Jazz

Tin Men and the Telephone: the jazz band you control with a smartphone

Deepening past attempts by bands to incorporate mobile technology into live shows, the Dutch trio's new app lets you set the tempo of their gig – and even improvise an instrumental based on a Donald Trump speech

'These are skilled jazz musicians who can improvise within any straitjacket imposed by an audience' … Tin Men and the Telephone at Ronnie Scott's. Photograph: Carl Hyde Photography/carlhyde.com

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There's one great app for your mobile phone that can enhance any live show," said someone on Twitter a few years ago. "It's called the off button." Seeing other people photographing, filming, texting, tweeting, Instagramming or taking selfies at gigs can be an annoyance to anyone who wishes to enjoy the moment.

However, the social stigma of getting your phone out at a concert hasn't stopped dozens of artists from using smartphone technology to try to turn gigs into interactive occasions. Imogen Heap has used apps that encourage the audiences to manipulate her onstage movements, helping her to generate sounds and music. Artists such as Years & Years, Passion Pit, Dan Deacon, the xx and Childish Gambino have developed applications to try to enhance the concert experience, while the Berklee School of Music in Boston pioneered a project that turned an audience into an orchestra of smartphones. Most famously, Coldplay got Brian Eno to develop a smartphone app for them, Hypnotised, that generates a unique accompanying melody when the song of the same name is played. They have also supplied gig-goers with interactive "Xylobands" that change colour and flash at set points during a gig.

Yet audiences can prove resistant to using smartphones interactively at gigs. Concertgoers often don't remember to download the relevant app beforehand, while other mundane issues (battery life, reception, receiving a message or a phone call) can serve as a barrier.

Chris Martin of Coldplay, who have developed an app and given fans interactive bands at gigs. Photograph: Arthur Mola/Invision/AP

Tin Men and the Telephone - a piano, bass and drums trio from the Netherlands - remain undaunted by these concerns. Just before yesterday's 80-minute set at Ronnie Scott's in London, they asked the 160 or so assembled punters inside to use the club's wifi to download their app, Tinmendo, which was designed by Mark Marijnissen. It encouraged the audience to get involved in the performance, while the band's pianist, Tony Roe, manipulated their submissions on his laptop. Images explaining the process were displayed on a large screen behind the band.

Punters could upload their suggestions for melodies, rhythms and chords using a graphic program, and the trio improvised over a series of disjointed breakbeats, odd chord clusters and random tunes. The audience could vote if they wanted the band to speed up, slow down, play "nervous", "relaxed", "weird" or "take a break". In another section, the audience had 90 seconds to guess which pop song was being mutilated in an avant-jazz style (on our night, these included songs by Soundgarden, the Spice Girls and Ed Sheeran). The interaction works both ways - durin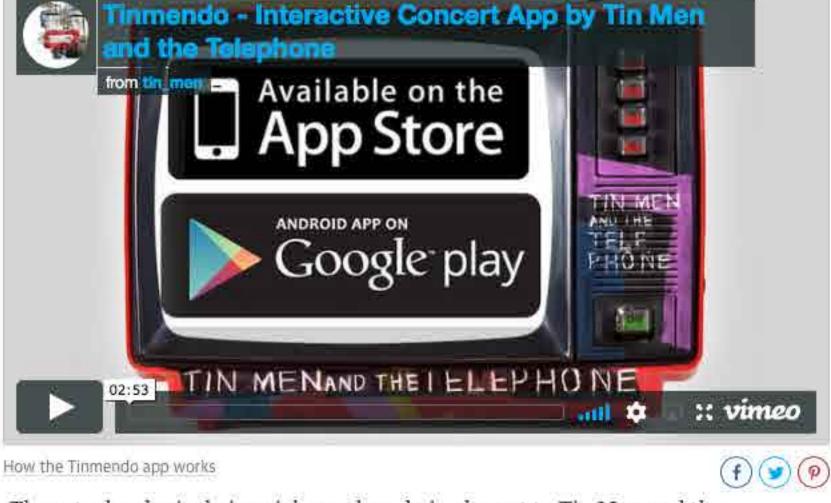g one delicate, Erik Satie-esque piano instrumental, stray sounds from Roe's piano kept chirruping on various phones, as if his solo was being reflected around the venue, a few seconds out of sync.

The opening of the gig, a prelude for their forthcoming album, World Domination, Part I, was a section about the dangers of populism, inviting the audience to vote for which world leaders they would like to eradicate to "restore international equilibrium". It was a chance for the band to improvise mocking instrumentals based upon the speeches of Donald Trump, Marine le Pen and Kim Jong-un, which were projected on the screen. Roe is an expert at mimicking the tonal patterns of a person's speech and then replicating them on the piano (something explored by David Bowie's pianist Henry Hey, Broken Social Scene multi-instrumentalist Charles Spearin and Texan pianist Jason Moran). It has a wonderfully satirical quality and was particularly hilarious when the trio mirrored a hysterical, falsetto-voiced speech by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

How the Tinmendo app works

These technological gimmicks are largely irrelevant to Tin Men and the Telephone's act. These are skilled musicians who can improvise within any straitjacket imposed by an audience, in a musical equivalent of Whose Line Is It Anyway? The app is basically a theatrical prop, like an audience shouting out suggestions to the Comedy Store Players. It is impressive, but incidental.

It is also a reminder of the frailties of digital technology. Roe explains to me, before the gig, that the show went like a dream in South Korea - where they had access to ultra-fast 5G technology - while it was beset by technical difficulties when they performed in Lebanon, in a venue with poor connectivity. At the London show, the wifi packed up halfway through and the band had to reboot their connections. "It looks like the North Koreans are hacking our show," said Roe, drily.