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**BRINGING SHEFFIELD'S HILLS ALIVE WITH MUSIC**

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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 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 postgraduate 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.