edge. Could this postmodern cave of wonders – already crammed full of pop-ups selling pop art, kale juice, vegan energy bars, and spiralised fresh air – cope with jazz, or would Empirical bring about some kind of hipster singularity in which Silicon Roundabout disappears into its own Instagram account and a giant beard ultimately becomes the next Mayor of London?

Happily, it turns out that it can. In fact, on the evidence of Thursday night, the lounge is a roaring success: relaxed and welcoming, not edgy or pretentious, and consistently packed. It looks the part, a narrow space lit by filament lightbulbs and angle-poise lamps, with Empirical album art splashed across the walls. And the audience is as varied as the band had hoped: a few hardcore music fans (you can tell from the earnest nodding), men in suits, tech company types, shoppers and even a few kids. Not the usual jazz club crowd.

With all Farmer's talk of publicity, outreach and audience questionnaires, my other worry after our conversation was that the music might be watered-down in the interests of accessibility, but there was no sign of that either. The four-piece were as adventurous and uncompromising as ever, stretching-out on episodic swingers, angular cross-rhythm-addled math-jazz and ambient ballads.

The dissonant melody of "Card Clash" set the tone, sliding into a solo for alto-player Nathaniel Facey, full of racing lines and aggressive squawks, with blurred chords and sudden stops by way of accompaniment. Illuminated by the ethereal glow of Lewis Wright's vibes, "The Element of Truth" unfolded like time-lapse footage of a neon-lit cityscape, while "Stay the Course" was gutsy and rough-edged, juxtaposing stop-start interplay with passages of fluid hard-swinging.

"Anxiety Society" was nagging and on-edge, constantly looking over its shoulder, with a bustling feature for Wright, a solo for Facey full of bluesy alto whinnies and plenty of rhythmic risk-taking orchestrated by Farmer and drummer Shaney Forbes. "The Healer", from 2013's *Tabula Rasa*, was a highlight, dominated by heady vibes chords that shimmered as if from behind a heat haze. The heavy-hitting riffs of "One for 'Bones' Jones" were met with whoops of approval and "Conflict in our Time", the finisher, saw all four men let rip as passing commuters craned their necks and crowded around the door.

Giving the jazz troglodyte a shove, getting out in the open and bringing it to new audiences can only be a good thing, it's a thrill to see it done with such success.

Empirical - Connection (Cuneiform, 2016)

jazzandblues.blogspot.co.uk

11 February 2016

Empirical is a fine European jazz band that mines the fertile music that Eric Dolphy and Jackie McLean produced in the early to mid 1960s and use that music as a jumping off point to create original music of their own. The band consists of Nathaniel Facey on alto saxophone, Shaney Forbes on drums, Lewis Wright on vibraphone and Tom Farmer on bass. "Anxiety Society" is an excellent example of their musical message, where they develop an interesting rhythm and then allow Facey's to slash over it, before the vibes find a quiet place to shimmer and shine. The full band improvises together and then ends the tune briskly.

There is a mid-tempo choppy theme and melody to "Stay the Course" which allows the band to gradually pick up speed and develop a very fast and complex improvisational section. "The Maze" opens with handclaps and the band enters with rakish rhythm and jaunty pace. There is an excellent section for vibes and drums, and Wright's percussion keeps the music moving relentlessly forward like a rumbling train. There's a fast theme to "Card Clash" which is pushed along by strong elastic bass, creating a roiling and churning nature to the music.

Facey steps out to solo his own and he plays with the space and time of the song, moving it into different dynamic areas of pace and tempo. "The Two-Edged Sword" is a short and exciting blast of energy, with a torrid alto saxophone feature that clearly demonstrates the group's feel for postmodern bebop. There is a break for Wright's vibes, before the full band comes together in a fierce tumult to finish the song. A digital bonus track, "Fluid Flow," has an uneven tempo, in which the vibraphone ripples and shades. Facey's saxophone circles overhead, moving and strutting, and building a fast and confident statement.

The full band comes together, meshing with and exploring the music before taking it in for a graceful landing. This is a good album that draws upon the energy and ideas of the early/mid-1960s jazz explorers. That music is clearly an inspiration to this group and there is a lot of ground in that territory yet to be discovered. Those ideas are relevant today, and Empirical chooses their own path in exploring them.

Foyles bookshop gather Empirical evidence while Gerald Albright slam-dunks at Pizza Express Jazz Club

Jamie Fyffe, Jazzwise online

2 February 2015

The breadth of Soho's live jazz scene was clearly illustrated by two contrasting gigs on the same night, both within walking distance of one another. First, through an opportunity to see forward-looking jazz group Empirical at Foyles bookshop, immediately followed by a stroll around the corner to Pizza Express Jazz Club for smooth jazz saxophonist Gerald Albright.

The experience provided an interesting comparison. Empirical's gig – part of an on-going six-night residency – was free to the public on the understanding that listeners complete a feedback form to describe their experiences on hearing each number, an initiative designed to help the group develop material for their new album. Unsurprisingly, creative thinking and artistic integrity abounded with great success, whereas Albright – who was in London to present his new album *Slam Dunk* – was more a master showman presenting his commercially successful established formula.

Empirical performed original compositions by Nathaniel Facey (sax), Lewis Wright (vibes) and bassist Tom Farmer, giving the quartet (completed by drummer Shaney Forbes) three different writing voices. Chief contributor Farmer's most memorable piece, 'Initiate', was constructed around a palindromic number (1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 2, 1), typified the group's search for imaginative writing techniques which audiences might emotionally relate to. While introducing the piece, Farmer encouraged the audience to clap his palindrome to which the band began playing, thus offering listeners a direct path into the composition. Similarly, improvised solos appeared to mix uncompromised musical integrity with melodic lines that told a story, thus holding audience attention. Wright was particularly accessible, perhaps in part due to the visual layout of his vibraphone bars, but also because of arresting shifts in rhythmic intensity and sweeping lines which encompassed the entire instrument. The result was that Empirical's lengthy single set gig flew by as an absorbing series of engaging musical moments.

Albright left no table unoccupied at Pizza Express Jazz Club's first smooth jazz date of the year. [...] The experience of seeing him in action was thrown into sharper relief by having first observed the non-commercially driven creative imagination of Empirical. Nevertheless, through their honest questionnaire and in their own manner, the young group also sought to understand how music moved their audience. Live jazz in London was the clear winner, with a thought-provoking night in Soho.

Empirical set to connect at Foyles with six-night residency

Mike Flynn, Jazzwise online

2 December 2014

Jazzwise can exclusively announce that MOBO-winning contemporary jazz group Empirical is set to take a radically open approach to developing music for their next album over six-nights at iconic London bookshop Foyles from 26 to 31 January 2015. The shop's move to a new architecturally stunning location at 107 Charing Cross Road that opened its doors on 7 June this year, now features a 200-capacity Auditorium performance space that Empirical plan to use in collaboration with in-store record shop Ray's Jazz for the project.

The new music takes inspiration from the idea of 'connection' – that has also influenced the way the spacious new design of the shop allows customers to engage with books and culture through events such as this. The band intends to explore this too, "both the personal and musical connection between the members of the band but more importantly the connection between band and audience." The new music will feature on the band's fifth album that will be recorded the week after the residency and follows their eponymous debut in 2008, *Out 'n' In* (2009), *Elements of Truth* (2011) and *Tabula Rasa* (2013). The group still feature the long-running line up of saxophonist Nathaniel Facey, vibist Lewis Wright, bassist Tom Farmer and drummer Shaney Forbes.

Also drawing inspiration from the way 1960s jazz bands would do a run of gigs – rather than single dates at a venue – the twist here will be that every gig is free entry with the audience invited to discuss and give feedback on the music to the band in the shop's café after the gigs. The band has commented: "it is a great opportunity to directly contribute to the making of our new work, so come and connect!"

Jason Rebello with Empirical bring fireworks to the Wiltshire Music Centre

Mike Collins, Jazzwise

29 September 2014

There were a few sharp suits on stage at the Wiltshire Music Centre on Saturday. If anyone thought that meant it was going to be a solemn evening, the look on pianist Jason Rebello's face was more 'kid let loose in a sweet shop' after the first scorching solo from Empirical's alto man Nathaniel Facey. Rebello's career went into orbit 25 years ago touring with Wayne Shorter, then saw him replace Kenny Kirkland in Sting's band and subsequently tour relentlessly with Jeff Beck. Empirical have maintained their status as one of the hottest, most adventurous young jazz groups in the UK and Europe for nearly a decade now. The pianist's decision to make the one off collaboration his inaugural gig of a year long artist-in-residence stint at the newly re-furnished Centre in Bradford-on-Avon, brought a near capacity crowd out and they were thrilled by the fireworks it produced.

It was a varied programme starting with that blistering take on 'Whole in One' from Rebello's 1999 release *Next Time Around*. There was a sharing of back catalogues as Empirical dusted off tunes from their last album to feature a piano, *Elements of Truth*. 'Ying and Yang' and 'Cosmos (for Carl Sagan)' evoked different moods, making the most of the moody wow of the vibes combining with chiming chords from the piano. There was more from *Next Time Around* including another burner to finish, 'Justin Time'.

In between there were some delightful duos. Piano and alto on 'Soul Eyes' had Nathaniel Facey evoking the spirit of Coltrane at his most tender. Vibes and piano on Lennon and McCartney's 'Blackbird' raised the roof, Rebello laying down a viscerally exciting funky gospel tinged groove driving Lewis Wright onto another dazzling solo. Despite a streaming cold, he nearly stole the show a few times.

It was the evident delight of Rebello and Empirical in each other's company that lifted this beyond what was always a sure fire jazz feast. Empirical found themselves grooving deliciously on Herbie Hancock's *Chan' Song* and etching out a lyrical flowing melody on Rebello's own *Closeness*. Jason found himself in the middle of a dense tumult on Empirical's 'In the Grill' and pulling out a wildly inventive solo on bass man Tom Farmer's zany piece 'Card Clash'. The grin on drummer Shaney Forbes' face barely dimmed all evening. He had one of the moments of the evening with a ghostly drum solo using hot rods on 'Ying and Yang'.

This was a reminder, if we needed it, of the world beating quality of the UK scene and a mouth-watering start to the programme at the Wiltshire Music Centre. The next in the series is a duo with Ola Onabulein November.

Empirical/Blue Note sessions – review (4/5*)

The quartet found cool precision in its 75-anniversary tribute to the Blue Note label, giving classis a modern spin

John Fordam, The Guardian

24 January 2014

It's the 75th anniversary of the birth of Blue Note Records, the pivotal American jazz label, founded in 1939, that offered its sympathetic studio techniques and ground-breaking sleeve graphics to Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Wayne Shorter and most of the biggest jazz stars to emerge between the 1940s and 60s.

Pizza Express Jazz Club joins the celebrations with its Blue Note Sessions, a monthly series of live reinterpretations of landmarks from label. The opener was Herbie Hancock's 1964 classic *Empyrean Isles*, reworked by the innovative London quartet Empirical.

Empyrean Isles was a more exploratory venture for Hancock, who was 24 at the time. It included one gold-standard funky hit – *Canteloupe Island* – and a mix of fast hard bop (*One Finger Snap*), free-ish group improv (*The Egg*) and a plaintively-calling drifter with a contrasting sting (*Oliloqui Valley*). With Empirical's fiery alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey taking the Freddie Hubbard trumpet parts and vibraphone virtuoso Lewis Wright in the Herbie role, Empirical emphasised the group-conversational strengths of the album without sacrificing Hancock's groove power. They changed the running order to open with *Oliloqui Valley* (Facey's bittersweet sound was very effectively cushioned by Wright's lustrous chords), followed by whippy double-time alto runs and gracefully balanced vibes lines over Tom Farmer's bass-walk and Shaney Forbes' sleek cymbals and jolting fills on *One Finger Snap*. *The Egg* explored Empirical's long-evolved empathy (the original album had its spectacular parallel in deploying Miles Davis's then rhythm section) and sparingly touched on tougher free-improv materials such as multiphonic sax chords and some dissonant bass bowing.

Canteloupe Island could have used a little more early punch, but flying solos from Facey and Wright and the rhythm section's cool precision eventually left the crowd in no doubt why it became one of jazz's most enduring themes.

Empirical, Kings Place Festival, London – review (3/5*)

Mike Hobart, Financial Times

16 September 2014

Drummer Forbes finally made it to the stage for a late set with the Mobo-winning band Empirical, of which he is a founder member. The UK quartet is fronted by the sharp-toned alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey and features the shimmering virtuosity of Lewis Wright on vibraphone.

They bookended their performance with the rattle and ping of percussion, but for the most part, the band featured compositions from their CD *Tabula Rasa*. That album featured a string quartet and was necessarily closely arranged. But at this gig, with no strings to fill the gaps, the surprising accents, unison lines and sudden stops were a straitjacket.

The finale, though, took off. Introduced as a signpost for the future, “Conflict in Our Time” opened with gentle rhythm and ethereal sax – Facey, a hidden presence behind closed curtains, prowled the auditorium perimeter to ghostly effect. Rhythms tightened, Facey's cascades came at angles and Wright's metallic textures hovered near dissonance until a thunderous Forbes drum climax cued a return to calm.

Empirical: Tabula Rasa (Naim Jazz) – review (3/5*)

John Lewis, Metro

23 August 2013

This award-winning British outfit started in 2007 as a hard bop quintet in the mould of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. Over six years and three albums, they've lost a pianist, a trumpeter and a guest bass clarinetist, and mutated into a spartan chamber jazz quartet, dominated by the sparkly vibraphone of Lewis Wright and the vinegary tone of alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey.

This ambitious double CD puts the four members of Empirical alongside the Benyounes String Quartet, who add another layer of complexity to Empirical's jerky, arrhythmic, M-Base-influenced themes. There are some interesting textures and cerebrally satisfying invocations of Bernard Herrmann, Olivier Messiaen and Ralph Vaughan Williams, but little visceral appeal.

Only the Ornette Coleman-ish free bop of Empiricism and Scoffie provide anything resembling a groove or a singable melody, making it much easier to admire than enjoy.

Album review: Empirical, Tabula Rasa (Naim)

Phil Johnson, The Independent

24 August 2013

What makes this Brit-jazz quartet so interesting is that you can't work out where they're heading, and you suspect they're not clear either.

This double album (and come on, no one needs a double album these days) is a collaboration with the Benyounes String Quartet which works because both groups experiment. There's plenty of moments that posterity wouldn't mind missing, but when the 1960s loft-jazz aesthetic gets funky, as on "The Prophet", it's great.

Empirical: Tabula Rasa (Naim Jazz) – review (3/5*)

John Fordham, The Guardian

22 August 2013

As on 2009's *Out'n'In* and 2011's *Elements of Truth*, young British quartet Empirical continue to inventively stretch the scope of their small lineup. This double album began as a collaboration with the Benyounes String Quartet, so the jazz group's habitual avoidance of familiar sounds is now compounded by an agenda moving much closer to classical chamber music. Saxophonist Nathaniel Facey's *The Simple Light Shines Brightest* fires staccato sax motifs through weaving strings lines, while vibraphonist Lewis Wright's *The Prophet* is a more playful, warmer and folk-tinged theme, and bassist Tom Farmer's *Ascent* builds a curtain of deep cello sounds and high violin tones. Walking basslines come and go, as do Native American percussion patterns, New York downtown rhythm games and Latin grooves; Facey's *Scoffie* is a delightful visit to the jazz line of Charlie Parker via Ornette Coleman. A single disc might have caught the essence of this fusion even better, but Empirical's skill and ingenuity keep on growing.

Empirical *Tabula Rasa* - CD Review

Alison Bentley, LondonJazzNews

8 September 2013

'Gathering knowledge through experiment and observation' is how Empirical describe their approach to music. The quartet has also been gathering awards since they began in 2007. This line up has been together since 2009, and '*Tabula Rasa*' is the third album they've recorded together. This time there are strings on half the 14 tracks- the Benyounes Quartet: Zara Benyounes and Emily Holland, violins, Sara Roberts, viola and Kim Vaughan, cello. *Tabula Rasa* means blank slate- Empirical invite us to listen with open minds. My

brain, however, refuses to return to factory settings, and keeps thinking of Gunther Schuller's compositions for the Modern Jazz Quartet. As in MJQ's 'Third Stream Music', Empirical integrate jazz and classical styles in their balance of structure and improvisation. Their suits are sharp and their harmonies modern.

Empirical's approach is democratic and they've all written compositions for this double album. It opens with alto-player Nathaniel Facey's *The Simple Light Shines Brightest*, 'finding beauty in simplicity'. There's a restless, drum 'n' bass, almost Latin feel. The sweetness of the strings and Lewis Wright's vibes against Facey's tough-edged alto sax is a delicious contrast, like eating strawberries with pepper. There's some Eric Dolphy in Facey's tone (a previous Empirical album was inspired by Dolphy and Bobby Hutcherson), and the uneasy intervals of Steve Coleman. There's a bright, intriguing call and response among sax, vibes and strings. Facey's *One For 'Bones' Jones* is dedicated to a martial arts champion. His muscular sax has Rollins-like twists, scratchy rushes of sound, and a superb drum solo from Shaney Forbes over repeated riffs. His *Scoffie (The Moody One)* - 'cheeky, fun and humorous' swings with strong walking bass from Tom Farmer, an Ornette Coleman-style bop theme, stalked by the ghost of Charlie Parker.

In Wright's *Bellsonian Scales* ('depicts an alter ego, outgoing and slightly mad') the tune rises against the descending harmony, in spiky phrases over thundering drums. His *The Prophet* is perhaps the album's most accessible piece, with percussive Steve Reichian vibes riffs, and dark bass, underpinning the folksy theme on strings. The vibes become swoony and resonant, wafting luxuriously across the expressively spitting drum solo and fluttering Balkan alto. In *The World In His Mind*, the vibes create a glowing backdrop for Wright's intricate Messiaen-like writing for the string quartet, before stretching out into a 7/4 groove with a stirring Coltrane-inspired sax solo.

Forbes' *Empiricism* swings with gutsy cymbals and some Jackie McLean yearning in the alto tone, and exciting cross rhythms between vibes and Forbes' African beats. His *Where Wisdom Is Found* mixes delicate Skrillex drum-styles with Latin grooves. Pizzicato strings and vibes create overtones like steel drums. His *Repentance* unravels long lines for strings, as lush as Delius, alternating with Philip Glass-like rhythmic string riffs.

Farmer's *Ascent and Descent* are 'two sides of a spiritual journey'. The first layers long, slow notes for the string quartet, with a frisson of high violins redolent of Arvo Part (no connection with Part's own *Tabula Rasa*). The second has clusters of dissonant overlapping semitones, fragmenting into contrasting phrases. Farmer's *Studies In Time: The Healer* opens with solo vibes: they combine the propulsion of a gamelan with the opulence of a harp, the sax like a pen line over the wash of sound. In his *Studies In Mind: Relative*, dislocated hip-hoppy grooves gradually move out of phase with each other. Farmer's *Conflict in Our Time* concludes the album with a strong emotional appeal, his bass pedals building tension as the chords never seem to resolve. The vibes are like a heat haze behind the Coltrane Ascension-ish sax.

The album is a strikingly original mélange of modern Classical and many jazz influences, from Parker to Dolphy and beyond; risk-taking, thoughtfully-composed and brilliantly-improvised. In a world of pick-up bands, Empirical's intense commitment to each other and to their music is a wonderful thing.

Tabula Rasa, Empirical – Review (4/5)

Ian Mann, The JazzMann

11 September 2013

Empirical are aiming high here and largely they succeed on what is unquestionably their most ambitious recording to date.

From the Latin for “blank slate” *Tabula Rasa* is Empirical’s fourth album and represents their most ambitious project to date. Now stabilised as four piece with a line up featuring founder members Nathaniel Facey (alto sax) and Shaney Forbes (drums) plus Tom Farmer on double bass and Lewis Wright on vibes the group has become a fiercely disciplined, close knit and interactive unit with all four members contributing to the writing process.

“*Tabula Rasa*” is a double set that sees the band collaborating on a number of pieces with the strings of the all-female Benyounes Quartet featuring Zara Benyounes and Emily Holland on violins, Sara Thomas on viola and Kim Vaughan on cello. The two groups met through the Golubovich Jazz Scholars programme at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, a scheme designed to encourage cross departmental collaboration. The members of Empirical enjoyed the experience and wrote a series of pieces designed to feature the two groups, attempting to achieve a real integration rather than just “jazz band and strings”. It’s an ambitious undertaking that moves the band’s music further away from the influence of Eric Dolphy which informed their two previous offerings “*Out ’n’ In*” and “*Elements Of Truth*”. Indeed the writing on the new album builds on the narrative and storytelling aspects of the excellent “*Elements*”. The sound of the strings seems a little strange at first to those of us already familiar with Empirical’s sound. However repeated listening bring its own rewards and it soon becomes clear just how successful and sophisticated this collaboration is. Empirical are a band who demand a degree of work from their listeners, the title “*Tabula Rasa*” represents an invitation to approach the album with an open mind.

The first disc begins with Facey’s “*The Simple Light Burns Brightest*”, an expression of his Christian faith, which begins by combining the lushness of the strings with Forbes’ contemporary drum sounds. The strings are an integral part of the group sound and of the improvising process. Solos by Wright at the vibes and Facey on alto represent a more readily identifiable jazz element as does the complex M-Base influenced rhythmic interplay.

Wright’s “*Bellsonian Scales*” is said to “depict an alter ego, outgoing and slightly mad”. With its jerky rhythms and incisive, hectoring alto sax it exhibits an air of edgy, restless energy and is played by the jazz quartet only.

The strings return for Wright’s “*The Prophet*”, a similarly intense piece of work combining percolating minimalist inspired rhythms, sweeping and swirling strings and Facey’s hard edged alto sax. At seven and a half minutes there’s an episodic feel to it with the composer’s vibes solo changing the direction of the music mid tune. Forbes also features strongly, his drumming often assuming prominence as he impresses throughout.

Farmer’s “*Ascent*” and “*Descent*” are thematically linked with the focus very much on the strings. One can’t fail to be impressed by the bassist’s writing in this area, the first piece broods and shimmers, the air of aching, arching melancholia making an effective use of space that is often chillingly beautiful.

The companion piece, “*Descent*” is shorter, spikier and more dramatic with harsher timbres and greater input from the jazz players. Individually and collectively these two pieces are highly effective. Farmer explains that they are two sides of the same coin, “the notes are in the same order, one has a feeling of ascension, serenity and calm and the other one is like descent and anger and a darkness. They show two sides of a spiritual journey”.

Forbes' "Empiricism" is more obviously jazz, a paean to the band itself perhaps. The piece opens with a fiery dialogue between Facey and Forbes and maintains the intensity over the course of seven minutes with Facey stretching out on alto in saxophone trio mode. Forbes and Farmer then mesh together in almost tribal rhythm as Wright's vibes trace spidery lines above the relentless rhythmic backdrop. Although very different in sound to Farmer's pieces that same sense of narrative is still there.

So, too on Farmer's "Studies In Time: The Healer" with Wright's shimmering vibes intro giving way to a second section where Facey's breezy, optimistic sounding alto skips over the interlocking rhythmic patterns of his colleagues, his tone increasing in intensity and darkening in mood as his solo progresses, the piece finally resolving itself as Facey winds down and the gentle shimmer of the vibes returns.

Disc one concludes with Forbes' "Where Wisdom Is Found" which offers further effective integration between the jazz instruments and the strings with Facey and Farmer the featured soloists, the saxophonist stretching out at length above a backdrop of complex rhythms and layered strings.

The second disc begins with Facey's "One For Bones Jones", a dedication to martial artist John "Bones" Jones, the UFC heavyweight champion. It can perhaps be seen as a companion piece to "In The Grill", Facey's boxing inspired composition on "Elements Of Truth". Facey combines Jones style of fighting in a confined space with Empirical's working methods. The music isn't quite as aggressive as one might expect but it is busy and claustrophobic with a lot going on both rhythmically and harmonically. Solos come from Wright and Facey amid some feverish rhythm work with Forbes' drums prominent in the closing stages.

Wright's eleven minute plus "The World in His Mind" is arguably the album's centrepiece, a fully integrated, highly narrative piece with the Benyounes Quartet fully involved and doing far more than providing mere textures. Indeed the strings often assume the lead in the early passages prior to the clarion call of Facey's alto. Elsewhere Facey takes flight above a colourful rhythmic backdrop of hand drums and pizzicato strings, probing and stretching before handing over to Wright at the vibes. Inspired by Bobby Hutcherson and Gary Burton the brilliant young vibraphonist gets better with each release and this piece also represents his growing stature as a composer.

"Scoffie (The Moody One)" is another "character tune", this time written by Facey. It actually turns out to be rather fun, a perky bop inspired piece played by the jazz quartet with lively solos from Facey and Wright and some wonderfully propulsive bass work from Farmer.

Forbes' near nine minute "Repentance" is another tour de force for the strings who achieve a near orchestral depth on the intro. Elsewhere there's a stunning passage of solo vibes from Wright and then genuine dialogue between him and the strings. On what is essentially a showcase for vibes and strings the Benyounes play us out as elegantly as they ushered us in.

Farmer's "Studies In Time: Relative" turns out to be a groove driven piece that reflects the influence of M-Base and the whole New York "Downtown Scene". Played by the jazz quartet it has an agreeable buzz and sense of urban urgency that is slightly at odds (but in a good way) with the rest of the album.

This ambitious double set closes with "Conflict In Our Time", also by Farmer. It begins with the lonely musings of Facey on solo alto before Farmer and Forbes set up an ominous rolling groove above which the saxophonist emotes purposefully with Wright's vibes filling in any gaps. It's all reminiscent of the sixties "spiritual jazz" pioneered by John Coltrane. Eventually Wright takes over, his metallic vibes riding the waves

of bass and drums before Facey makes his presence felt once more with some further hard edged soloing. It's a piece informed by the music and struggles of the sixties but forms an apposite musical comment on current circumstances.

"Tabula Rasa" may lack the instant appeal of some of Empirical's earlier discs but it's worth working at and sticking with. The band are aiming high here and largely they succeed on what is unquestionably their most ambitious recording to date. The pieces that deploy strings work well with the Benyounes Quartet buying into the Empirical vision and integrating superbly into the world of semi improvised music. Conversely Empirical's experiments with classical forms work equally well with Farmer and Forbes in particular writing extensively for strings. A well programmed and admirably diverse set emphasises the narrative qualities of the group's music. Empirical continue to mature and develop, now a well-established presence on the UK jazz scene it is interesting to speculate on what they will attempt next.

Empirical: Elements of Truth (Naim Jazz) – review (4/5*)

John Fordham, The Guardian

27 October 2011

The departure of pianist Kit Downes and trumpeter Jay Phelps made Empirical a more chamber-jazzy outfit. It didn't soften saxophonist Nathaniel Facey's searing sound, though. Pianist George Fogel augments the quartet on their most eclectic venture yet: a collection of pieces – drawing on contemporary-classical music, jazz and a kind of purified pop and hip-hop – that sometimes step on to the precarious tightrope of musico-philosophical speculation. Tom Farmer's Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say is a Messiaen-inspired otherworld that becomes New York-downtown jazz halfway in. Facey's In the Grill triggers exciting phrase-swaps over Shaney Forbes's hip-hoppish drumming. A Portico-like tranquillity touches Out of Sight, Out of Mind, the bleary Cosmos is like Thelonious Monk and Eric Dolphy mingled, and vibraphonist Lewis Wright's title track unfolds in yearning lines over a pulsating vibes chord, before it turns to a rolling groove. Empirical have become fascinating and fearless, even if they do wear their wiring diagrams on their sleeves at times.

Empirical 'Elements of Truth' (4*)

Ivan Hewett, The Daily Telegraph

05 November 2011

This has the best opening I've heard in years - Lewis Wright's descending vibraphone chords etched mysteriously against George Fogel's piano backdrop, then an invigorating beat and Nathaniel Facey's agile sax. Many other things are thrown in - angular abstraction, film-noir mystery, distant Debussyan horizons. Not all the juxtapositions work, but the best of them are terrific.

Empirical: Elements of Truth

Empirical return with a consistently brilliant album that favours substance over swing

Robert Shore, Metro

4 November 2011

The 2007 self-titles debut by Brit post boppers Empirical sent them straight to the top of most jazz fans' best new band list. Having picked up a prestigious MOBO last year on the back of their sophomore effort – the Eric Dolphy inspired Out 'n' In – alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey & co are back with their third album, the consistently brilliant Elements of Truth (Naim).

This is jazz that rarely swings – the music's astringent, fractured rhythms aim for the head and the gut rather than the feet – but it's totally engrossing all the same.

The haunted atmospherics of opener Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say give way to the skittering, spiky sonic explorations of In the Grill and the driving dissonance of An Ambiguous State of Mind, while the transcendental, two-part Out of Sight, Out of Mind is simply lovely.

Empirical – Elements of Truth

Phil Johnson, The Independent on Sunday

30 October 2011

Over three impressively different albums youthful Brit-jazz band Empirical have followed their own logic, from swinging Ornette-ish bop to deeper Eric Dolphy-isms, to this: a slightly unstable but engagingly contemporary set of percussive, spiky variations on strong themes, with the core quartet joined by George Fogel on piano. When Nathaniel Facey's alto sax echoes Steve Coleman's tedious repetitions it's a cul-de-sac, but then he goes off on a long, wonky solo (as on 'Cosmos') that could lead anywhere, and you're hooked. You really want to see them do it live.

Empirical 'Elements Of Truth' - Album Of the Week

Tim Cummings, The Independent

19 November 2011

A mixture of the tranquil, the riotous and the otherworldly flickers across the British jazz quartet's new album. Instrumental chamber music may be a better label for the likes of the opener, "Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say", and the cosmic "Yin & Yang". Throughout, Lewis Wright's ethereal vibes and glockenspiel cast all the right spells over Nathaniel Facey's sax.

Empirical: Elements of Truth (Naim Jazz) – Review (4/5*)

Mike Hobart, Financial Times

22 October 2011

Empirical's mix of structure and freedom is nourished by the atmospheric modernism that so characterised Blue Note's cutting edge in the early 60s. Their references and sound, though, are thoroughly contemporary – tracks are inspired by Bjork, boxing and Vijay Iyer – and their confidence, cohesion and mature compositions made the quartet worthy winners of last year's MOBO for best jazz act. Saxophonist Nathaniel Facey adds squawk to a hard tone, Lewis Wright shimmers and pulses on vibes and pianist George Vogel guests.

Empirical - 'Elements Of Truth' (4*)

MOJO

04 October 2011

Nathaniel Facey (alto), Lewis Wright (vibes), Tom Farmer (bass) and Shaney Forbes (drums) continue to display a fiercely imaginative sensibility, producing music as challenging and stimulating as anything on the international scene. Broadly Dolphyesque, but with a multifarious palette thanks to a four-way creative democracy, it's a vividly involving, dramatic listen.

Empirical 'Elements of Truth' – Metro Albums of the Year (2011)

Arwa Haider, Metro

16th December 2011

Talented British hard bop quartet Empirical channelled their characteristically smart and punchy playing into an illuminating third album, *Elements Of Truth* (Naim Jazz). The combined strengths of the band members creates a jazz album rooted in heritage yet also intrepidly funky.

Empirical - Elements Of Truth (4*)

BBC Music Magazine

3 November 2011

Being a mixture of invention and discovery, jazz is really the least empirical of musics, so as Empirical settles into its artistic residency at Trinity Laban Conservatoire, it's tempting to ponder which aspects of this third album belie the band's name, perhaps concluding that it's the un-empirical elements that define Empirical's music and possibly a good chunk of the band's success.

The clipped arrangements and understated melodies with their repetitions and variations are all more composerly than jazzy, but the sheer flow of an Empirical performance, even when filtered through the recording process, is discreetly potent; the most angular of phrases and the murkiest/sparkliest of atmospheres glide along like Teflon-coated snakes. It takes a particular kind of musicality to make this work and it's in evidence here, with the occasional addition of some mellifluousness from Wright and Fogel. The recorded sound is tight and detailed.

Empirical Elements of Truth - Review

This London jazz quartet crashes irresistibly through the decades on album three

Daniel Spicer, BBC

2011

Empirical burst onto the UK jazz scene in 2007, with a self-titled debut album that proclaimed them the new young lions: feisty 20-somethings with bags of energy, studiously channelled into creating a distinctly retro style of acoustic jazz that owed more to late-50s/early-60s Blue Note recordings than it did to anything happening on the streets of 21st century London. During 2008, the band underwent line-up changes and took a step towards the leftfield with an ongoing project exploring the musical legacy of Eric Dolphy – aided by the recruitment of vibraphonist Lewis Wright, and culminating in the 2009 follow-up album *Out 'n' In*, which investigated the wonky mid-60s strut of Dolphy's *Out to Lunch*. Now, with this third album, Empirical have come up to date – or at least as far as the 1990s.

Operating as a core quartet of Wright on vibes and glockenspiel, double-bassist Tom Farmer, alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey and drummer Shaney Forbes – plus special guest and long-time collaborator George Fogel on piano – Empirical have made a decisive move away from swinging jazz and closer to the kind of cerebral groove first outlined in New York in the late-80s/early-90s. In a way, it was inevitable they should follow this route: it's an aesthetic that has continued to inspire young jazz musicians on both sides of the Atlantic just as much as those 60s recordings that first got Empirical fired-up.

Opener Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say centres around a circular vibes figure, launching into a zesty math-funk not dissimilar to the recent output of Chicago's minimalist-influenced Claudia Quintet. But it's on tracks like In the Grill that the most obvious influence is heard, with jerky, fractured drums and Facey's frenetic yet precise alto recalling the 80s experiments of M-Base artists such as Steve Coleman. There are other, more meditative moods at work, too – largely thanks to the diaphanous sonorities generated by the combination of piano and vibes. Cosmos (For Carl Sagan) makes a brief return to a Dolphy-ish limp before jettisoning into a spectral space walk, like Morton Feldman on an interstellar vacation.

Empirical are crashing irresistibly through the decades. Next stop, 21st century.

Empirical - Elements Of Truth (4*)

Record Collector

7 October 2011

From the same label comes Elements Of Truth, the keenly anticipated third album from the award-winning British quartet Empirical, led by alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey. Its markedly different from their last offering, the Eric Dolphy - inspired In'n'Out, but evinces the same high degree of musicality and invention as they continue to probe the frontiers of jazz. George Fogel guests on piano, adding a decidedly different dimension to the group's sound.

Empirical 'Elements of Truth' (4*)

Ian Mann, The Jazz Mann

6 January 2012

Empirical have changed immeasurably since their attention grabbing début album featuring the now departed trio of trumpeter Jay Phelps, pianist Kit Downes and bassist Neil Charles. Now with a stable quartet line up featuring founding members Nathaniel Facey (alto sax) and Shaney Forbes (drums) plus Tom Farmer (double bass) and Lewis Wright (vibes) the award winning group are back with their third album "Elements Of Truth", a worthy follow up to their acclaimed Eric Dolphy inspired release "Out 'n' In".

"Elements Of Truth" combines the episodic writing of their début with the Dolphy inspired abstractions of "Out 'n' In" to produce a distinctive recording on which bassist Tom Farmer emerges as the main compositional voice. He contributes seven of the ten pieces with Facey weighing in with a further two and with Lewis Wright supplying the title track. Guest pianist George Fogel is featured extensively and his presence gives the new record a less claustrophobic sound than its predecessor.

The album commences with Farmer's atmospheric "Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say", a piece inspired by the unlikely triumvirate of Oliver Messiaen, Steve Lehman and Vijay Iyer. A ghostly opening section featuring subliminal voices and the other worldly shimmer of Wright's vibes leads into an intricate, densely knit piece with alto, vibes and piano jostling for supremacy. There are no extended solos but each of the three front line instruments enjoys brief prominence as Farmer and Forbes stoke the often complex rhythmic fires.

As the title might suggest Facey's "Yin and Yang" is a two part composition with Fogel's gothic piano intro quickly ceding to Farmer's propulsive bass figure which in turn provides the backbone for the composer's incisive alto explorations. The second half of the piece is more impressionistic and is centred around Wright's vibes, Facey's alto, and Forbes atmospheric and colourful drumming.

It's a mature and imaginative piece of writing.

Also by Facey "In The Grill" (the phrase is actually a boxing reference) is fiendishly complex and represents a celebration of spatial awareness. The composer solos with bravado above the switchback rhythms and textures created by vibes, piano, bass and drums. You feel like you've gone fifteen rounds just listening to it. Collectively Empirical possess huge technical abilities and are not afraid to show them off. That sense of "going for it" is also inherent in the title.

Farmer's "Out Of Sight Out Of Mind Part 1" employs a similar structure to his opening tune with another ghostly introduction, this time featuring bowed vibes and interior piano scrapings, that eventually gives way to a more conventionally structured and by, Empirical's standards, relatively uncluttered second half centred around Facey's long alto lines.

Farmer dedicates "Cosmos" to TV astronomer and physicist Carl Sagan and the piece includes a suitably spacey middle section bookended by a Monkish main theme. Facey really digs in on alto in the closing section with a searing Dolphy-like solo before the delicate coda.

Empirical's influences are wide with Farmer naming Bjork as an inspiration for "Simple Things", a piece with more of a song like structure than much of their other work. Forbes' hip hop inspired drumming gives the tune a thoroughly contemporary feel but the music is far more complex than the title might suggest as Wright and Fogel weave their way in and out of a piece structured around Facey's repetitive sax phrasing.

There are more contemporary grooves on "An Ambiguous State Of Mind", inspired by the methods of pianist Vijay Iyer and written By Farmer as a feature for Fogel. The guest pianist impresses with a leaping, exuberant solo but there is also garrulous sax from Facey and dynamic drumming from the excellent Forbes.

"The Element Of Truth", effectively the title track, represents the first Lewis Wright composition to be recorded by the band. The piece exhibits a deliberate dream like quality with Facey's sax musings underlaid by subtly shifting rhythmic pulses with Forbes again particularly impressive.

Farmer's "Out Of Sight Out Of Mind Part 2" is a more energetic affair than "Part 1", briefly swimming into focus with Facey's alto sax to the fore amidst a maelstrom of swirling vibes and busy drumming. It all fades out rather abruptly with Facey still in full flow and seems to be little more than a snapshot.

My review copy also includes the bonus track "Spitting Them Out", another Farmer composition but one that differs significantly from the rest of the album. This shows the four piece Empirical in full on, heads down bebop mode with dazzling solos from Wright, Facey and Forbes. It's a very welcome addition and its comparative simplicity contrasts well with the densely knit, often cerebral music to be heard elsewhere.

"Elements Of Truth" displays clear signs of Empirical's continuing artistic development on a series of intriguing compositions. There are few conventional jazz solos, the approach is very much one of collective improvisation on what are often very complex themes. Nonetheless the individual contributions are superb with Fogel so fully integrated that he can almost be considered a fifth member. Perhaps the band still wear their influences a little too much on their sleeves, besides the names mentioned above Andrew Hill, Wayne

Shorter and Branford Marsalis are also name checked by the band as influences. The layered complexities of the music have also evoked valid comparisons with the Claudia Quintet and I'd also suggest that the music of Steve Coleman and the M Base crowd also exerts a considerable influence. For all that these boys can play and are certainly not bashful about showing off their chops on this demanding but ultimately invigorating music. Empirical continue to progress and their dates on a short British tour, with Fogel guesting on piano, should be well worth seeing.

Empirical live at Cheltenham Jazz Festival – review (4/5*)

The Financial Times

4 May 2010

Sunday's all-day jazz trail started with Empirical's midday Eric Dolphy commemoration – drummer Shane Forbes raised a chuckle when he asked: "Is it as early for you as it is for me?" The life of the multi-instrumentalist and sideman to Charles Mingus and John Coltrane provided inspiration for the UK quartet, whose originals, with their oblique riffs and wide intervals, captured the essence of Dolphy's music without imitation. The multi-tempoed rhythm section caught the spirit of two reworked Dolphy covers – "Hat'n'Beard" and "Gazzelioni". Compositions such as "And Then he Left" and "A Bitter End for a Tender Giant" referenced Dolphy's biography – the latter his death in 1964, when a diabetic coma was presumed to be a heroin overdose (he never took drugs). Lead soloists Nathaniel Facey on alto sax and vibes player Lewis Wright balanced being inspired by a jazz great with strong musical personalities.

Empirical are visionaries in a modern world

Arwa Haider, Metro

4 October 2009

In the basement of a Chelsea jazz club, a fluid sax riff ripples through the corridors, coming from a rehearsal room where sharp-sounding, suited-and-booted young British ensemble Empirical have gathered.

This outfit – currently comprising saxophonist Nathaniel Facey, Tom Farmer (double bass), Shaney Forbes (drums) and the newest member, 21-year-old vibes man Lewis Wright – first snapped up plaudits for their self-titled 2007 debut, produced by Courtney Pine and delivering funky hard-bop rhythms with modern jolts of inspiration.

Empirical don't have a conventional band leader (although Facey tends to passionately introduce their live sets). As Forbes explains: 'We still feel like we're learning collectively because jazz has such an involved history. It's the quest that brings us together.' It's also big-city energy that brings Empirical together. 'Jazz is city music – it's grounded in busy, dense populations and everyone having equal say regardless of their roots,' argues Farmer.

Chances are you'll already have heard these individual talents in various places: Facey and Forbes previously played in the prolific youth project Tomorrow's Warriors and Facey also guests in The Spatial AKA Orchestra, Jerry Dammers's psychedelic tribute to Sun Ra. Farmer, meanwhile, features in clubby collective The Heritage Orchestra.

Empirical's emergence seems to tie in with a swathe of diverse young acts who have grabbed mainstream attention, notably the punky outbursts of Led Bib and the ambient grooves of Portico Quartet, both Mercury Prize nominees in recent years.

'We're part of that underthirties generation but we wanted to play contemporary music that's also deeply rooted in tradition,' says Farmer. 'I think that's been missing in a lot of bands and it's partly why our first album did so well.'

Empirical's latest album, *Out 'N' In*, draws further on that combination: it's a tribute to avantgarde jazz multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy, who died in 1964, before any of Empirical were born – but they're emphatic that he's timely for a new era.

'The first time I heard Eric Dolphy's album *Out To Lunch!* [released on Blue Note in 1964] when I was 15, it scared me. I was, like, whoa, too much!' admits Facey.

Dolphy's music wasn't easily digested back in the day, either: *Live At The Village Vanguard*, the 1961 album he recorded with John Coltrane, was slated by the press as anti-jazz. 'But the more you get into it, the more you realise that Dolphy's work was revolutionary and that this genuine guy didn't really get the credit he deserved,' insists Facey. 'His career was so short but there's an outcry against social injustice in his music. It leads straight into the two big movements of the time, the Black Panthers and Martin Luther King: the aggressive, emotive side that demands its voice and the more meditative side.'

Empirical have dynamically reworked two tracks from *Out To Lunch!* on *Out 'N' In* (*Hat & Beard* and *Gazzelloni*) alongside deeply moving original compositions such as *A Bitter End For A Tender Giant*, inspired by Dolphy's death in Berlin from a diabetic coma; the hospital left him untreated, assuming that this African-American musician had taken a drugs overdose – he'd never actually been a user. It's a heartfelt and daring homage – are Empirical wary of rampaging jazz purists?

Farmer shakes his head, grinning: 'I'm not sure it's possible for any music to be "exclusive" anymore. Now you can listen to any style with the click of a button, you're not as likely to outrage anyone.'

'We're trying to open some doors rather than just play our weird music and have people going: "What were they doing – and why?"' chuckles Facey. 'We don't wanna alienate people, which many modern jazz musicians have been guilty of. It's almost like they've misinterpreted Miles Davis's mystique on stage, the way he wouldn't speak to the audience, sometimes even turning his back on them. You can't expect everybody to understand musical technicalities but they can "get it" if you give them a small amount of information about where you're coming from.'

'You know what still hits me about this music?' says Forbes. 'Eric Dolphy and his crew were risky – they wanted to get lost in music, they got their kicks from finding their way back home again.'

Thanks to exponents like Empirical, such musical visions have settled into the 21st-century. Hard bop don't stop.

Empirical: Out 'n' In

Dave Gelly, *The Observer*

25 October 2009

Their debut album won every award going over the past year and already Empirical have made big changes. New member, vibraphonist Lewis Wright, has given the band a whole new range of tones and textures. This set is dedicated to exploring the music and influence of the late Eric Dolphy, whose star is on the rise again. Since Dolphy was a multi-instrument virtuoso, this wasn't an easy task, but they catch the distinctive flavour of his work beautifully. Guest artist Julian Siegel's bass clarinet playing is quite marvellous.

Empirical: Out'n'In (Naim) – review (4/5*)

John Fordham, The Guardian

Friday 25 September 2009

When they emerged in 2007, Empirical made bigger waves and more column inches than any UK jazz - ensemble since Courtney Pine's early bands. Their debut album swept across contemporary styles, including funk, gospel and R&B, although the motor that ran it was fuelled by classic bebop, particularly its ecstatic Art Blakey derivatives. In this session with guest tenor-saxist Julian Siegel, the American jazz tradition still energises Empirical, in a revised lineup in which the excellent Nathaniel Facey's alto sax remains dominant but is now in a more laid-back dialogue with Lewis Wright's vibraphone. Facey's fascination with the short-lived and often overlooked sax and bass-clarinet visionary Eric Dolphy shapes the set. Dolphy's edgy sound and bristling melodic lines feature on a series of ducking and diving tunes, on his own Hat & Beard and on Gazzelloni. Out'n'In might seem more of a purist venture than its predecessor, but it is full of sparky variety – from the boppish and then free-contrapuntal title track, through Facey's and Siegel's intertwining dialogues, the Third Stream-like precision of So He Left, and the freebop and time-switching of Dolphyus Morphyus.

Why we should be clear about what trad jazz means

Trad stars? ... Empirical revel in reinventing the jazz canon

John Fordham, The Guardian Music blog

22 September 2008

Sorry to return to the Mercury prize for a second week, but this is only a passing spin-off from that much-discussed event. Observer music critic Kitty Empire, one of the Mercury judges, described the shortlisting process in a recent article and included among the difficulties the challenge of comparing "the merits of Empirical's trad jazz against Benga's dubstep".

The collective snort of derision about this in the jazz world has made a trombone section sound like a solo flute, and Empirical will undoubtedly have been astonished to be considered a trad jazz band. They're a quintet of early-twentysomethings who cite among their influences artists from Herbie Hancock to Ali Farka Touré and even Olivier Messiaen, and can splice hip-hop beats into jazz grooves so deviously that listeners of all ages shake their heads in disbelief. For indignant jazz fans reading Kitty Empire's description, the term "trad" has a specific meaning: revivalist bands reproducing the early-20th-century proto-jazz of King Oliver, Louis Armstrong and their New Orleans contemporaries.

But if this is a piece of historical information a contemporary music critic probably ought to possess, us older jazzers perhaps need to take a second look at what we take for granted as well. "Trad jazz" was a term in widespread use in the 1950s and 60s (a hybrid of the style even generated chart hits, like Kenny Ball's Midnight in Moscow or Acker Bilk's Stranger on the Shore) but you hardly ever hear it used in that sense

outside the cognoscenti now. Some jazz insiders might refuse to believe that anyone with half an ear open could possibly confuse, for instance, the 20s sound of Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and the 60s one of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers - but it's not only possible, it's happening, just the same way that Bach's and Rachmaninoff's works might all sound like "classical music" to someone who's never listened closely enough to figure out they're 200 years apart.

Empirical undoubtedly reference the jazz canon, but they have a thrilling contemporary take on reinventing it. An innocent bystander, however, may only notice that they don't sing, they play trumpets and saxophones and upright basses and not electric guitars or synths, they salute long-gone heroes like Cannonball Adderley or Eric Dolphy, and mix a cruising, jazzy swing beat in with their hip-hop and funk grooves. That's more than enough to get labelled as "trad jazz" now, whatever your repertoire really is.

There's no point in there being a jazz community. There's no reason why anybody, even a music critic, should appreciate these subtleties if information about jazz is so sparsely disseminated and hard to find - and if the media allows jazz only those few leftover column inches and snatches of airtime not already eaten up by mainstream culture.

But in the Guardian and these blogs we're going to do our bit to fill in some gaps as we get closer to November's high-profile London Jazz Festival. So watch this space.

'Why would you want to do anything else?'

Meet the sharp dressers bringing a sense of style back to jazz – John Fordham talks to Empirical

John Fordham, The Guardian

22 February 2008

Its members might all still be college students, but London-based jazz quintet Empirical seem to have cruised through most of their practical exams already. The ball started rolling a year ago, when Courtney Pine called them "the most exciting jazz band to come out of the UK" and then lined up a recording date to launch his new Destin-e label - the group's eponymous debut album came out last July.

Since then, Empirical have been to Rotterdam's North Sea jazz festival - one of the world's biggest - and won its inaugural rising stars competition. At last November's London jazz festival, saxophonist Joshua Redman paid them the ultimate compliment - he listened in the wings to his support band's entire set. "I stayed because I wanted to hear what you'd do next," Redman told them. Jazzwise magazine then named the group's CD its album of the year for 2007, ahead of Michael Brecker's swansong Pilgrimage, and Wynton Marsalis' *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*.

When we meet at a deserted, mid-afternoon Ronnie Scott's in London, however, all the fanfare seems a long way off. Empirical's members are like any group of young, laid-back friends catching up with the weekend's gossip, not only jazz, but also world cinema and visual art, which they say influence their thinking. They're very sharp dressers for students, however. Drummer Shane Forbes, 24, is concerned that the stitching on his left trouser turn-up has broken loose and now droops disconsolately over one snappy fawn loafer. Saxophonist Nat Facey, 25, and bassist Tom Farmer, 23, are comparing the ties they have brought for the photo shoot. Seeing the jazz legends depicted on the walls, we ponder the complicated baggage the notion of jazz carries - does it still represent musical innovation, or the subterranean world of arcane runes and

ageing buffs the unconverted believe it to inhabit? The Empirical members - and, they say, many of their generation - feel nothing but excitement about it.

"I love jazz and I'm happy to be affiliated with it," says Facey, a south Londoner born to Jamaican parents. "What got me into jazz in the beginning, and kept me in it," says trumpeter Jay Phelps, also 25, "was the stories of all the people who've played it, and still play it. It's timeless, and it keeps going."

Phelps, who exhibits much of Wynton Marsalis's fluency and vocalised tone, is Vancouver-born and now studies alongside Forbes at Greenwich's Trinity College of Music, one of London's big four conservatoires. He came to London in 1999 and soon joined Jazz Jamaica bassist Gary Crosby's talent-spotting workshop group Tomorrow's Warriors. Phelps met Forbes and Facey in the 2002 edition, and the roots of Empirical are traceable to the crop of young players Crosby has since said were the best the project has so far seen.

"For me, the word 'jazz' is just a summary of all the things I like," says Kit Downes, the 21-year-old pianist currently on a scholarship at the Royal Academy and studying with Acoustic Ladyland keyboardist Tom Cawley. "Jazz seems more about a way musics mingle, ways in which players can improvise and share things, rather than anything to do with a specific style."

Empirical's debut album tracked rapidly across Ornette Coleman-inflected freebop, sonorous African-choir vocal chants, McCoy Tyner-like rhythmic momentum, and a lot more - but the members say that was then, and that the range of inspirations they draw on, and the fluency with which they improvise collectively, broadens and strengthens every day. Wayne Shorter's quartet, and Miles Davis's mid-60s band - both built around spontaneous musical conversations rather than individual solo bravura - are beacons to Empirical. But making a music that's theirs alone is the band's driving motive. Building new pieces for this year's gigs and a second recording due at the end of 2008, they have found fresh inspiration in both the spiky freebop of saxophone legend Eric Dolphy and the birdsong vibrations of Olivier Messiaen.

They all emphasise how important their mutual friendship, shared history and the bonding influence of the music colleges has been to the evolution of their sound. "Me and Jay are at uni together, and me and Nat have grown up together," Forbes says. "We've also played together in a lot of different spheres - I studied classical percussion, and I've played funk and broken-beat as well as jazz with Kit, for instance. We try to bring it all into the band in an organic way."

"The music colleges have become very important for jazz here," Downes adds, "because people who can really play but have very different interests are around each other for several years. Being friends, then being together in a band, knowing you can write in any way for them and they'll hear it, and give you something you hadn't anticipated back ... well, why would you want to do anything else?"

"Of course, that option is also to do with our ages," says Phelps. "None of us have kids, or big mortgages." "That's right," agrees Forbes. "I mean, you don't have to worry about me saying, 'See you later, I've got to go and play with the Spice Girls now.'" "I'd love to hear you with the Spice Girls," Farmer, the Guildhall-schooled bassist tells him, very straight-faced. Amid the gale of laughter, Facey muses on saxophonist Eric Dolphy's 1964 album, *Out to Lunch*, which the band is currently exploring. "You don't realise just how awesome that music is until you start checking it out in detail," Facey ponders. "Then you go, 'Oh, hang on a sec, the rabbit hole goes a lot deeper than I first thought.'"

"Hopefully, as we go," says Phelps, "people will get on board with our approach and say, 'Let them do whatever they're going to do this month.'"

"Empiricism is about observing and experimenting, not having a theory first and trying to prove it," Farmer reflects. "It's happening more and more in music, I think. It just needs the gig opportunities, and maybe some more public funding, to make people aware of it. Then they'll find out what amazing things are going to come out of this approach."

Billy Cobham/Empirical at Ronnie Scott's, London (3/5*)

John L Walters, The Guardian

25 February 2008

[...] Playing opposite, the young British quintet Empirical demonstrated why they are so hotly tipped to succeed: they are creative and effortlessly stylish, with a confident approach to older forms of jazz that makes them sound new.

Empirical: Empirical (2007) - Review

Martin Longley, BBC

2008

This five-piece band are impressive upstarts on the British jazz scene, and are nominated in the Best Ensemble category of the 2008 BBC Jazz Awards. This debut disc's chief credit was surely being declared Album of the Year in Jazzwise magazine's annual poll at the end of 2007. Produced by Courtney Pine for his Destin-E label, the respected saxophonist is clearly unequivocally championing the Empirical sound.

The band's approach mixes the classic sounds of both 1960s and 70s recordings for the famed Blue Note label. As well as extending their reach into an angular crying out of horns, it incorporates jazz extremity within a palatable, highly-structured framework. The line-up's front-line features two of the UK's brightest hopes for the future, already well-advanced in these days of their youth. Trumpeter Jay Phelps and alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey are both acrobatic solo displayers, cutting and fiery, and certainly not afraid of extended bouts of self-expression. They're joined by pianist Kit Downes, bassman Neil Charles and drummer Shane Forbes, although Tom Farmer has subsequently replaced Charles in the band's live incarnation.

Empirical have a strong complement of writers, with Phelps and Facey the chief contributors. The album's sole cover version is by the Malian singer-guitarist Ali Farka Touré, and is a remarkable choice. While it's simple to choose a tune from the global repertoire, so few jazz bands elect to venture into this territory. Tulumba is given a mournful South African quality, but also manages to sound strangely Celtic.

The opening Blessings provides a strutting fanfare, imbued with a New Orleans gait, establishing the outfit's tendency towards a kind of intellectual brashness. This seems to be their strategy for success: being adept formulators of substantial compositions, while maintaining an earthily low-down edge. Phelps makes A Tyrant's Tale into an 11-minute mini-suite, while Facey's The Deep includes vocal sections that invoke the image of a 1930s Hollywood Afro-epic, and Palantir showcases a particularly exhaustive saxophone solo. Several of their pieces move through suite-like phases, often vibrant with filmic imagery, with tales being told and grand events visualised whilst the sections unfold. Rarely is hard bebop played with such dramatic complexity.

Empirical: Empirical – Album review (4*)

Frederick Bernas, *All About Jazz*

19 September 2007

Empirical burst onto the international music scene at the 2007 North Sea Jazz Festival, beating four other bands to win the inaugural *European Jazz Competition*. Two days later, with perfect timing, its self-titled debut album hit the shops. British saxophonist Courtney Pine had been keeping a keen eye on the quintet's progress and produced the CD, which is released on his own Destin-E records.

It's a startlingly mature set for such a young group, undoubtedly as a result of time spent playing together in Tomorrow's Warriors, a development program which has seen the likes of Denys Baptiste, Soweto Kinch and Tony Kofi pass through its ranks over the years. All of these have become established names on the UK jazz scene and Empirical looks set to follow their lead.

The opening track, "Blessings, is a crisp, quick, swinging post-bop melody penned by saxophonist Nathaniel Facey. The composer moves into the limelight, taking the first solo with a pleasing dexterity, and is flawlessly overlapped by Jay Phelps on trumpet. It's clear from the start that a near-telepathic understanding exists within the group and this gently whets the listener's appetite for what is to come.

A strong African influence is present on a couple of tunes: Ali Farka Touré's "Tulumba is delightfully arranged by Phelps, with a meditative overdubbed opening passage taking off into a whirling frenzy of collective improvisation. It's a shame this track was cut to less than four minutes, as it fades away into nothingness just as pianist Kit Downes is setting out his ideas. The first few seconds of "The Deep recall the opening of *A Love Supreme* (Impulse!, 1964), as Facey's wailing sax borrows a touch of John Coltrane's phrasing. However, this ten-minute offering moves into other directions as a spiritual chant begins and extended solos follow. Chanting then returns at the end, apparently depicting the emptiness of deep, unexplored regions of the ocean.

Drummer Shaney Forbes displays a loose affiliation to hip-hop in the album's longest track, "Palantir, which clocks in at nearly seventeen minutes. During movements of this composition and on "Clapton Willow, "Kite and "Dark Lady, Empirical demonstrates its aptitude for intimate, more sensitive moods—as opposed to freewheeling, dynamic and fast-paced jams.

This is a highly promising release from a band which can only go from strength to strength. All tracks but "Tulumba are originals, with a multitude of influences and fresh, excitable energy in abundance.

Empirical, Empirical (Destin-E Records) – review (3/5*)

John Fordham, *The Guardian*

31 August 2007

This Courtney Pine production introduces the young UK five-piece Empirical - who have just won the European Jazz Competition at the North Sea Jazz festival. The members are products of Tomorrow's Warriors, an organisation that tutors young jazz musicians; it has clearly influenced the lineup, which includes the vinegary tone and agile phrasing of alto saxophonist Nathaniel Facey, and the hard-boppish sound of trumpeter Jay Phelps.

The players twist the lazily animated hard-bop style of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers with the later departures of Ornette Coleman, Wayne Shorter and John Coltrane - and some spiky, hip-hop influenced grooves. Facey is an interesting improviser, with a melodic adventurousness punctuated by an Ornette-like soulful cry, and Phelps sounds as though he has absorbed everything from Birth of the Cool Miles to pure-toned Wynton. But it's the themes that establish Empirical's promise, from the skidding jazziness of Facey's Blessings, through a sonorously folksy Ali Farka Touré adaptation, to the hip-hoppy Palantir.

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