

## MUSIC

James Tartaglia is both a philosopher and a musician - and he has finally found a way to bring these two passions together. He talks to **PETER BACON**

**B**EFORE he had entered his teens, James Tartaglia's future career seemed set. His parents had bought him a keyboard when he was very young, he had benefited from music lessons and was composing his own pieces. And when his mother signed up to borrow records from Hereford library, the die really did seem cast.

"She let me choose one. I went for a compilation called Heavy Horns because I liked the cover; bendy, distorted images of saxophones and trumpets. It included three tracks by jazz saxophonist Cannonball Adderley. The one called Another Kind of Soul (an extremely philosophical title, now I come to think of it) absolutely blew me away."

James, it is clear, doesn't do things by halves. He formed a rock band, then a jazz trio. By the time he had left school he had mastered the saxophone to the extent that, having been awarded a Daily Telegraph Young Jazz Musician Of The Year prize, he won a scholarship to attend the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts (its alumni include Quincy Jones, Diana Krall, John Mayer and Steve Vai).

But then, just as jazz saxophonist Cannonball Adderley had sparked one passion, so the philosopher Martin Heidegger sparked another. James had run out of money to remain at Berklee and returned to take up a deferred place to study economics at University College London.

"My interest was only in having a base in London to pursue my jazz career; economics was just something I'd done well on at A Level, and it was a topic which pleased my dad."

But still things would not go to plan.

"Economics was a drag for me, and considerably harder to bluff my way through while pursuing a career in jazz than I had envisaged. There was an option to take a module in a different subject, and I took Modern Philosophy."

Enter the 20th century German philosopher who wrote the book Being And Time.

"In my second year, I went to J.J. Valberg's lectures on Heidegger and the same kind of thing happened to me at 21 as had happened when I heard Cannonball Adderley at 11. I was hooked."

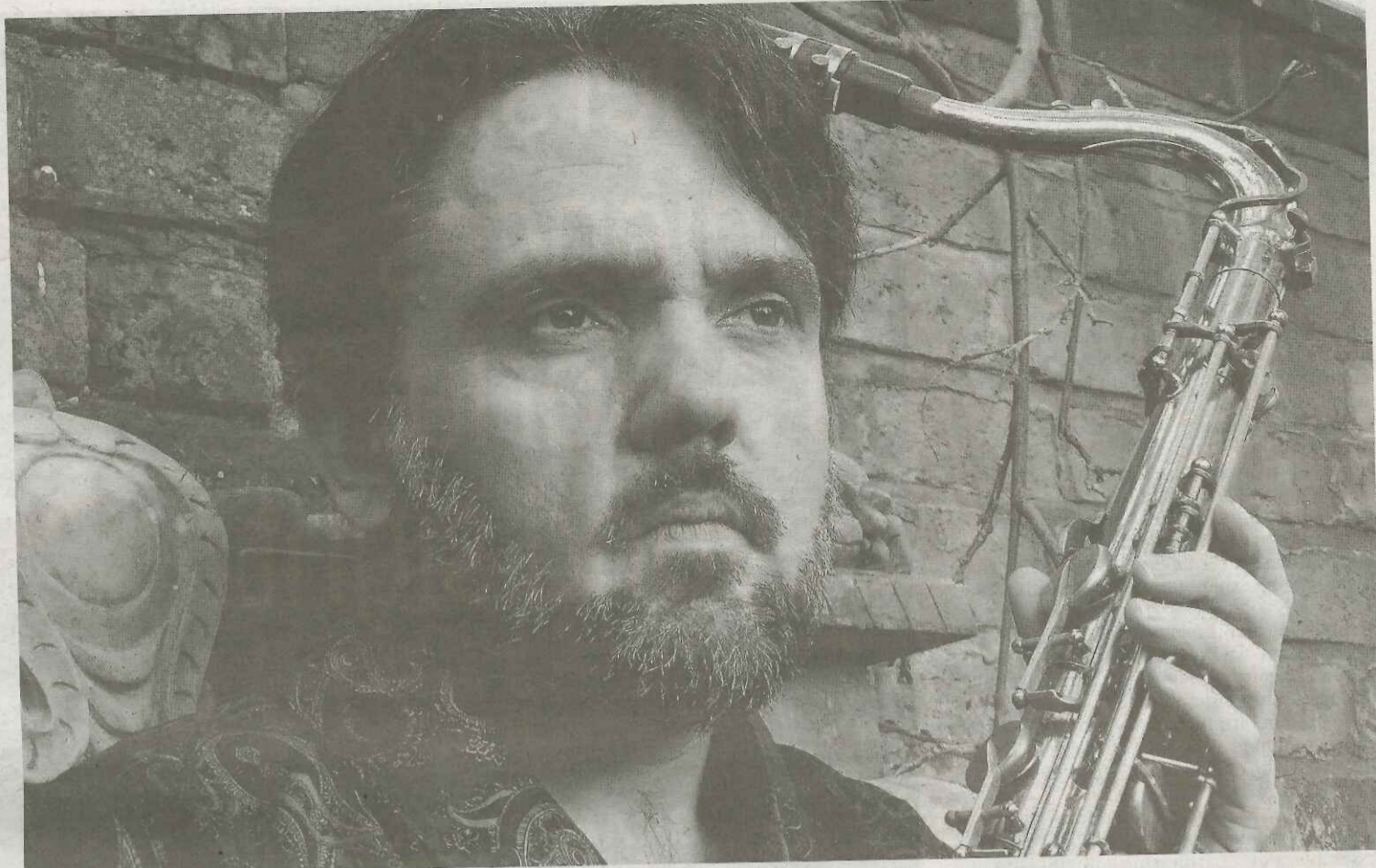
Which is why, in the summer of 2016, we are chatting over coffee in the refectory at Keele University, in the hills just west of Newcastle-under-Lyme, where James Tartaglia is senior lecturer in Philosophy.

Of course, he could have left jazz behind. He had classes of students to worry about, a book to write - it was published by Bloomsbury earlier this year under the intriguing title *Philosophy In A Meaningless Life: A System of Nihilism, Consciousness and Reality*.

While we stroll across the Keele campus - looking vibrant on this sunny day and feeling not nearly as fraught as it might appear in the run-up to exams - James's enthusiasm for his chosen subject is infectious.

"Once I was well and truly hooked, I started doing well in my philosophy degree. I wasn't really making any progress in jazz. Meanwhile I was able to secure funding to continue my studies into an M.Phil, then a Ph.D, then I was offered a teaching fellowship, then I got a lectureship."

Which is what prompted the journey



James Tartaglia and his band Continuum of Selves have created an album titled Jazz-Philosophy Fusion (below)

## Innovative album a fusion of jazz and philosophy

north to settle in Birmingham.

"I already knew philosophers in Birmingham, the jazz scene was considerably more focused, accessible and arguably more innovative than in London, and we could afford to live right in the city centre and walk to all the kinds of attractions that London offers only via the Tube."

"Our two children were born in Birmingham (James is married to a real estate lawyer) but when they got old enough for school, we moved out to 'Royal Sutton Coldfield', as I loyally put it in the preface to *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*.

"This was another stellar move. Sutton is beautiful (looking out from my garden at the Catholic church down the road I imagine I'm in Tuscany!) and there's a real sense of community. Plus the big city is just a hop away on the train, which is useful when I want to eat at our China Town (much better than the London one)."

So, had the final choice been made?

"I never consciously chose philosophy over jazz, although the prospect of needing to choose quietly tormented me for many years. I suppose I did make the choice without admitting it to myself, but the direction I took

was only live-able, for me, so long as there was no question of my ever giving up on jazz. And I never did."

Which brings us to his band Continuum of Selves, and their innovative album *Jazz-Philosophy Fusion*.

It's understandable that we often think of philosophy as an elevated mental exercise divorced from our lives. It's an impression James is keen to dispel.

"Philosophy is about our lives; yours and mine. This can be easy to forget in some of the dry, technical debates that go on... philosophical ideas can have an effect on us; they can make us ask why we have chosen our goals in life and what the point of them is; or about who we really are. These effects, which you might think of as emotional or poetic, can be expressed by music; just as the effect of hearing a poignant lyric about love can be expressed, amplified and moulded by music. Jazz is particularly good at expressing this kind of effect, and philosophy offers it an untapped and very large reserve of them."

And that is just what James and his band - largely made up of Birmingham musicians - is doing. The music is energetic, beautifully played jazz, with James on tenor saxophone,



Steve Tromans on piano, Gareth Fowler on guitar and Tymoteusz Jozwiak on drums. David Hilton, an old friend from Berklee, flew over from the States to play bass. The words are as witty and accessible as they are philosophical, expertly conveyed by singer Jessica Radcliffe and actor Sonja Morgenstern.

We can now hear ideas about teletransportation, animalism and the transcendental ego discussed against a jazz groove. Oh, and there's also a track inspired by James' favourite restaurant: Under Bridge Spicy Crab: The Original Typhoon Shelter Spicy Crab Speciality Restaurant in Hong Kong.

Any torment that James felt about having to make a choice between philosophy and music is clearly behind him. He's finally found a way to choose both.

■ The *Jazz-Philosophy Fusion* project has been made possible by the APRA Research Foundation Berlin Multidisciplinary Fellowship for 2015-6 and an Impact Acceleration Fund award. You can find out more about Continuum Of Selves, buy a copy of *Jazz-Philosophy Fusion* and see where the band is playing later this year at [jazzphilosophyfusion.com](http://jazzphilosophyfusion.com)