

THE TWO PATHS OF JAZZ

by Merv Acheson*

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Merv Acheson on tenor saxophone... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Part One

Jazz in Australia has travelled by two distinct paths - that of the professional musician and that of the dedicated amateur - and each has led to a completely different interpretation of the art form.

When jazz music hit this country in the 1920s the first people to be impressed were the professional musicians of the day, men who could play one or more instruments competently and who were already working in the entertainment field.

Misconceptions about the new music brought about some serio-comic results. A few musicians saw its real depth and worth, while the majority literally hopped onto the band-wagon to get with the latest craze. Dance halls thrived in the capital cities with big bands in which classically trained fiddlers scraped and conservatory clarinetists slurred and trilled, or worse still, attempted to do battle with the new-fangled C Melody saxophone (a bastard cross between the alto and tenor which has now mercifully gone into oblivion). "Jazz" spread to the country towns where the "Saturday Night Hop" band did terrible things to early popular tunes.



The C Melody saxophone, a bastard cross between the alto and tenor... PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA

But while all this was going on the minority of professional musicians who had delved into the origins of the music were expanding their mastery of the art, importing records or scrounging them from visiting foreign seamen, and whenever possible, travelling abroad to get experience. It was much easier than to work overseas. The tourist and travel industries were confined to shipping, and all ships catering for passengers had bands. A local player could sign on and work his way to America or Europe. Once there he could play practically anywhere with no restrictions. Union bans on visiting workers, quota systems and the stifling red tape of today were then unknown. In this way top musicians like the late and great Frank Coughlan were able to work with some of the best British and American jazzmen of that era in England and on the Continent. They then came home to impart their knowledge to up and coming players keen to enter the jazz field.



Multi-instrumentalist Frank Coughlan (left, here on trombone) pictured with his brother, the bassist Jack Coughlan: musicians such as Coughlan were able to work with some of the best British and American jazzmen of that era in England and on the Continent... PHOTO COURTESY JACK MITCHELL COLLECTION

Visiting American bands, an increasing flow of recordings from overseas, better instruments (particularly saxophones and drum kits), and new approaches to basic teaching methods saw jazz in Australia well on its way by the early 1930s. The big Palais bands began to employ "hot" soloists featured on certain arrangements throughout the evening, although most of the programme was devoted to corny dance melodies. Musicians who wanted to play jazz but did not get enough of it on the job, started to hold "jam sessions" after hours or on Sundays.

In those days there were dozens of little halls and dance studios scattered around Sydney which could be hired for a few shillings and it became customary for jazzmen to put in a little money each, get a hall and a keg or a few dozen bottles of beer, and play just what they wanted to for hours at a time. These sessions soon began to attract young students of music - some of them brought along by teachers or relatives actually playing at the session - and these youngsters brought their friends. A fan following started.

Because of the ground from which they sprang these musicians were not trad or Dixieland oriented. Their style of playing was the forerunner of the Swing Era and what is today called "mainstream jazz". The nearest approximation of the sound created would be, in a few words, comparable to a "jam" with men from the Luis Russell or Fletcher Henderson bands of the period. Not that the Australians were as polished or as good as the stars from those outfits, but that was the type of music they admired.



Australian jazz musicians were not trad or Dixieland oriented, but more akin to players in, say, the band of Fletcher Henderson (pictured above)... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN FORDHAM'S THE SOUND OF JAZZ

The mid - and late 1930s saw an upsurge of "swing" music in this country with the dance hall big bands adding more and more jazz type orchestrations to their libraries and hiring more "take-off" soloists. The private or semi-private jam sessions continued to proliferate in such places as Smith's Oriental Nightclub, the Black and White Artists' Club, the Polynesian Club and the Maxine Nightclub - all these on Sunday afternoons. I regularly played the Black and White Artists' and the Polynesian clubs with such men as Clive Whitcombe (drums - in the USA for the past 25 years), Jim Somerville (piano), Reg Robinson (bass), Tom Sterne (alto, clarinet, piano - long-time editor of the now defunct *Music Maker* magazine), and many others.



*Jim Somerville on piano with one of his early bands. Others are L-R, Clive Whitcombe (drums), Ken Flannery (trumpet) and Duke Farrell (bass).
PHOTO COURTESY PHIL SOMERVILLE*

The Sydney Swing Club held regular record sessions featuring everything from the Original Dixieland Jazz Band to Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington. On occasions it organized live music presentations by professional musicians, usually on a Sunday afternoon at one of the city nightclubs.

Musicians had long been queuing for the jobs available in the dozen or so after hours nightclubs where they could play more or less what they liked, and get paid for it, late at night when their work in the theatres and restaurants had ended. These nightclubs came and went regularly, changing hands and names rapidly, following police raids - for the law of the day said that no liquor could be sold anywhere after 6pm. Naturally this law was broken regularly as was the notorious American Volstead Act which attempted to enforce prohibition. A musician could work in the same building on the same bandstand for a year and have anything up to a dozen nominal employers and the same number of club names - but he didn't care if he could play his kind of music. And this music was not Trad or Dixie. It could best be called "small band swing".

Part Two

In the mid-thirties and towards the end of that decade while professional musicians were getting more and more involved in the swing music scene, playing in both big and small bands, many youngsters in schools and universities were becoming interested in the beginnings of jazz.

They admired the early New Orleans and Chicago styles, and were essentially purists — some even insisting that to be an art form, jazz should not be played for filthy lucre but purely as a creative experience for the soul.

This tenet conveniently overlooked the fact that every record available from America, Britain and Europe was played by paid professional musicians. The dedicated amateurs of jazz in the institutions of learning seem to have been much more active, both as budding instrument A lists and as connoisseurs, [more] in Melbourne than in Sydney where the professional musician to all intents and purposes had the field to himself.

However Newcastle has always been a jazz town and had a thriving jazz club with both live and recorded performances well before World War II. When war came in 1939, a lot of musicians enlisted or were drafted into the Australian services where many, because of their reading ability and technique, were immediately absorbed into military bands. Later, when the army instituted entertainment units presenting a whole variety show packed with bands ranging from about eight men to over thirty, army musicians with a big dance band or theatre orchestra background quickly transferred to them.



New York's 52nd Street in 1948... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM P GOTTLIEB

At about the same time this was taking place, America entered the war, and Australia was inundated with US servicemen. This was at the height of the swing music boom in that country with more than 400 touring big bands listed in *Downbeat* magazines,

and New York's 52nd Street becoming known world-wide as "Swing Street". Many Americans brought here with them a love of this music, or at least a liking for it.

Big bands proliferated in the palais of Australia, dozens of war-time charities organized dances for the troops both local and from abroad, the American Red Cross hired Australian musicians to entertain at army camps for their boys, clubs for officers and other ranks appeared rapidly in all big cities and they all had live bands.

The best Australian big band I ever heard and one in which I often played, was that led by the late drummer Giles O'Sullivan at the Booker T Washington club for coloured American servicemen in Sydney. This 13-piece band contained some of Australia's best and most colourful jazz personalities and played then new and exciting arrangements brought out specially by the American Red Cross. They included charts from the libraries of Count Basie, Erskine Hawkins, Chick Webb, Benny Goodman, Fletcher Henderson, Jay McShann and Jimmy Lunceford.

The American Army often arranged special leave for members of the Australian forces to play there. One of the great stars of the orchestra was that wonderful alto player Rolf Pommer, described by coloured American alto man Willie Smith, who was out here in the navy as "The best white alto in the world". Although he is still around the jazz spots Pommer no longer plays because of a medical problem that resulted in deafness in one ear.



Alto saxophonist Rolf Pommer: described by coloured American alto man Willie Smith as "the best white alto in the world"... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

While all this was going on the name American bands started arriving in this part of the world. Both Claude Thornhill and Bob Crosby got as far as New Zealand and were

then sent up to the Islands where many Australians had a chance to hear them. Artie Shaw, with his star-studded aggregation, made it to this country and appeared in nearly every capital city - although his concerts were supposed to be for members of the services and their girlfriends only, many fans managed to sneak in.

I remember that, as public relations man and leader of the jazz group in the army entertainment unit, the 116 Rhythm Ensemble, I was given about 50 double tickets to Shaw's concert at the Sydney Trocadero and for a couple of days, when the word got out, I was the most popular guy in town. That concert with Dave Tough, drums; Max Kaminsky, cornet; John Best, Conti Condoli and Frank Beach, trumpets; Rocky Colluccio, piano and Sam Donohue, tenor (later to lead the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra), and many other top players was a never to be forgotten experience.



The Artie Shaw concert at the Sydney Trocadero included Dave Tough (above, drums) and Max Kaminsky (below, cornet): a never to be forgotten experience...



Part Three

The greatest break ever given jazz musicians in the state of New South Wales was the introduction of 10pm closing for hotels in the summer of 1955-6. Previously all hotels had to close their doors at 6pm and the only bands they employed were a handful of wishy-washy sweet groups playing Saturday afternoon "tea-dances" in old English Palm Court surroundings.

Suddenly more than 1,000 hotels in the state found themselves in competition with each other. Laws allowing sales of liquor until late at night in nightclubs and restaurants were not yet in existence, but these flourished as they had for decades providing entertainment, some good middle of the road bands, and selling liquor illegally. This was done through a clause in the act which allowed liquor to be served at tables, provided it was ordered and paid for before 6pm. This was hardly ever done - patrons just walked in and ordered what they wanted at any hour, paying about twice the normal daytime price. There was the occasional raid when temperance, church, and other bluestocking pressure groups got heated up over something, but strangely these raids seemed always to be anticipated. Wealthy, famous, or infamous patrons were shown out the back way, and some never-before-seen "front man" in a hired waiter's uniform was there to take the rap. Next night it would be business as usual.

But the newly franchised hotels had to compete with these nightclubs and restaurants and to do that they needed entertainment. Some big hotel chains, such as the no longer existing Miller's, installed large flashy show bands, teams of dancing girls, acrobats, comedians and popular singers of the day. The small hotel in both city and suburbs had no money and no room for such extravaganzas. That was where the jazz bands came in - they were relatively small and compact, could play in a corner or behind a bar, played loud, cheerful music to drown out the Saturday night drunks, and were reasonably cheap even by the standards of 25 years ago. The award rate was somewhere around 3 pounds (\$6) per man for a three-hour show.



Harvey Bruce (left), a never to be forgotten jazz identity, hired Merv (right) and his band for the first night of 10pm closing...PHOTO COURTESY MERV ACHESON

I will always remember the first night of 10pm closing ... that never to be forgotten jazz identity, famed for more than 20 years in both Victoria and NSW, Harvey Bruce, had obtained the position of Maitre d'hotel in charge of the newly built beer garden at the Balaclava Hotel, Alexandria, an inner Sydney suburb. He invited me to take in the band, and I got together the late Dick McNally, trumpet, the late Kenny Green, piano, John Ceeney, drums, and hauling along my tenor and clarinet I turned up to play the date. All was confusion ... hundreds of people were struggling to get into the place which seated about 250. Maitre Harvey and a couple of assistants were desperately trying to stem the tide. We squeezed through, set up and began playing. In 20 minutes people were fighting over seats and tables, sitting on each others' laps, storming the bar, waiters were having trays of drinks ripped off them, and all hell had broken loose.



At the Parisienne Café, Campsie, in the late 40s: trumpeter Dick McNally is second from the left. Others, L-R, are Terry Wilkinson (piano), Ralph Mallen (trombone), bassist unidentified, Billy Mannix (tenor sax), Ron Mannix (alto sax)... PHOTO COURTESY CATHI WILKINSON

We kept on playing ... loudly and clearly! Next day I found out what happened. Entry was supposed to be free, but Harvey (I can say this because he passed away some eight years ago), had been selling preferred seating tickets in all the local pubs and betting shops for days beforehand - at 10/- (\$1) each, which in those days must have amounted to a considerable sum. We lasted only a few weeks at the Balaclava Hotel. After the first night's enthusiasm about the new timetable calmed down we found that the audience of very un-hep suburbanites just did not understand anything we were playing and did not like it anyhow. They preferred the discordant pianistics of

Mrs Bloggs from down the road (never 'ad a lesson in 'er life but she makes that pianner talk) and a variety of squawking amateur signers.

So we moved to greener pastures. I joined the Doc Willis band at the Port Jackson Hotel in George Street near Circular Quay, where we played behind the public bar for about a year until the management changed. Such musicians as Chris Hamilton and Terry McCardell (trumpets), Jimmy Shaw (drums), Jim Roach (piano), played in that band; and with them many more who sat in or deputised for a night or more.



Trombonist Doc Willis is pictured here (far left) with, clockwise L-R, Bob Cruickshanks (alto), Bob Barnard (trumpet), John McCarthy (clarinet), Dick Hughes (piano), Ray Price (banjo), at Macquarie Hotel, Sydney, 1958. PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

Conclusion

The introduction of late hotel closing in the mid-fifties was the catalyst that for the first time brought the full-time professional musician into close contact with the semi-professional or amateur jazzman. It came at just the right time. A short while earlier word had gone out from the Hollywood moguls that movie houses throughout the western worlds, receiving their products, should cease to have live orchestras, singers, dancers, and variety acts on the show or their supply of movies would be cut off. The motive for this appeared to be that the exhibitors would then need more movies, shorts, and cartoons, to fill up the shows.

Previously the big city picture theatres in all Australian states regularly employed bands of 20 or more musicians. These men were now on the market and looking for work. The edict also affected American name orchestras. Bands like Tommy Dorsey's, Jimmy Dorsey's, Duke Ellington's, Charlie Barnet's, Jimmy Lunceford's and Benny Goodman's had been making regular tours of theatres for years supplying a concert style presentation for the first half of the session, with a feature movie on after interval.

This was now all finished. This state of affairs, though not often mentioned, was one of the big changes that killed the big band era.



Merv Acheson (centre) pictured here with US clarinetist Pee Wee Russell (left) and Sydney trumpeter Terry McCardell... PHOTO CREDIT ALAN DOUST

In the Australian theatre orchestras were a lot of players who were devotees of jazz, and capable of playing that music very well indeed. Economic reasons, continuity of employment, and the prestige of playing a name theatre band, had kept them from the jazz marketplace, but now they went right into it. Those who did not care much about jazz gravitated towards the big hotel chains where their reading ability assured them of jobs backing lavish floor shows. But quite a few of the younger and keener ones settled for the small band jazz scene. These men were nearly all what would now be termed modernists - they favoured the work of the US big bands and smaller groups such as those put together by Benny Goodman, Lionel Hampton, Teddy Wilson, Art Tatum and the 52nd Street regulars like Coleman Hawkins and Roy Eldridge. They were not very well acquainted with New Orleans or Dixieland jazz, but were fervent admirers of technical virtuosity.

On the Sydney jazz scene as it was then, however, they soon met and mingled with traditional jazzmen and blended musically so that it was possible to work together in the small jam session type groups needed by the various hotels and clubs. And this is still happening with the professionals, the part time musos and the up-and-coming amateurs combining their talents on a great number of shows.

A final thought ... No other industry has been so hard hit by automation as that of the musician. And it is not, as some might believe, a new thing. In the 1920s and early 30s every one of the hundreds of movie houses in Australia employed at least a pianist to accompany the silent pictures and many hired five and six-piece bands. When the "talkies" struck, all these were fired. Next came the mass sackings of the big theatre bands described above; the ubiquitous juke box, and lately the disco. The poor old muso just can't win.