

12TH TAC WANGARATTA FESTIVAL OF JAZZ 2001

by John Clare* with a brief introduction on the Peace Process

There are morons in Sydney who call Melbourne 'Bleak City', having no receptors for the subtle and intense atmospheric changes of our most fascinating capital. But everyone I know loves Melbourne, and at any rate all that nonsense is left behind when we meet at Wangaratta. Therefore I was distressed to hear rumours of a jihad stirring in the warm South. Some Bin Laden type was howling a prophecy that would madden the remotest resident of Reservoir with dreams of paradise. If enough hatred was directed north, infidel Sydney would explode in time loop for ever and ever and ever.

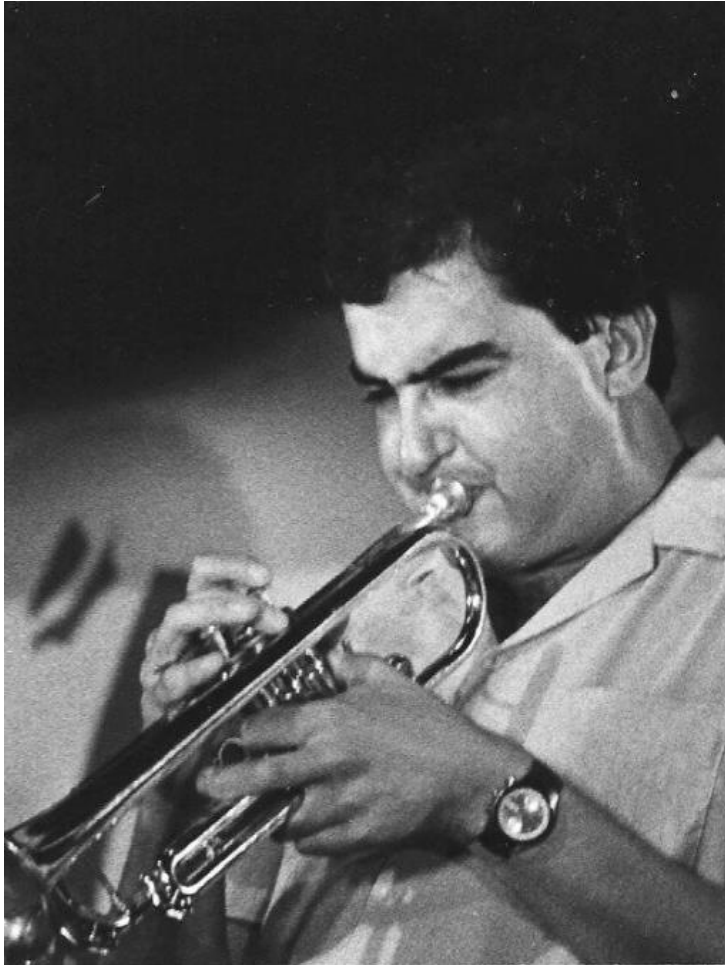


Two brilliant Melbourne musicians, Steve Grant and Don Stewart, declared that Sydney's James Greening (left) was just about their favourite trombonist "in the whole world"...
PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS

On the first night I did encounter some infantile chauvinism. A group of good old southern boys gave the stranger the dead eye each time he tried to be friendly. But Allah is merciful, and this evaporated as the joyful music of Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and elsewhere unrolled over the next few balmy days. Great Melbourne friends began appearing out of the sunshine, two brilliant Melbourne musicians I didn't know well at all - Steve Grant and Don Stewart - declared that Sydney's James Greening was just about their favourite trombonist "in the whole world", and Wangaratta was restored. Don't let's throw it away!

**When this was written in late 2001, John Clare was writing for the "Sydney Morning Herald", the "Australian Financial Review" and "The Australian's Review of Books". His previously published books included "Bodgie Dada & the Cult of Cool", "Low Rent" and "Why Wangaratta?"*

Seriously, Melbourne has better everything, if you insist, but some of us live in Sydney for reasons you may never have contemplated. In my case a certain raw natural beauty. I can surf at Maroubra with fairy penguins hunting beside me between waves and tern hurtling down like stukas with their angled wings. Call me a philistine but that is my culture. For civic beauty, style, lanes, arcades, coffee shops, pastel subtleties of the Bay, the Melbourne Shuffle, etc etc, I love to visit Melbourne. But all pretension to superiority is cancelled the moment you begin sneering and jeering at others.

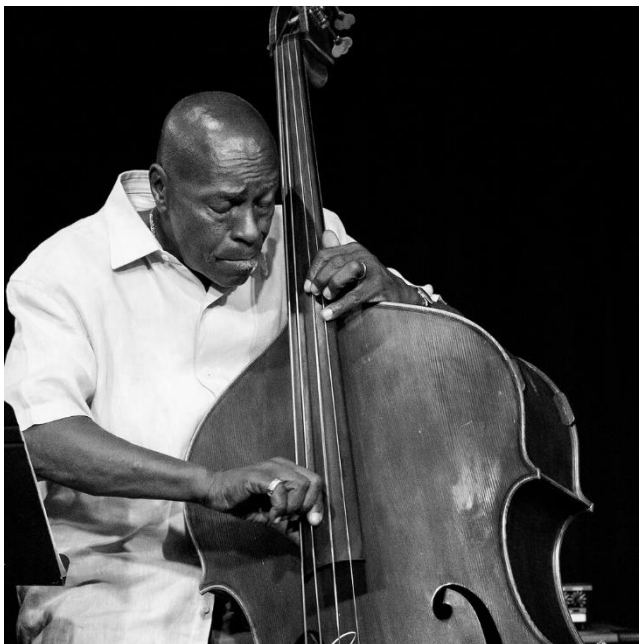


The Sydney trumpeter Warwick Alder: he played a series of elegant, fiery, yet oddly fragile solos that were highlights of the festival... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

Okay. This festival far exceeded my expectations. Curtis Lundy and Odean Pope (who has been here before) were not international guests who excited anticipation in the way, for instance, Arthur Blythe, Mark Helias or Sam Rivers had. But there was an international dark horse in the German band Pata Masters, and they gave delightful, clear, fresh, inventive and buoyant recitals in which composition and improvisation, acoustic and electronic sounds, were unusually well integrated. The instruments included flutes ranging down to the giant sub-contrabass!, slitted wooden bass

drums and gongs, tenor saxophone, drum kit and electronics - all as good to look at as they were to hear.

Of Curtis Lundy, trumpeter Warwick Alder said, “His manner was sometimes a bit outlandish and his instructions often not very clear, but as soon as he played the bass I knew what he was about!” Alder himself played a series of elegant, fiery, yet oddly fragile solos that were highlights of the festival. In the same league was the masterful playing of Paul Furniss. But back to Lundy. He had under his admittedly eccentric command a group of top drawer Australians, most of them best known in hard bop areas. And that's what they played. It is a music born in archetypical small jazz clubs, terrifically exciting up close but quite often distant and sterile in the concert hall. Lundy's local lads, under his unpredictable direction, managed to project the excitement of a small club and direct sound into the big hall, and while it got better and better with each performance, I thought it was on from the start. Critics, we hope, try to be objective, but we have our mysterious likes and dislikes, in ice cream flavours as well as musicians. I had not been crazy about the clearly excellent pianist Mark Fitzgibbon until these performances. With Lundy - and I would think the drumming of Danny Fischer was a significant factor here - he seemed somehow lighter, less muscular, yet more swinging and airborne. He was dazzling in the best sense.



American bassist Curtis Lundy: according to Warwick Alder, his manner was sometimes a bit outlandish and his instructions often not very clear...

Speaking of fine trumpet playing, Eugene Ball, leading the Melbourne band Donut, startled me with the progress he has made. Always inventive, often original, compelling to hear, he has now added technical mastery and perhaps a more intense drive. Donut, in which Steve Grant replaced their usual pianist Colin Hopkins, bring something fresh, satisfying and very Melbourne to the acoustic sextet format. Several

of the members can be heard on Andrea Keller's outstanding *Thirteen Sketches* on Newmarket.



Eugene Ball: always inventive, often original, compelling to hear, he has now added technical mastery and perhaps a more intense drive...

PHOTO COURTESY MELBOURNE JAZZ CO-OPERATIVE

The first band I heard, immediately on arrival and almost reluctant to step in out of the late afternoon sun, was Melbourne's Snag, who were a delight. Steve Magnusson, with the beautiful colours of his effects pedals, was the perfect guitarist for this rock-influenced and distinctive band, which on this occasion anyway achieved a clean aerial quality, full of power but judiciously restrained just at the point of going over the top.



Steve Magnusson (above) with the beautiful colours of his effects pedals, was the perfect guitarist for the rock-influenced and distinctive band Snag... PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL

Young WA band Frames Of Mind had some of Snag's attributes - clean, fluent, sparkling sound, enthusiasm, vitality - without having yet found as distinctive a path as the more experienced Melburnians. Plenty of signs that they will, however.

Absolutely over the top, pointedly and ecstatically so, was punk-rock/free-jazz/R&B outfit Bucketrider, who have quite a following in Melbourne. Some of their fans speak in a kind of hyperthyroid version of the Valley Girl accent which sits oddly beside the punk influences - 'Is he into creative math?' I heard one girl say, with math pronounced maaarth - but the Bucketriders poured forth such a joyful aggression that I decided to speak like that as well - or should I say as waaahrl? The dancing of saxophonists Tim O'Dwyer and Adam Simmons had an antique and quite inspiring effect. True, nobody has that kind of visual flair in Sydney.



Saxophonist Tim O'Dwyer: his dancing and that of saxophonist Adam Simmons had a quite inspiring effect... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIE LYOU

With an expanded line-up which included fantastic drummer Will Guthrie the Bucketriders also gave a recital of Coltrane's simultaneously solemn and uproarious *Meditations*, somehow conquering the very live acoustic of St Patricks Hall, and introducing an ecumenical note (these works of Coltrane's often remind me of the horn relays and chanting of a Tibetan ensemble: the solemnity of the eternal.)



The Bucketriders also included drummer Will Guthrie (left), described by John Clare as "fantastic"... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Free playing holds audiences in Wangaratta - an international visitor observed people he would never associate with this music sitting there and taking it like men, and women - but my son Mathew Clare's band Freedivers (a reference to our deep snorkeling out from Sydney's cliffs) sent masses fleeing. Those who remained were very enthusiastic indeed. I really can't say - conflict of interest and all that - whether it was actually any good, but the *Sydney Morning Herald's* John Shand said that this was the most original development of the free jazz tradition that he heard. He also said the same of the Andrew Robson Trio. What would he know? A Kiwi for godsake.



The Sydney Morning Herald's John Shand: what would he know? A Kiwi for godsake... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Speaking of which, Judy Bailey's septet presented some of her excellent ensemble writing and distinctive, unmistakable piano in St Patrick's. The small sampling of Chelate Compound that I heard showed some considerable advance in vocal control and improvisatory invention by the highly original singer/songwriter Michele Morgan.



Another Kiwi Judy Bailey: her septet presented some of her excellent ensemble writing and distinctive, unmistakable piano... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

I did not hear Odean Pope's Saxophone Choir. Many said that Serge Ermoll's piano solo was the highlight of the first performance, with further applause for Tim O'Dwyer, Adam Simmons and others. Pope's trio was most enjoyable. The leader has one of the great tenor saxophone sounds - a very distinctive dark tone, hinting perhaps at Don Byas - and this time round he deployed it with much more subtlety, continuity and invention over swing and Afro-Latin rhythms. As a full bore energy player he is not in the league of Mark Simmonds, for instance, but I would like to have heard him punctuate his performance with some of the aggression from the last time we heard him.



American saxophonist Odean Pope: one of the great tenor saxophone sounds, a very distinctive dark tone, hinting perhaps at Don Byas... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

The new marquee venue, where I heard enjoyable performances by Ian Chaplin's techno/jazz band Decoy and The World According To James, works very well. In fact the sound folks seemed to get a better saxophone reproduction here than elsewhere. Or maybe Andrew Robson just sounded better than everyone else! Actually Ian Chaplin also sounded fantastic in his acoustic jazz set in the Town Hall. All in all, the sound was the best I have heard at these festivals, in all venues.



Ian Chaplin: he sounded fantastic in his acoustic jazz set in the Town Hall...PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

Through some aberration the only traditional jazz I heard was the San Francisco Jazz Band, founded by the late Tom Baker and led for some time by Paul Furniss. Superb. Groping for a word to describe Furniss, I was happy to let Ian Date supply it: “incandescent”. I kick myself for missing Tony Newstead's first Wangaratta performance. Likewise, I only heard one blues performance, and it was not officially part of the festival. Jim McFloyd's Blues Band were rock solid in the front yard of the Sydney Hotel. Sunshine, the blues, and the river nearby with the weir overflowing. Could be worse. And a mug overflowing with the warm South.



With the San Francisco Jazz Band, leader Paul Furniss's playing was described by guitarist Ian Date as “incandescent”....PHOTO CREDIT RON JOBE

My only excuse is that I have been extremely ill and tended to go to performances when I was feeling good. (I missed last year, 2001) for two reasons: my mother's funeral at Bendigo and a desire to get back to Sydney for the results of a nuclear scan for bone cancer). Still, this year I went to more than most. More than enough to say that this remarkable event maintains its best traditions.

Wangaratta is a forum, unmatched in my experience, for the spectrum of jazz and its offshoots and relatives. The variety of music presented under the one heading - jazz - is quite remarkable. It is also a meeting place for musicians from different states. I was vastly relieved to see that the friendliness and curiosity continues. I only missed seeing the great Allan Browne, master musician, distinguished poet and wit.



John Clare missed seeing the great Allan Browne (above), master musician, distinguished poet and wit... PHOTO CREDIT RON JOBE

Finally, Vince Jones was flying on the last night. He began with a fast version of *September In The Rain*, spinning the melody out with a series of rhythmically loose but accurately pitched melisma that had a thrilling effect. He played a couple of very

nice trumpet solos indeed. His Sydney band did him proud. A couple of his new songs are co-written with pianist Matt McMahon.



Vince Jones (left), pictured here with Matt McMahon at the piano...

After that, Melbourne bassist Matt Clohesy and drumming compatriot Scott Lambie grooved ecstatically with visiting pianist Henry Butler, who played in both the jazz and blues (with guitarist Corey Harris) sections of the festival.

Largeness and power characterised Butler's piano statements, whatever the idiom. He sang a powerful version of *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, recalling Nina Simone in the way piano and voice were deployed simultaneously with equal force. You probably won't be too surprised to learn that he closed with a medley that included Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane and the Henry Glover classic *Drown In My Own Tears* (made famous by Ray Charles).



Blind American pianist Henry Butler: largeness and power characterised his piano statements, whatever the idiom...

For the first time I heard not one heat of the National Jazz Awards competition, which was for bass. Many were amazed that Melbourne's Philip Rex and Sydney's Brett Hirst did not make the finals. Brendan Clarke won, and what a relief that was for me as I had half a million dollars riding on him! Kerry Packer foolishly shot his mouth off and I challenged him to put his money up. Seriously, Brendan is a beautiful player with a great sound, and a very modest fellow who was genuinely shocked by his victory. A group of the good old boys picked up their instruments and marched out in a tight platoon as he began his brief, self-effacing speech.



Brendan Clarke, who won the National Jazz Awards competition: he is a beautiful player with a great sound, and a very modest fellow who was genuinely shocked by his victory... PHOTO CREDIT GARY DARK

One musician told me he thought the Perth electric bassist Dane Alderson was the winner on the day. Can't comment, but he must have been good. He was third, with superb Melbourne bassist Matt Clohesy second.

Footnote: I have not been overwhelmed by every international guest at Wangaratta, but there have been enough who were fascinating and/or exciting enough to justify the tradition. Who would I like to see? Don Byron, Dave Douglas, Steve Coleman, Kenny Wheeler... Would the budget extend to any of them?