THE FORCE THAT WAS GRAEME BELL

by Loretta Barnard*

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E veryone knows that the origins of jazz are firmly rooted in black America, and many a learned tome has been penned over the years to explain how it came about and why it struck a chord with listeners, so I'm not going into that here. Suffice to say for the moment that American musicians and their music travelled across the world, spreading the jazz gospel.

Graeme Bell: a genuine Australian pioneer who helped give Australian jazz a big voice…AOMG

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Jazz as a genre is largely undervalued by the bulk of society, which is a terrible shame because it's such a creative and vibrant music and offers listeners so much on so many levels. Australian jazz musicians more than hold their own on the global stage: they are inventive, experimental, virtuosic. We have world-class exponents of all the major jazz styles – truly there's something for everyone. And it may surprise you to know just how long our jazz history is in this country.

In his excellent book *Black Roots White Flowers: a history of jazz in Australia* (1979) Australian jazz historian Andrew Bisset suggested that Sydney may have heard "real" jazz music before Chicago did. In 1915, the first major jazz band to perform in Chicago – the Original Creole Band from New Orleans – was billed as "coming direct from the Hippodrome Theatre in Sydney, Australia". Bisset explains that although this hasn't been confirmed, he thought it likely. Why would a band be promoted that way unless there was some truth in it?

Australian jazz historian Andrew Bisset: he suggested that Sydney may have heard "real" jazz music before Chicago did... PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS

So our love affair with jazz goes back a long way, but Australian jazz as a thing really didn't come into its own until the 1930s. According to jazz historian Bill Haesler, while there were jazz clubs in Sydney and Melbourne quite early, it really wasn't until the late 1930s in Melbourne that jazz was played professionally for its own sake by musicians such as Ade Monsbourgh (1917-2006) and Roger and Graeme Bell. Haesler writes: "it was the Bell brothers and associates who eventually took undiluted jazz music to the public". Graeme Bell ultimately became known as the "father of Australian jazz", a label that will forever be applied to him*.

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Editor's note: although it is true that the "father of Australian jazz" accolade was often applied to Graeme Bell, it is well-known that Graeme himself maintained that the real father of Australian jazz was Frank Coughlan.

Graeme Bell was born in 1914 to a very musical family. His mother was a contralto who toured with Dame Nellie Melba; his father sang musical comedy sketches. Graeme and his brother Roger (1919-2008) were classically trained, but in the 1930s Roger, soon to become one of our pioneering jazz trumpeters, discovered Dixieland jazz and enthusiastically shared his discovery with Graeme who embraced this exciting new music. By the end of the decade, the Bell brothers were playing at local dances and in 1941, Graeme decided to form Graeme Bell's Jazz Gang, later known as Graeme Bell's Australian Jazz Band.

L-R, Roger Bell, Graeme Bell: both were classically trained, but Roger discovered Dixieland jazz and enthusiastically shared his discovery with Graeme, who embraced this exciting new music... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION

Graeme was very enterprising, sometimes even creating gigs to sidestep the law that prohibited live entertainment and public dancing on Sundays. For instance, in 1941 he hired a function room at the St Kilda Baths in Melbourne every Sunday night; he then had membership cards printed to hand to each patron so that they could legally attend a "function" at that venue.

Bell's band also played dance halls, ballrooms, coffee lounges, university lawns. People came to dance, listen or simply to seek welcome distraction from the reports of war. Bell and other bands of the time inspired an energetic live music scene and the jazz message continued to spread. Ever the dynamo, in 1946 Bell set up the Uptown Club, a cabaret and jazz venue, and it's nice to know that all these decades later, there's still an Uptown jazz club in Melbourne.

The Bell band at the Uptown Club in 1947, L-R, Cy Watts (trombone), Pixie Roberts (clarinet), Sid Kellalea (drums), Ade Monsbourgh (trumpet), Lou Silbereisen (bass), Roger Bell (trumpet), Graeme Bell (piano)... PHOTO COURTESY GRAEME BELL AUSTRALIAN JAZZMAN

By the mid-1940s, the Bell band had secured a regular gig at the Eureka Youth League, a communist organisation, which partly sponsored the band's trip to Czechoslovakia so they could participate in the Youth Festival in Prague. This was a remarkable opportunity to take Australian jazz to the world, but to make it actually happen required a massive amount of fundraising, band members even selling personal possessions to raise the cash needed.

These days, Australians travel all over the world all the time, but back in 1947 not many Australians had the money to do this. In addition, it was difficult to get passage – the war was not long over and troops were still being repatriated from one country to another. And it was a long trip by ship which then docked in England; the band had to get from there to Prague. This was a very big deal. It was also history-making: Graeme Bell was the first bandleader to take an Australian jazz band to Europe, and when their two-week engagement in Prague was extended to four months, the band became internationally famous. The band went on to tour the United Kingdom and Bell is credited as the Australian leader in the worldwide jazz revival. Critics have said that it was Bell's injection of a bit of "larrikinism" into his music that gave his brand of jazz a distinctive Australian zing.

On their return, Bell toured Australia for the ABC. He'd made his name abroad, now it time to conquer his own country. As mentioned, Bell was a bit of a powerhouse and as well as performing, he also began to promote jazz. He brought a number of American jazz musicians to Australia, notably American cornet player Rex Stewart, and he made a point of recording with international artists, including the English trumpet legend Humphrey Lyttleton.

American cornet player Rex Stewart (left), with Roger Bell in Melbourne in 1949... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Bell also helped to found the iconic jazz record label Swaggie, which set about recording Australian jazz musicians, although after it was sold in 1954 the label also reissued classic American recordings. Bill Haesler comments that without Swaggie Records there would be very little recorded Australian jazz from the 1960s-1980s, so its foundation was a hugely important act. We are fortunate that this recorded jazz history was made and can still be enjoyed.

A small example of the enormous Swaggie catalogue... PHOTO COURTESY ORIGIN RECORDINGS

Bell toured Europe again and entertained Australian troops in Korea and Japan in 1953. Over the next few years, he opened an art gallery (he was a gifted painter as well), he took students and made arrangements of pieces for other musicians and bands. In 1957, Bell moved to Sydney for good. In 1962, he formed a new band, the All Stars. One of the musicians he hired was my father the young Melbourne trumpeter Bob Barnard.

The Graeme Bell All Stars in the early 1960s, L-R, Graham Spedding, Bob Barnard, Ken Herron, Lawrie Thompson, Bell (holding violin), Harry Harman...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ LOVERS

The All Stars enjoyed a residency at the Chevron Hotel in Kings Cross, a very ritzy nightclub, attracting local and international guest artists and very appreciative audiences, keen for the comedy routines (performed by band members) as much as the music. They did seven shows a week for two years, toured a great deal and recorded for various television shows. It wasn't long before Bell had his own national weekly television program – *Trad Pad* (later changed to *Just Jazz*), making Graeme Bell a household name. So famous was Bell at the time that a photograph of his band appeared on the official *Sydney Tourist Guide* in June 1964.

One of Bell's strengths was a sense of entrepreneurship and a real connection with audiences. He had an eye for talent and only ever engaged good musicians, he knew what people wanted to hear and he delivered. Bell had a knack of producing what others have termed a "freewheeling" style of jazz, where listeners felt free to tap their feet, holler out encouragement and generally show their appreciation of the music. As pianist and writer Dick Hughes later said, "He thought that rather than being played in concert halls for people who took the whole thing terribly seriously, jazz should get back to its original function as dance music".

Over the next few decades, Bell recorded extensively, performed across Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, China, Japan, Europe and North America. He played with a who's who of the jazz and wider entertainment world both from at home and abroad. He was made a Member of the British Empire in 1978 and an Officer in the Order of Australia in 1990, just two years after he'd published his autobiography, which if you can get hold of, is well worth the read. In 1997 he was inducted into the Aria Awards Hall of Fame. All well deserved accolades for this irrepressible musician, bandleader and composer, who made over 1,500 recordings across his almost 70-year musical career.

In 2003, when he was 90, Bell formed the Graeme Bell Reunion Band which performed a number of engagements and made a recording. That same year, the Australian Jazz Awards were instigated. They are now known as "the Bells" in recognition of Graeme's extraordinary influence on Australian jazz.

The Graeme Bell Reunion Band, 2012, L-R, Bell (piano), David Blenkhorn (guitar), Jack Wiard (reeds), Bob Henderson (trumpet), Lawrie Thompson (drums), Dieter Vogt (bass), Paul Furniss (reeds)...

On a personal note, I remember Graeme with affection. I was a little girl when my father first worked with him, and although he later left the Bell band, we continued to see a great deal of the Bells – Graeme, his wife Dorothy and their son Jason, because they lived nearby. Bell also had a daughter Christina from a previous marriage. He was a friendly open man always taking the time to talk to we kids and interested in what we were listening to or reading. As my brothers grew up and went into the music business too, Graeme was always happy to offer them guidance. He was a generous man indeed. He died in 2012 at the grand old age of 97.

Graeme Bell died in 2012 at the grand old age of 97... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Bell's particular brand of traditional jazz is no longer as popular as it once was, and like any other artistic movement, jazz has changed and developed over the decades. Here in Australia we have internationally acclaimed jazz musicians dedicated to their art. They play a range of jazz subgenres, from the old to the new and everything in between and even beyond. Jazz today is something of a niche genre, but there are plenty of discerning listeners out there who enjoy the textures and beauty of this most creative of all music. Whatever form it takes, Australian jazz owes a debt of gratitude to musicians like Graeme Bell – a genuine Australian pioneer who helped give Australian jazz a big voice. His was a life well lived.

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