

DOUBLY GIFTED

The Annual Bell Jazz Lecture, 1995

*Jazz &
the Press*
and Related Airs and Themes

Dick Hughes

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The Third Annual Bell Jazz Lecture

Delivered 23rd September, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

The Third Annual Bell Jazz Lecture, given by Dick Hughes and opened by Tom Uren on 23rd September 1995, reveals yet another aspect of the approach to jazz in our community.

This Lecture has now become an annual event in the calendar of the Waverley Library and the jazz community of Sydney.

Originated by the late Harry Stein, the Doubly Gifted Committee intends to continue to produce this lecture and trusts that, as well as applauding Graeme Bell's contribution to Australian jazz, it will also serve as a memorial to Harry Stein.

This year, the Lecture is given by Dick Hughes, jazz musician and band leader, a journalist and an author of two books. Dick has had a number of "firsts" in a long career in jazz and has interviewed a great number of famous international jazz musicians.

He has a prodigious memory for names and dates and his knowledge and research into his chosen subject plus a wicked sense of humour will certainly offer us a lecture both erudite and entertaining.

Kate Dunbar
Co-Convenor
Doubly Gifted Committee



Dick Hughes

Pianist with the Port Jackson Jazz Band since 1955 and bandleader himself (Dick Hughes Quartet and the Dick Hughes Famous Five), the man who delivers the Third Annual Bell Jazz Lecture is also an author - *Daddy's Practising Again* (1977) and *Don't You Sing!* (1994). Born in Melbourne in 1931, he was the youngest president of the Melbourne University Rhythm Club (1950-51) and youngest delegate at the first Australian Jazz Convention (Melbourne, 1946). He was the first solo jazz pianist to play at the Sydney Opera House (1973) and first Australian jazz pianist to record an album completely solo (no rhythm accompaniment). His writings (primarily but not exclusively on jazz) have appeared in *The Australian*, *The Bulletin*, *Downbeat*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *Australian Jazz Quarterly*, *Quadrant*, *The Observer*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Sunday Mirror* and *The Independent Monthly*.



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.

I sang then of Buddy Bolden, the first known jazzman, a New Orleans cornet player of the turn of the century about whom there exists legend, fantasy and myth rather than fact and authentic history.

But at least we know who he was. And after that introduction by Tom Uren, I know who I am ... I think.

I'm a journalist-jazzman.

And who was the first journalist-jazzman? Why, none other than Buddy Bolden. According to the legend, what we can call the Buddy Bolden story, he also edited a scandal news-sheet called *The Cricket*. As Rudi Blesh said in his book, *Shining Trumpets*, New Orleans was a place where the supply of scandal could have kept all the presses running day and night. If you've read a book called *The French Quarter*, by Herbert Asbury, you'll know why.

As it was, Buddy Bolden was kept running day and night. Apart from playing cornet and leading the first jazz band and editing *The Cricket*, he also found time to be a barber. (His professional life might have been summed up in the barbershop phrase "Three Chairs, No Waiting"). Not surprisingly, he had a nervous breakdown, and went stark raving mad at a Labor Day parade in New Orleans in 1907. Born in New Orleans 118 years ago this month, he died in an asylum in 1931.

So we know who he was. I don't know who J. Bradford Robinson is, but in the *New Grove Dictionary Of Jazz*, he says that "Buddy Bolden undoubtedly had a formative influence on Freddie Keppard, Bunk Johnson and other New Orleans cornettists and, by his example, helped to standardise the New Orleans jazz ensemble and repertory." My reference to "we know who he was" reminds me of a story of another great New Orleans trumpeter, Wingy Manone. He was wandering through the coloured section of an

American city after hours and entered a place where some very hot music was being played. Wingy, who was white, sat in with the band and tore off about a dozen choruses of *I'm A Ding Dong Daddy From Dumas*, whereupon the black leader, himself a trumpeter, of the black band said: "Man, I don't know who you is, but you sure is." I say, contrary to what some would have us believe, that the birthplace of jazz was New Orleans. I should say, too, that I've had only one-twelfth of the time to prepare this lecture as was allowed my learned predecessors, Dr Johnson and Gail Brennan (also known as John Clare). So, if I apply the laws - and then incorrectly - of arithmetic progression, I can say with all confidence that my lecture will be only one-twelfth as worthy. Unfortunately for you, it won't be one-twelfth as long.

I'm a ring-in, which I suppose is appropriate for a Bell Lecture.

Now regarding this business of jazz and the press and related airs and themes, what did the New Orleans press think of this lively art that was born on its doorstep? Very little - and most destructively.

In the local newspaper, the *Times-Picayune* of June 20, 1918, we read this thundering editorial: "Why the jass music?" (It was spelt thus - JASS - but I'll pronounce it JAZZ) "Why is the jazz music and therefore, the jazz band?" (Good thinking, that: like "why is the symphony and, therefore, the symphony orchestra"). Here's how the writer answered the self-posed question. "As well ask why the dime novel or the grease-dripping doughnut. All are manifestations of a low streak in man's tastes that has not yet come out in civilisation's wash. Indeed, you might go farther, and say that jazz music is the indecent story, syncopated and counterpointed. Like the improper anecdote, also in its youth, it was listened to blushing behind closed doors and drawn curtains, but like all vice, it grew bolder, until it dared decent surroundings, and there was tolerated because of its oddity ... We hear the hum of the Italian dance, the throb of the Oriental tambourines and

kettledrums, the clatter of the clogs, the click of Slavic heels, the thumpty-tumpty of the Negro banjo, and, in fact, the native dances of the world ... It gives a sensual delight more intense and quite different from the languor of a Viennese waltz or the refined sentiment and respectful emotion of an 18th century minuet. In the matter of jazz, New Orleans is particularly interested, since it has been widely suggested that this particular form of musical vice had its birth in this city - that it came, in fact from doubtful surroundings in our slums. We do not recognise the honour of parenthood, but with such a story in circulation, it behoves us to be the last to accept this atrocity in polite society."

When I was in New Orleans in 1972, I met the editor of the *Times-Picayune* and mentioned to him this editorial of 54 years previously. It was quite obvious that he'd never heard of it. Then he thought - briefly, all too briefly - and said that it would have been intended as a joke. But that was no joke. That was how a bourgeois paper attacked jazz. I first read excerpts from that editorial in a book called *American Jazz Music*, by Wilder Hobson; a second time in *Jazz In Perspective*, by the British critic Iain Lang. Lang was a journalist, the foreign editor of *The Sunday Times* in London, and after quoting the *Times-Picayune* of New Orleans, he wrote down his reaction: "Of course the *Times-Picayune* was disgusted," he wrote. "Would you expect *The Times* (meaning THE Times of London) he asked in the mid forties "to be sympathetic to an art-form created, independently of bourgeois values, in Shadwell, Shoreditch, Soho and Saffron Hill?"

Iain Lang was a victim, shall I say, of a leftist approach to jazz, best exemplified, in Lang's instance, by a plea at the end of his book for what he called a restoration of jazz to the common people who created it.

When he wrote "common people" (unfortunate phrase, really, with its hoi polloi connotation), he implied the proletariat. So did Harry Stein (and we thank him and revere his memory, if only because that's how we come to be here today) - so did Harry Stein in the talk he gave at the first Australian Jazz Convention, of which he was president, and to whom I paid my 4/6 admission fee on the one day my Victorian - in more than one sense of the word- grandparents allowed me to attend. The 50th will be on us in 13 weeks and two days.

I remember that on December 30, in an amiable and very brief report of the first convention, *The Herald* (Melbourne) used a photograph of Graeme Bell playing the piano at the Eureka Hall, where the first convention was held. Could we have thought then that it would be celebrated at Melbourne University, two kilometres away?

Allow me to say again that I would have liked to have had more time to have carried out research on this subject. Allow me too to warn you that there will be no profound conclusions or sociological theses. On the other hand, I won't pontificate or even make cardinal points.

Before I consider a few examples of press reports of the first Melbourne convention (1946) and the first Sydney convention (1950), I shall extend the press beyond the confines of a New Orleans daily paper of 1918 to a European intellectual (suspect word) magazine called *Revue Romande*.

The author was the great Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet, who in 1919 heard New Orleans native Sidney Bechet play at Ciro's in London, where Iain Lang heard and met Bechet for the first time.

I said that the *Times-Picayune* editorial attacking jazz was "no joke". Allow me to say that it's no joke how comparatively few

people - even those who attend jazz clubs, concerts and festivals, maybe even conventions now - know of Sidney Bechet.

In the *Revue Romande* of October, 1919, Ernest Ansermet, who for decades was conductor of the orchestra of the Suisse Romande, wrote this. Remember that the *Times-Picayune* dragged jazz down into the gutter, suggesting that was its natural habitat. Next year in Europe, Ernest Ansermet pushed it up to the alpine foothills and helped propel it to the Olympian heights, to the firmament, beyond ...

This is what Ansermet wrote of the music of Bechet and his colleagues:

"There is in the Southern Syncopated Orchestra an extraordinary clarinet virtuoso who is, so it seems, the first of his race to have composed perfectly formed blues on the clarinet. I've heard two of them which he had elaborated at great length, then played to his companions so that they could make up an accompaniment. Extremely difficult, they are equally admirable for their richness of invention, force of accent, and daring in novelty and the unexpected. Already they gave the idea of a style and their form was gripping, abrupt, harsh, with a brusque and pitiless ending like that of Bach's Second Brandenburg Concerto. I wish to set down the name of this artist of genius; as for myself, I shall never forget it: it is Sidney Bechet."

I hope you all know that name. I'm sure most of you do. If so, I'm sure you'll never forget it and will never forget the music of Sidney Bechet, sometimes more thrilling than that of Louis Armstrong.

Incidentally, Ross Fusedale, a Sydney native who for years has been a sub-editor for Radio Australia in Melbourne - another journalist-jazzman - had a noble idea early in 1952. He wanted to bring out Sidney Bechet to appear for one night in Melbourne with the Graeme Bell band at the Exhibition Building. One night only.

He would have cleaned up too, but understandably, didn't have the cash to realise this vision splendid. And he knew obviously that he would have to wait until the Bell band returned from their second overseas tour.

Ross told me of this in a Melbourne pub.

I'm now thinking of another Melbourne hotel long since gone, the New York Hotel, in Bourke Street. It was a late afternoon in mid-1950, two to three months before the Graeme Bell Australian Jazz Band left on that second overseas tour.

Graeme was talking to some of us - a few members of the Melbourne jazz fraternity - and said:

"Don't give me journalists. I've had journalists - except one."

(This was 2' years before there was the slightest suggestion that I would become a journalist).

Anyway, Graeme made an exception of one journalist. That exception was a man called Frederick Tee who I think wrote for a Melbourne radio paper, *The Listener-In*.

When Graeme said he'd had journalists, I think he was referring to the lack of reliability and punctuality of some members of that strange but fascinating craft.

I myself believe it's fair to say that Graeme Bell has done relatively well out of the press, if no more than his due.

I've already referred to the *Melbourne Herald* photo of Graeme at the first convention. Five months earlier - in July, 1946 - the *Sun-Pictorial*, sister publication of Sir Keith Murdoch's Herald, did for those times a presentable coverage of a history of jazz concert at the Eureka Hall which featured the Graeme Bell Band.

Graeme refers to the first jazz convention press coverage in his book, *Graeme Bell - Australian Jazzman: His Autobiography* - and quotes from an amiable sub-leader which appeared in *The Herald* on Friday, December 27, the first day of that first convention.

I'll take the liberty of quoting the entire piece - in all its succinct brevity: "Those who do not closely observe which way the instruments blow may not realise how much musical strife exists between swing and jazz. The delegates at Eureka Hall, who stand four-square for hot jazz and no nonsense, can be expected to put their case with piercing clarity. If they wish to have a trial of chords and discords with the swing faction, we know the very place for it - a small reservation on the rocket-weapons course in Central Australia."

Fair enough. That was good-humoured.

The *Sunday Telegraph* in Sydney wasn't so kind or good-humoured four months later when the Graeme Bell Dixieland Band, as it was called, came to Sydney for their first record session for a major label - the session of April 11, 1947.

I've spent hours in the State Public Library going through that irritating business of turning the reels of microfilm of issues of the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* of the first half of 1947 without finding this ill-advised, ill-natured and ignorant reference. At the time, the band was also raising funds to get to Prague, and the sponsor of the tour was the Eureka Youth League. And it had been Harry Stein (here we go again! thank you Harry) who had first suggested the tour to Graeme in Melbourne in February, 1947, when everybody who had been there was still riding high on memories of the first jazz convention.

The Eureka Youth League had Communist Party connections. Not one member of the band was a communist, but you could get tarred with the same red-paint brush in those days, and *The Sunday Telegraph* produced something like this: "So they've hitched their band wagon to a red star and, using the non-patriotic name of a Dixieland band, are off to represent Australia at a Youth festival in Prague."

Truth can be a casualty of peace, too.

Truth.

I remember commenting about 20 years ago to a knock-about Sydney jazz musician on the camaraderie often seen to exist between journalist and jazz musician. Possibly naively, possibly profoundly, my knock-about friend said that in their own ways journalists and jazz musicians were seeking the truth. Alas, they can't all always have it published...

Blues And The Abstract Truth was the title of a strong and stirring LP by Oliver Nelson.

I remember a radio identity at the time saying that it was a good title. I thought it was a pretentious title. *Blues and the Abstract Truth*. It's hard enough getting the concrete truth and the concrete facts...

And it was impossible for me to get the Melbourne *Truth*, the newspaper, for January 1949 in the State Public Library, because they do not store it. I mention it because Melbourne *Truth* on the first Sunday in January 1949 came out with some lurid impressions of the third convention which gave a sort of Mafia slant to jazz. Dave Dallwitz, who came up for the first Doubly Gifted exhibition here in 1992, was portrayed - as I seem to remember it - as a manipulator of Adelaide jazz musicians. I

believe there was a photo of this peaceable man, underneath which some such caption as: Dave Dallwitz - Big boss of Adelaide jazz. One was tempted to wonder whether the implication was Big Bad Boss of Adelaide jazz.

No such fantasies were indulged in by the press for the first Sydney convention, which was held at the Ashfield Town Hall in the last week of the year. I looked diligently through the issues of the *Daily Telegraph* but failed to find a comment which I found particularly offensive. That was, if you'll forgive personal intrusion, the first convention at which I played piano. I took the all-day all-night train which left Spencer Street Melbourne at 8am and arrived at Central the following day, Boxing Day, at six o'clock in the morning.

The remark at which I took particular offence ran something like this: "The locals" (meaning the youth of Ashfield) "reckon they can drink any bodgie jazz whipsnapper under the table if they stick to milk shakes." Some puerile nonsense like that.

I couldn't swear to the use of the word "bodgie" in the report I was trying to find, but it certainly cropped up in other reports.

Pardon the digression, but in the *Sunday Sun* on December 31, a Kings Cross bodgie rejoicing in the name of Martin Kelvin Vaughan was quoted as saying "Now the truth about a bodgie is that you can't be one unless you've got commonsense, a lot of brains, a sense of colour and an appreciation of progressive jazz. We don't have any jargon except that people who appreciate progressive jazz are sharpies and those who don't are squares."

In that issue of the *Sunday Sun*, New Year's Eve, 1950, I was delighted to see a photo of John Cummings, 21 - the same John Cummings I'd first seen at the New Theatre, Melbourne, a week or two before the second Melbourne jazz convention in 1947.

Cummo was never a musician, as far as I knew, but there he was photographed playing a sousaphone and, according to the caption, a member of a band called Honk Atkins' Good-oh Washboard Whackers. And underneath that there was a photo of Alan Green, whom I seemed to remember from Melbourne days. Alan too, according to the caption, was a member of Honk Atkins' Good-oh Washboard Whackers.

This came as a great surprise to me because I was the pianist with the Honk Atkins' Good-oh Washboard Whackers, whose personnel for Ashfield Town Hall performances was, apart from me, Bill Miller on washboard, Ken Ingram on trombone and Keith Hounslow on trumpet deputising for the clarinettist Honk Atkins - whom I've seen only once since our last rehearsal at his house in Gardenvale, Melbourne, in November, 1950.

Joe James, who was treasurer of the 1948 jazz convention, came up from Melbourne for the first Sydney convention and was quoted in the *Sunday Sun* as saying: "I have noticed this in Sydney that we seem to be regarded as slightly comical, or even criminal. I can't understand it. Most of us dress in bright colours but we are perfectly normal men who think women are wonderful. We object to being whistled at in the street by taxi drivers."

Re-enter Ross Fusedale. In the *Daily Telegraph* of December 27, 1950, Ross is described as a Melbourne saxophone player. He was quoted as saying that all bodgies and long hairs are barred from playing jazz.

"There's no long-hairs or drape socks here," he said. "Jazz is a serious art - and has nothing to do with bop."

Well at least that statement put Ross in agreement with Charlie Parker, one of the creators of bop, who once said that bop was no love child of jazz.

Do we remember bodgies? I couldn't tell you when I first saw one, or when I last saw one.

A *Daily Telegraph* reporter who went to the first day of the Sydney jazz convention at Ashfield Town Hall said about 15 per cent of the onlookers (yes, onlookers, as opposed to audience) were bodgies, then went on to elucidate by explaining that bodgies were "teenagers in exaggerated American-style suits and Cornel Wilde haircuts".

And what did bodgie mean?

The Sydney *Sunday Sun* obligingly tells us that too. Bodgie, it said, was wartime slang for a disguised article. Ersatz. Doubtless we shall read the ultimate definition of bodgies and their significance in Australian culture in the Gail Brennan book to be published next month - *Bodgie Dada: Australian Jazz Subcultures*. Bodgies, widgees, cults, factions. I don't mind styles and fashions, provided they're good.

These have been merely random recollections and reflections from a man in his anecdotage. Not to harp on a theme, but I must say that a few months more notice - a full year, preferably - would have worked to the advantage of all of us. But due to circumstances beyond our control, etc. ...

Let me emphasise that this has been an honour for me. It's just on 34 years ago that Graeme Bell honoured me by asking me to be best man at his wedding. And it's almost 50 years ago since I first heard his music. Long may I, long may all of us continue to hear it - and long may he continue to produce it.

It is now my melancholy duty to declare this lecture almost closed - and then we can all be in the state of peace which broke out 50 years ago. Some peace; some break-out.

It would be a vision splendid to behold the jazz world at peace without being plagued by such bickering and feuding as are the stamp of insularity and parish-pump provincialism.

Or maybe it's better to maintain the rage, provided we maintain the enthusiasm as, for more than half a century, has Graeme Bell.

Dick Hughes.

Don't forget.....

**The 5th Doubly Gifted Exhibition and
4th Bell Jazz Lecture will be held during 1996**

General enquiries or further information
may be obtained from:

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