

Songs in the (colourful) key of life

SUE CADE learns how painted pop-up pianos are filling the streets of Exeter with sound and joy

In the corner of my living room is a lovely old upright that my children learnt to play on. Now superseded by a modern piano, it sits there gathering dust. So, I was interested to hear about Devon Pop-up Pianos, which transforms old pianos like mine into beautiful instruments available to be played in public spaces.

The scheme is coordinated by Music in Devon Initiative (MIDI) director Nick Hall and I went to meet him to find out more about it. Nick's been a working musician for over 30 years, travelling through Europe and West Africa learning various instruments and musical styles. He's a busy chap, playing with well-known local band Dakar Audio Club as well as running Soundtribe, Exeter Street Arts Festival, the Amber Music Project - and the pianos.

He explains that the Pop-up Pianos kicked off when Blind Ditch, a group of collaborative artists, wanted to do a one-off public project for Street LAB in 2017. "We got hold of three donated pianos which we asked local artists to decorate. One was painted by Cissy Lange, another by Cleo Jones and the third by Aisha Hall and Gala Hills." The talented artists got creative with the instruments making them bright, eye-catching and alluring to the public.

The painted pianos were placed in prominent positions around the city and after some initial wariness became extremely popular with passers-by. The colourful designs overcame any inherent suspicion and all sorts of people from total beginners to highly experienced players started tinkling the ivories.

Nick adds: "Somewhat randomly, gifted classical pianists arrived in the city and played the music of Bach and Chopin, with jazz trios bringing other instruments and performing highly entertaining boogie-woogie. One particular duo played at opposite ends of the piano - they visited all three pianos across the city in turn."

My son tells me he and his musician mates from Exeter College regularly played one outside Exeter Phoenix.



The Pop-up Piano scheme is coordinated by Music in Devon Initiative director Nick Hall



Local artist Devon Pearce was given the chance to jazz up a piano

Over time the pianos, which were permanently outdoors, were adversely affected by wet weather and, sadly, vandalism; the 'Freefall' piano was totally destroyed. The remaining two pianos overwintered under cover in the Guildhall and Boatyard Bakery.

Luckily, Nick and his team found a solution – a lockable metal cover that protects the pianos overnight: "We now have 'piano buddies' who take on the responsibility of opening the pianos in the morning and shutting them at night."

'One duo played at opposite ends of the piano – they visited all three pianos in the city'

With another piano donated and in need of jazzing up, step forward local artist Devon Pearce who studied in Exeter and now works freelance, painting distinctive pet portraits and landscapes. Devon, whose work has been exhibited in Melbourne and at the Brick Lane Gallery in London was given the chance to jazz up a piano for the Poltmore Music Festival.

Devon explains: "The piano was totally bare and very scruffy; I had full creative licence to make something colourful, whacky and interactive. I've always thought that piano keys look like teeth so I came up with the idea for the Cheshire Cat from Alice in Wonderland."

It took Devon just six hours to fashion his design using spray paint, acrylic and



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paint pens. The piano went down a storm at the festival, played by various musicians in the courtyard as well as on stage for all to see.

Nick tells me that another piano has recently been donated ready for an artist to transform into something quite special. It will be finding its way on to the streets of Exeter this summer, with pop-up pianos planned for various sites including the Phoenix, and events such as Exeter Street Arts Festival and Exeter Festival.

For those who reel in horror at the thought of a lovely old piano being painted, it's a sad fact that more and more are ending up in landfill or being thrown on the bonfire. Pianos need a lot of care, and with thousands of moving parts restoration is a costly business. Becoming a Pop-up Piano means they can at least continue to give pleasure to people and, who knows, may even be the inspiration for someone's future career in music.

As well as being used for city events, the painted pianos are available for hire. They come with or without performers and, Nick says, are perfect for festivals, weddings and street events. ♦

Pop Up Piano hire: info@musicindevon.org; Devon Pearce: Facebook: @devonpearceart Instagram: @devonpearce.art

STEEL CITY'S STREET PIANO

In Sheffield in 2003 a piano was left out on the pavement, the owner unable to move it into the house because of the steps. Instead he attached a sign inviting people to play the piano.

It became part of the community and stayed on the pavement. At one point the piano was stolen and replaced by a newer instrument. The local council labelled it an 'abandoned item' and threatened to take it away; it was saved by a subsequent media campaign before finally falling foul to weather damage in 2008.

PLAY ME, I'M YOURS

This Play Me concept was created by artist Luke Jerram in 2008. Luke installed large numbers of street pianos initially to challenge the rule that playing music in public spaces needed special permission.

These pianos are often painted and are free for anyone to play. More than 2000 street pianos have now been installed in 65 cities.

Luke was also responsible for starting the trend for pianos placed in train stations. In 2012, one was donated to St Pancras Station and attracted huge attention when 92-year old amateur player Denis Robinson accompanied West End singer Celli O'Connor as she sang Somewhere Over the Rainbow.

Sir Elton John donated a Yamaha piano to St Pancras in 2016 and even gave a performance there. His piano bears the message: Enjoy this piano. It's a gift. Love, Elton John.