DOUBLY GIFTED

The Inaugural Bell Jazz Lecture, 1993

JAZZ & SOCIETY

Sound, Art, Music - Living

Bruce Johnson

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Telephone: (02) 389 1111

Fax: (02) 369 3306

INTRODUCTION

The inaugural Bell Jazz Lecture by Dr Bruce Johnson, launched by Senator the Honorable Bob McMullan, Minister for the Arts and Administrative Services, at Waverley Library on 9 October, 1993, marks a new milestone in the history of jazz in Australia.

This annual event is organised by the Doubly Gifted Committee and Waverley Library, in association with our annual exhibition of visual art works by jazz musicians who are, indeed, "doubly gifted".

This inaugural lecture by Bruce Johnson, performer, writer and jazz historian will help performers and jazz lovers to see their music in a new light.

There are a number of people, although not enough, who are carrying out an invaluable role by recording the facts of Australian jazz history. Bruce Johnson has taken this many steps forward by interpreting the facts of our jazz history, and explaining how it functions within Australian society.

Harry Stein
Convenor,
Doubly Gifted Committee.

BRUCE JOHNSON

Dr Bruce Johnson is a senior lecturer in the School of English, University of New South Wales. His current speciality is in twentieth century popular music, particularly jazz and its history in Australia. Dr Johnson's most important publication is *The Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz.* He is advisory editor on Australia and Oceania for *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World.* Bruce is noted for his research and has given talks to audiences in Australia, United Kingdom and the United States.

Bruce still finds time to play regularly in jazz groups, his instruments being trumpet and flugelhorn.

GRAEME BELL

The Doubly Gifted Committee and Waverley Library have named this lecture series on jazz, the Bell Jazz Lectures, in honour of Graeme Bell's outstanding contribution to jazz in Australia and abroad over the last fifty years. He is an outstanding pianist, excellent band leader, and composer of note. Graeme is also a talented artist who has exhibited in the Doubly Gifted exhibitions of visual art works by jazz musicians, as well as contributing to other exhibitions.

The Right Honorable the Minister, and distinguished guests - as I consider everyone in this room to be a distinguished guest, no further salutations are necessary.

I would begin by thanking and congratulating the Waverley Library and the other individuals who conceived and organised the Doubly Gifted exhibition, of which this is the second, and the annual Bell Jazz Lecture, of which this is the first. I believe this is an important tribute to an important part of Australia's music history, and to a particular individual without whom that history would be much the poorer: I mean, of course, Graeme Bell himself, and I am honoured and complimented to have been asked to present the first lecture in the series.

It's a little intimidating having to set the tone for what promises to be a major annual event, and because the subject is jazz, the range of levels which might seem to be available is very broad. Jazz itself has been categorised as everything from high art to popular entertainment. It's a very personal and localised music, but also the most influential development in twentieth century music on an international scale. So - where do you start to talk about it? It has been the subject of scholarly musicological analysis, but also the source of a considerable body of aggressively demotic and ribald anecdote.

One thing that jazz itself tells me which gives me my cue is that you can be serious without being academically mystifying, and you can be accessible without being trivial. So - I'm not going to parade the kind of learning that tells people how clever someone is, but tells them little else; nor am I going to impress people with hip anti-intellectual street cred. I am just going to talk like a person who is a jazz musician, and who enjoys the fun and pleasure of the music as something very serious and significant in the business of getting through life.

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Harry Stein, who is one of the makers of this event, prepares his projects with care and forethought. The forethought is of such long range that he caught me a little by surprise when he asked so many months in advance what might my topic be. The words 'and society' tripped all too easily off the tongue of someone who has often had to improvise courses being planned a year ahead. 'The Novel and Society', 'Language and Society', 'Art and Society' ... the phrase is stock in trade of cultural studies. But of course, one day you have to write the lecture, and you look at the title and ask yourself, "What did I mean when I said that?"

And when that moment came for this lecture, the answer was, "What I really meant was 'Jazz *in* Society'. The difference is very important, and in fact I could anticipate my theme today by saying that it is this very

difference. 'Jazz and society' asserts a disjunction between its two terms. Here is Jazz. There is Society. But I want to talk today about music *in* society, music as part of the whole social process, and not framed as a special event outside the stream of what we call ordinary life.

First, lend me your ears.

In our society there are two senses which dominate those expressive forms often referred to as art. These are vision and hearing. We have three other senses as well - touch, taste and smell - but, however inappropriately, they are very rarely thought of as channels of cultural transmission. We use our eyes to take in painting, the printed page, sculpture, theatrical gesture and movement. We use our ears to take in sounds - music, spoken dialogue. We often use our eyes as a substitute for our ears, as for example when we read a score or script. But we rarely do this the other way round. We can't hear a painting or a gesture or a statue. This is just one way of 'showing' how much vision dominates conscious experience in our civilisation - that it can take over the function of other senses, but rarely allows other senses to assume its tasks. And the word 'showing' - when what I am really doing is telling - reminds us that vision dominates our way of describing experience, even when that experience is not visual.

We tend, therefore to forget the distinctive power of hearing as a way of shaping our consciousness. Yet sound is one of the most powerfully invasive forces in our lives. We have eyelids, but because we do not have 'earlids', we have little choice about what sounds enter our heads. Unlike our eyes, our ears have poorly

developed powers of focus and discrimination, little capacity for depth perception and distancing. We have less power to decide what we hear than what we see, and for this reason, sound shapes our experience in ways over which we have comparatively little control. This becomes especially important when we realize that the level of sound in our environment is higher than at any time in recorded history. One of the distinctive features of twentieth century urban life is inescapable noise. We can choose not to read unsolicited junk mail, but I cannot choose not to hear unsolicited junk sound, like the aircraft passing overhead. Sound is constantly shaping our sense of what it is to be human beings in the twentieth century, in ways over which we have little control. We hear more music now than any of our forebears. Music is in restaurants, lifts, department stores, airport terminals, telephones, gymnasiums, accompanying film, radio and television narratives. Music is probably the most pervasive and intrusive presence in our cultural environment. This is one reason why we should think about sound. Visual images are constantly telling us how we should behave. Advertising, film and television narratives, books, magazines, bureaucratic publications, all present models of behaviour which are part of our socialising process. Some films graphically suggest to us that in any dispute, the first solution to be tried is that of homicidal violence. Others, that certain groups in society may be treated as insentient objects. There is vigorous enquiry regarding the relationship between what we read and see and its social impact. Yet, to a greater extent than hearing, we can actually control much of what we see.

So, what do these sounds that we cannot block out tell us about our social roles? What models do they present for our way of engaging in

the social process? I'm not talking here about the misogyny or racism or sentimentality that might be found in the words of songs, but the actual practices which constitute making sounds, whatever individual words might mean. What does music, and jazz in particular, offer us in the way of patterns of social conduct?

Apart from the fact that this event is centred on jazz, there are other very good reasons why a discussion of the social functions of music may very usefully take note of jazz. One of these relates to what I have been saying about sound. Sound is the medium of some of the most intrusive messages in our society; it is also, in a very distinctive way, the medium of jazz and other popular musics. The reason for this is that, unlike what we loosely describe as classical music, jazz practice cannot be reduced to the medium of sight. Jazz exists primarily at the moment of its performance. You might make a sound recording of it, and transcribe the notes onto a score. But the next performance won't sound like that record or that score. To a high degree you can predict the future sound of, say, a piano sonata, by reading a score. You cannot do this to anything like the same degree with jazz, which has therefore been described as 'the sound of surprise'. We have to hear jazz to form a response to it: it is pre-eminently an aural music. Given what I have been saying about sound, what then does this aural experience say to us about living in Australia in the twentieth century?

Well, first, that gives me a cue to remind us all of some of the achievements of Australian jazz. Let me stress the phrase: Australian jazz.

- Of all forms of music, it was jazz which became the gate through

which modernism entered this country. If we are seeking the first evidence in musical terms of Australia's sense of modernity and all that that implies, we must look to jazz.

- One of the most significant changes in our cultural orientation has been the shift of attention from Europe to the US as a source of cultural models. This in turn helped to turn our eyes more towards the reality of our geographical situation. The musical weather vane of this shift was jazz.
- Having assimilated the music from its American sources, jazz then became our first major cultural export. While the early local film industry disappeared under the marketing forces of the US, jazz developed a robust local identity which we exported overseas to great effect. Graeme Bell's tours of Europe in the late forties and early fifties actually generated jazz movements in those regions. The Bell band radically altered the social function of jazz in the United Kingdom, changing the direction of its subsequent history and setting the stage for the 'trad boom' of the early sixties. It established in the minds of European musicians the sense of an Australian jazz style which has inspired imitators, collectors, and social historians. Later, Australia had the gall to re-export jazz to its country of origin, when the Australian Jazz Quartet toured the US, topping concert bills that included players of the calibre of Miles Davis.
- Australia boasts the oldest annual jazz festival anywhere in the world. Established in 1946, the Australian Jazz Convention is still held annually, and is unique also in its dynamic structure, in which the distinctions between audience and performers, strolling space and performance space, are shifting and indeterminate. The Australian

Jazz Convention was a postmodernist installation long before the word became the sign of contemporary chic.

- Jazz has been the most durable and influential development in Australian music since its arrival at the end of the First World War.

If nothing else comes out of this inaugural Bell Lecture, let this at least be emphasised: Australian jazz has been a rich and fertile source of inspiration both locally and internationally. The lack of institutional support for the preservation and study of its history is something of which we should be ashamed. Our educational programmes, our administrative and funding machinery, our archival bodies, all show a deep ignorance of this vivid thread in our tapestry. And all the while, the resources through which it might be preserved - old recordings, documents, and the musicians themselves, deteriorate and perish, silenced beyond retrieval.

Let me be very clear about this: if specific and urgent action is not taken by those bodies and individuals who deploy the necessary resources, a rich and significant narrative in our cultural history will be lost.

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Jazz, however, has a social function far more profound than simply as an embellishment of our music history.

I want to start us thinking today about how the conditions in which that

sound called jazz is made might offer models for civilised socialisation that we cannot find in other music.

Let us begin by thinking about the idea of the artist in our society . We are told that art is one of the highest achievements of humanity. Art is transcendent, ennobling, enriching. It is divorced from the ordinary, and its objects are set apart by location - in galleries, concert halls, museums - and by economics: in terms of broad social perceptions, its importance is signalled by a price tag. The artist who produces these works is also defined by her/his difference from ordinary people like clerks, teachers, tradesmen, office workers, engineers. The artist is separate, special. For most of us, the idea of the artist is the idea of Someone Else.

Because of this, most people in our society believe that we are not privileged to be able to make something artistic of, and with, our lives. We cannot produce art, we can only consume it. We can only participate in art by buying books or tickets to concerts or exhibitions or plays, or, to show how privileged we are, perhaps we can actually afford to buy art objects themselves. Our participation in this enriching experience thus becomes dependent on our economic circumstances. The practice and experience of art is something separate from the practices of our mundane and uninteresting lives, of normal social intercourse.

Now, we are persuaded by various means that this is a natural state of affairs, that it is the universal character of the relationship between art and society. I wish to repudiate this. This version of that relationship is what I would call a cultural construction. That is, it is not some kind of

universal principle, but a belief which is very specific to this society in which we live. The things I have been describing are not characteristics of 'art' or the 'artist', but of our society's way of talking about those things. Artists do not spontaneously discover that they are by nature, different, like being born with webbed feet. It is a social attitude which creates that sense of difference. It is so strong that many people wish to be seen as artists because the separateness, the special status is attractive. Other artists - that is, people practising certain activities which result in what we call art, are not happy to be separated from society in this way, and their career becomes an attempt to reconcile this activity with 'normal' social relations. This act of reconciliation, however, is often destructively difficult, because social attitudes based on European 'high art traditions' stress the inaccessible special status of the artist - composer, painter, musician, writer, sculptor.

Something of this has happened in jazz. I am speaking of the canonisation of certain artists. It is clear, of course, that some musicians have been far more influential than others in giving definition to the jazz tradition. But it does not necessarily follow that they should then be elevated to a special status that places them outside the social realm. This canonisation has particularly affected our way of writing more recent jazz history as it has become increasingly taken over by European traditions of study and practice. But there is no evidence that the so-called 'great artists' of jazz, particularly during the earlier phases, saw themselves as leading lives separate from the collective called society - Armstrong, Ellington, Morton, Parker, Gillespie, wished to be regarded very much as part of the social formation. A life like Charlie Parker's was not skillfully socialised, but

this was not for lack of him wanting it to be. I think his career shows us that so-called artists are often forced into the role of 'outsider' against their will. Louis Armstrong always saw his 'art' as primarily popular entertainment. It is subsequent white audiences and writers who have tried to decontaminate it.

That is, the role of artist as outsider is not 'natural', but is a form of social conditioning, and it has many effects, two of which are: the exclusion of the artist from society, but also, the disenfranchisement of the citizen from art. I can express it even more simply, and in a way that shows us that this distinction has economic rather than aesthetic foundations. It is an attitude which says there are producers of art, and there are consumers of art, and the two are completely separate.

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Now I want to follow another path for a moment, but it will converge with what I have been talking about. One of the distinguishing features of the lives of everyone here is that we live in settled concentrations. We are not solitaries, we are not nomadic. We live in permanent and thickly populated groups which are called towns and cities. This is what the word 'civilisation' derives from. It is one of the central characteristics of twentieth century life that we are urban dwellers, packed together in high density living. However, it is also one of the central characteristics of our modern society that we are constantly enjoined to discover and celebrate our individuality. This

objective is thrust at us in advertising, leisure, entertainment, education, politics. It is at the conjunction of these two conditions that the central and decisive problem of contemporary social organisation is to be found: how do we simultaneously exist within a densely populated and necessarily regimented collective, and yet at the same time give expression to our individuality.

I don't present this as an abstract issue in social theory. I think it is perhaps the most pressing problem in contemporary urban life. The man who beats his wife or takes a shotgun into the streets, the driver who burns off from the lights, the vandalised telephone box, the aggressive drunk, the bullying bureaucrat and the buccaneering businessman who brings ruin to those about him: all of these proclaim the problem of reconciling individuality with bureaucratic collectivity, of everyone in the crowd calling out "I'm different". In a tightly regulated society, where do we find the site of our individuality? It is this problem which leads to such a deep discontinuity between the idea of work and play. Work is the realm of control, so play must become the realm of an extreme compensating abandonment. Think about why we refer to many forms of recreation as 'raging', 'raving'. Why must it so often be accompanied by destructive and anti-social over-indulgences in alcohol, violence, speed (both kinds), aggression? The rage of the individual is a microcosm of the collective rage which we see in the violent emergence of new nationalisms and tribalisms, in the anger felt against precisely those manipulative multinationals whose products make urban infrastructures possible. This frustrated rage is a manifestation of the central problem of contemporary Western civilisation: the harmonising of individual difference with collective

experience.

The difficulty of achieving this in our social system is apparent in every activity in which our individuality is on display. The brutal competitiveness of our culture is instilled from our earliest education both in schools and recreational media. The drive to gain and demonstrate our control over other people and over nature itself, is an imperative in a culture that fetishises individualism, but provides few psychologically healthy ways to express it. Competitiveness and control are the driving forces of our social system, and they are in principle incompatible with a harmony between the collective and the individual - they separate rather than harmonise the two, placing the individual at odds with the collective, either in a position of subordination or dominance. Our politics are presented to us in this way. The media never reports approvingly that representatives of opposing views 'reached a civilised compromise' or 'negotiated points of agreement'. The headline always invokes the phrase 'backs down': social interaction is seen as a competition to be the one out in front, not a process of harmonisation. How can there be 'negotiation' if it is always presented as weakness? Our education systems - schools, universities - are based on competitive hierarchies which, for the majority, ensure demoralisation and scarred self esteem, a sense of disempowerment which in turn leads to an increasing sense that the 'average' individual has no value as such, and that passivity is her or his natural condition - controller or controllee, consumer or producer. Our dominant entertainment patterns replicate this, what Sartre called 'series' structure - a spectacle made by someone else, watched passively by people who have little other contact with each other. Our art industry is another

microcosm of this social structure: a mass of consumers watching a minority of privileged producers. Losers watching winners.

This is the prevalent model of cultural politics, by which I mean the ebb and flow of power in the construction of culture. If we often feel that we are living at a time of insoluble social crisis, we should not be surprised, when social relationships in a settled collective like a city are conceived as a struggle for dominance rather than a negotiated harmony. I want to emphasise this: there can be no richness of spirit in a civilisation that is based on such a model. The essence of civilisation is the reconciliation of the individual with the collective. It is the conviction that individual value and sovereignty can be realised through collective activity.

Yet where is this decisive process of socialisation taught, fostered? Where is its model in social practice?

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I suggest that music is one of the great acts of collective cultural production. Painting, writing, sculpting are all characteristically conducted in isolation, resulting in a product which no-one else can participate in except as watchers - that is, as outsiders to the enriching artistic process..

Music. And where, in this supremely collective activity, do we find the

value of the individual voice harmonised with the collective? Where do individual choices regarding the making of sounds - pitch, rhythm, metre, timbre - produce a collectivity that is not chaotically competitive?

The music which carries greatest cultural gravity in our society is that which we term very loosely 'classical' music. What sort of model for social relationships do we find here? Obviously the collective is of the essence in score-based symphony, chorale and chamber groups.. But it is a collective in which the individual is strictly regimented and set off against the privileged individual 'genius': composer, conductor, soloist. The third violinist, the second trumpeter is positively forbidden to exercise her or his autonomy as an individual. If the symphony orchestra is a model for urban socialisation through music, it is a model of bureaucracy and totalitarianism - the suppression of dissent and plurality. I am not proposing that we should deprive ourselves of the pleasure of the European based classical music tradition, a pleasure which I share to an immense degree. But as a model of social conduct, it is deeply problematic in a society that also pretends to value democratic egalitarianism, that is constantly exhorting its members to explore and display their individuality. I am not alone in asserting that the social model it provides is one of strict regimentation based on dominance and subordination, and that this is one of the reasons it is such a congenial form of music-making to the attitudes of our ruling classes.

There are many other musical models in our society, all of them to be valued and nurtured as ways in which individuals can articulate some aspect of themselves. There are folk forms, and I don't just mean

musical bush balladists. Local country and western, ethnic music groups, parish church music, aboriginal music ... these are all examples of what I would describe as folk forms.

I cannot pretend that all of these speak for me or to me, and in this, I am typical of the white, urban, secular , industrialised middle class, which makes up such a large section of Australian and other Western societies. Many of these folk forms, however, do manifest to a greater or lesser extent a practice which is important to me - that of improvisation. So to some extent does pop. But there are other complexities here which make this a problematic music for me. On one hand pop is the musical terrain in which the 'mass' (of which we must all think of ourselves as members) experiences music. It is a music of industrial urban society. But to me it is also the music that proclaims the triumph of technology and marketing over the individual. Its conditions of consumption are so massively determined by a commodity machinery, that it is not easy to think of it as the site of articulated individuality.

Jazz has some of the qualities of both folk and pop, most notably, I think, its independence of prepared scores. This is not always or wholly so, but it is more true of jazz than of any other music that is available to a person of my situation and history. Strange, that it is generally imagined that jazz is different because it is an improvised music. This is not so. The most common form of music practice now and throughout the totality of human history, is improvisation. It is not jazz that is unusual and different for doing it. 'Classical' music is different for not doing it. Historically it is an aberrant form of music.

Jazz and blues reintroduced into white, western society perhaps the closest thing to a universal, natural form of group music making: improvisation. Jazz is a music of folk origins, and has retained strong traces of its folk function, above all, its harmonising of collective activity with a high degree of individual freedom. But it is also a music which for reasons of history and technology has made the transition into modern urban life. This has inevitably been with some modifications. For example, the transition from the 'folk' conditions of its practice in New Orleans to the more anonymous, alienating conditions of the urbanised north led to the foregrounding of the soloist from the mid twenties. While this pushes the music towards a model of dominance/subordination, it is not with the same emphasis as scored symphonic music. I must be careful here; I don't want to romanticise the music, in the way that the flower power commune movement of the late sixties was dangerously romanticised. Jazz has its fair share of bastards - musicians who are over-bearing, pathologically competitive, inflexible of purpose, exhibitionistic and inconsiderate of the collective mood. But I want to stress that the ethos of collective improvisation that is central to most jazz practice does not reward these characteristics. They are not valued, in the way they are in other expressive forms like mainstream movies. The most heartfelt compliment you hear paid to a jazz musician by musicians is that he or she listens. "Yeah, a good player, but he just doesn't listen" is the most common grounds of criticism among jazz musicians who are actually working from day to day and week to week, and there are a number of fine technicians in any city who get much less work than they would if they could learn what is also a significant social skill - to listen and to respond sympathetically. The role of the jazz soloist is thus significantly different from that of the

concerto soloist, who has total musical sovereignty over the mass, and who is in turn almost totally subordinate to the composer. The jazz performer, even when soloing, constantly has to make adjustments to his/her design in response to interactive gestures (sometimes of a subversive and mischievous kind) from a rhythm section who, at the moment the solo is being made, know as well as the soloist that their individuality is still essential to the result. The jazz performers differ from symphonic musicians in this way, then - they have the freedom to articulate their own responses to the unfolding musical narrative, but are never allowed to forget that there are others creating this community. The 'classical' musician is at any moment either a section player or a soloist. The jazz musician is always both, and this is largely because of the central role of improvisation.

Let me emphasise something here very strongly. To participate fruitfully in this kind of music making, you don't simply have to acknowledge intellectually the fact of collective improvisation. You have to live and think that way, you have to do it, you have to discover that you believe in it. If you don't already, you have to learn it, re-create yourself. This is what recreation should be: re-creation. And if you don't know how to harmonise difference, you have to re-create yourself to participate in the pleasure of collective improvisation, and in a way that enriches your life outside of music. In these respects, jazz has more important connections with improvised forms of theatre than with the European concert tradition, that is, with non-musical improvisation than with musical non-improvisation. It links up with that function of group performance which is actually used as a therapy for forms of psychopathy, performance as psychic healing.

Jazz projects this power beyond its instrumentalists, beyond the performance space. In live performance, this balance between individuality and collectivity, this self-realizing socialisation, is extended to the audience as well, and this is particularly so at what I think of the workface conditions of most jazz performance - in pubs, clubs, bistros, where the interaction between the audience is most evident. Dancing and applause are not just responses to the music, they play an important role in shaping it, determining the flow of its energy. This is why live performance is so important to the music, and in conditions where the audience/musician separation is dissolved. I recently saw some video footage of Commedia del'arte performances in Italy and was struck by the way the 'audience' meandered in and out of the performance space. It again seemed to me to demonstrate that this activity had more in common with jazz than the concert music tradition with which the latter is usually paired for administrative purposes. In the collectively improvised ambience of a pub jazz gig, the divisions between producer and consumer, between demagogue and mass, between doer and watcher, between empowered and disempowered, diminish and sometimes even vanish. I am making a very large claim for jazz: I am saying that it is perhaps the most fruitful artistic model for a fulfilling socialisation in a modern industrial urban society.

And, with all this, there is something else to be emphasised. I don't want to suggest that jazz is merely a humourless Orwellian process of social conditioning, a benevolent lobotomy. I must stress again, that the social model it provides actually real-ises rather than suppresses the individual, and in the fullest way. The kind of

music making I have been describing never overlooks what has been called 'the politics of pleasure'. Jazz gives pleasure to the mind and body, brings them into being as a totality. This is increased, not diminished, by participation in the collectivity of the experience. Collective improvisation is a way to re-create ourselves, and in our society, the main access to this as a musical activity is jazz. Before you smile in disbelief that such a large claim should be made for a musical form so trivialised by legitimate artistic discourse, think about it.

Bruce Johnson

Don't forget .....

The 3rd Doubly Gifted Exhibition and 2nd Bell Jazz Lecture will be held during 1994

We are pleased to announce that Gail Brennan, the distinguished SMH jazz critic will present the 1994 Bell Jazz Lecture.

General enquiries or further information may be obtained from:

The Secretary, Doubly Gifted Committee,
Jeannie Mc Innes, 5 Lodge Avenue,
Old Toongabbie, 2146.