

Jazz the ticket home

Ahead of opening the new Sheffield Jazz season, city musician Alex Hutton reveals why the city is in his blood

ANYONE who has ever lived in Sheffield will confirm the place gets under your skin for many reasons.

And, in spite of being a resident of the nation's capital for a decade, the influence of his hometown and its people is as strong as ever for pianist Alex Hutton.

"I've returned to Sheffield frequently to see my parents," he says ahead of his show at the Millennium Hall a week tomorrow. "And returning to the house I grew up in, with many happy childhood memories, I tend to write little melodic ideas."

In fact, Alex has just released an album fired by Sheffield and the surrounding countryside, called *Songs From The Seven Hills*.

"I had great fun with this 'suite' because it was all there in musical fragments that I then had to piece together. Sheffield's fresh green landscape definitely is echoed here but memories sometimes take on dream-like qualities, and I think this is reflected in the music.

"I definitely think the fantastic landscape around Sheffield is echoed in this music. Sometimes when I was composing I would even get out pictures and landscapes of

Sheffield and sit them on the top of the piano for a mood setting."

Of course, Alex isn't the first Sheffield musician to be inspired by his town and he won't be the last.

But there is always a danger that wearing a place so evidently on your sleeve, including your album cover, could alienate you from a non-Sheffield audience.

Like fellow city muso Richard Hawley, Alex makes no excuses. Either way, it didn't do the aforementioned Brit-nominated star any harm.

"It could be the album alienates a non-Sheffield audience, but it's been really well received so far.

"And it's performed with three musicians who have been steeped in the jazz tradition, so musically it can pull in different directions. But I think music if it's honest is always a reflection of its environment."

Currently promoting the new album, Alex singles out his Sheffield Jazz show on September 12 as something special.

"It's great to be playing this music in Sheffield," confirms Alex. "Sheffield Jazz has been hosting great jazz for decades



and I remember attending these gigs before I left town, hearing world class players like Pete King, Bobby Wellins and Jim Mullen - who I've since met and had the pleasure to play with in London.

"I've also got good memories of doing my first jazz gigs in Mr Kite's, on Devonshire Green."

While Alex will take care of the piano, his trio is completed by Arnie Somogyi on double bass and Enzo Zirlii on drums/percussion.

"It will be a great gig with lots of fireworks," adds Alex.

"The music and the way we play is not just for jazz purists by any means. My Italian drummer Enzo is fantastic and really captivating.

"I'm hoping some familiar faces will be there - I've lost touch with a lot of people so it would make a great reunion. There are some great musicians in Sheffield and it would be great to see them again."

Bringing Sheffield's hills alive with music

LIVING in London, jazz pianist Alex Hutton often found himself thinking wistfully of the countryside around Sheffield where he grew up and he ended up putting it to music.

The result is an album, *Songs from the Seven Hills*, a suite inspired by the landscapes and people of Sheffield which is receiving its hometown launch at a Sheffield Jazz concert tonight.

"I wrote these melodies every time I was up in Sheffield," he explains. "There were recurring themes and harmonies and then I put it together."

"That was when the real fun began, putting it together like a jigsaw. I didn't have a clear idea of where it would go until we focused once we got into the studio."

Hutton has been based in London since 1996 but it was in Sheffield where the former St Wilfrid's junior and Silverdale secondary school pupil got his taste for jazz.

"Me and my brother had done piano lessons and got fed up with it and I had started playing the mandolin and thinking about taking up the electric guitar and getting in a rock band," he recalls.

"I remembering seeing Erroll Garner playing on TV and was really taken with it



Alex Hutton's Songs from the Seven Hills has its hometown launch at a Sheffield Jazz concert tonight

and my dad said 'well, if you like, there's a guy down the pub doing that'."

That turned out to be Ralph Salt, who might not have been the great American piano man but was a respected local jazz musician. "He played once a week in our local at Millhouses and I assumed this kind of music was going on in every pub but I soon realised I was lucky to have this in the pub just down the road," says Hutton.

"I ended up having a couple of lessons with him and then I began listening to

records. It was a time when record shops were almost giving away vinyl and I began buying up all these be-bop albums and doing my own research.

"I never thought about hooking up with other musicians because I didn't know of anyone my own age in Sheffield doing it. It only really took off when I went down to the Guildhall in London."

During his Sheffield days he kept busy with other forms of music, playing in a salsa orchestra and with Sharp Cuts and

Boy on a Dolphin – "their golden half year when we toured Canada". He was part of the Sheffield jazz scene, too, with a Tuesday night residency at Mr Kite's and regular appearances at Trippet's wine bar before in 1996 he left the city to do a post-graduate jazz course.

"That was the turning point because it was great for connections and feeling you were part of something. A year was long enough and I couldn't wait to get back in the real world," he says.

Since then he has worked with such luminaries as Dave O'Higgins and Gilad Atzmon and continues to perform regularly in quartets with different bands, ranging from those of veterans Pete King and Bobby Wellins to some of the capital's emerging talents.

"They are gigs mostly playing standards and I guess writing *Songs from the Seven Hills* was almost a reaction against that. With my trio I expect to play more of that, especially now it is getting a lot of air play on things like Radio 3's Jazz Line-up and I've been told it's on the Virgin Trains playlist."

● **The Alex Hutton Trio, featuring drummer and percussionist Enzo Zirilli and bassist Arnie Somogyi, are at the Millennium Hall, Ecclesall Road, tonight.**