

A FOOTNOTE ON MERV ACHESON

by John Clare*

[This article appeared in the January/February, 1982 of Jazz Magazine, when Merv Acheson was still alive. Acheson died on August 11, 1987. Those interested in Merv Acheson are referred to Bill Boldiston's book Merv Acheson Remembered, which was published in 2015.]

He's a funny fellow, Merv," Graeme Bell once confided. There was a long silence in which he searched for a definition of the essential Merv Acheson. None was forthcoming. Like many before him, he gave up and settled for an anecdote: Bell and Acheson once got a job playing in Coffs Harbour on the North Coast of NSW for a few days. "We all had a wonderful time," said Bell, "swimming, walking in the countryside. We hadn't been out of the city for months. The weather was glorious. We all loved it, except Merv. He didn't like it at all. It seemed to annoy him. He stayed in his room reading all day."

Reading about gangsters most likely. I can imagine his annoyance. The countryside was an alien world whose existence he would rather not have acknowledged: and all that sunshine — well, it would not have seemed natural. I did once see Merv Acheson walking in broad daylight along Pitt Street, Sydney, and it was clearly not his element. His dead-white skin threw it off in an alabaster glare. The glare indeed, of white sepulchres.

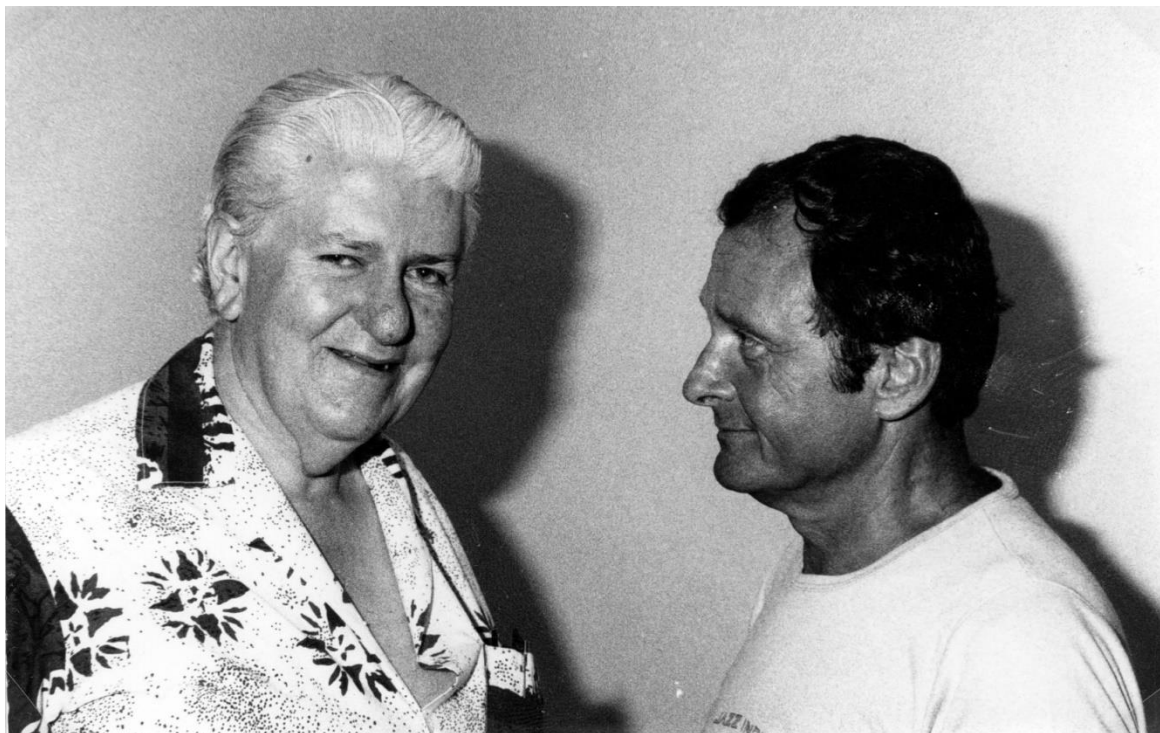


Merv Acheson: pictured in the Soup Plus, Sydney...PHOTO CREDIT JACK MITCHELL

*John Clare has written on diverse topics for most major Australian publications. He has published four books: *Bodgie Dada: Australian Jazz Since 1945*; *Low Rent*; *Why Wangaratta?*; *Ten Years Of The Wangaratta Festival of Jazz*; and *Take Me Higher*. His website is at <http://johnclare.extempore.com.au/>

Merv Acheson is a creature of the city, of jazz and the night, and of a specific era. He still lives and works in the remaining pockets of his own era in Sydney, like a rare white bird, in some diminishing reach of rainforest. Currently he is playing with Dick Hughes at Soup Plus in George St on Thursday and Friday nights. There's a bit too much Scandinavian oiled wood in there for it to be a true Merv Acheson habitat, but it is underground, and faces appear there from the old sporty days.

Merv Acheson's claim that there has been no real jazz since the 1940s is often repeated as a kind of joke, and it is sometimes hard to tell whether Merv himself is dead serious about it. While I was editing *Music Maker*, to which Merv contributed, he once came in very quietly, left an envelope on my desk, nodded solemnly and left. Usually he would have stayed and chatted. He had left a letter disparaging a wide spectrum of latter day musicians — all of them that he could think of, I suspect. I ran it with this note: "If I had not known that you were armed when you came in here Merv, I would not have consented to publish this ridiculous letter. It is true that Miles Davis was fired from Andy Kirk's band after a single night, but he was only 16 at the time..." And so on.



Acheson (left) pictured in 1980 with the American saxophonist Stan Getz...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

I am sure Merv was pleased to see the rumour revived that he carried a gun, and I know he was satisfied to have said his piece. He never mentioned the letter, nor my Editor's Note.

I believe Merv Acheson is serious. I also believe he is wrong, but his claim cannot be so lightly dismissed. In an article by Ray Sutton in *Music Maker*, Merv said that anyone who started playing later than the 1940s would not understand the feeling of jazz. Clearly, he believes that the jazz of the 1930s was a phenomenon inextricably meshed with its environment. If you never played in the old crim haunts, he implies,

you don't really know what the music means, just as I might say to young rockers: if you were not a teenager in the 1950s, don't try to tell me what rock and roll stands for.

However, rock and roll was not invented in the 1950s, and nor did Coleman Hawkins, Illinois Jacquet, Don Byas and Herschel Evans materialise in a vacuum. Further, I would say unto Merv, when music reaches a certain level it transcends its era and is akin to high music of all ages. It is my belief that there is a jazz tradition which changes through the decades but holds certain aspirations intact just as there is a European tradition to which Webern belongs as surely as Haydn.

By sticking to his — in my opinion — flawed philosophy, Merv Acheson has achieved something that is not too common in Australian jazz: authenticity. And authority. If time has softened Acho's flat baleful stare and made his aura more ghostly than menacing, it has done nothing to dim the brilliance of his playing.



Merv Acheson: the mouth is still a contemptuous beak when it snaps the tenor saxophone into its vindictive grip... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

The mouth is still a contemptuous beak when it snaps the tenor saxophone into its vindictive grip. Its control of tone and pitching is certain. Dead set, as they used to say. As they still say in the remaining pockets of Merv's era.

When he is cruising at the beginning of a night, his playing has an old world eloquence. It is even ornate; but the beat is running in it with implicit power. He throws up warm rugs of tenor sound and floats them down elegantly, back on the beat. By the second set, these rich upward sweeps have begun to ominously buzz. There is a curving bray to his long notes. By the end of the second set it is pouring out in a controlled fluid raging. Everyone has settled in. Acho has taken charge.

Merv Acheson is one of the best tenor saxophonists we have ever had. His style is a perfected thing. Yet it is not boring. It is a living monument, like Ayers Rock. Quite awe-inspiring really. It is time, I feel, to go and hear it again.