

AVANT-GARDE TO NEW ACCESSIBILITY: SOME MOVEMENTS IN SYDNEY EXPERIMENTAL JAZZ

by Gail Brennan/John Clare*

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It may seem odd that allegedly avant-garde bands such as Wanderlust, Clarion Fracture Zone, The Necks, The Last Straw, Ten Part Invention, Lisa Parrott's Melody Rhythm Ensemble, The Engine Room, the Bernie McGann Trio, The Catholics and Mark Simmonds's Freeboppers have found favour with a young audience for whom rock accessibility is a high priority if not a demand. Some very simple explanations can be found.



Allegedly avant-garde bands such as Wanderlust (above) and Clarion Fracture Zone (below) have found favour with a young audience for whom rock accessibility is a high priority if not a demand. (Personnel of these two groups are listed below on page 11)...



**When this was written in 1992, John Clare was the Sydney Morning Herald's jazz critic, writing under the pseudonym Gail Brennan, and a columnist with the free newspaper On The Street.*

First, these bands do not represent the extreme avant-garde, but they use avant-garde elements along with ethnic music inputs, rock, funk and many other contemporary sources. That they are often called avant-garde is symptomatic of the big sleep that descended on Australian criticism after the 1950s, which probably resulted in turn from a generation of modern jazz enthusiasts reaching marriage and home-buying age. Understandably, they were too preoccupied to follow new jazz developments and anything different was assigned to the inaccessible, too hard, avant-garde basket. It is a shame that this practice continues.

Bands and musicians who today occupy a consistently avant-garde position include Roger Dean's Australysis, Tony Buck in certain projects, Mind Body Split, Ear Rational Music, Roger Frampton in certain projects, Serge Ermoll's Free Kata, Jim Denley and James Fielding.



Musicians who today occupy a consistently avant-garde position include Free Kata (above), L-R, Louis Burdett (drums), Serge Ermoll (piano), Eddie Bronson (saxophone), and groups led by Jim Denley (below)... PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN



Second, the avant-garde was and is ahead of its time, as well it should be if it is to warrant the name. Invited to DJ at a venue one night, I played John Coltrane's *Africa Brass* and Pharoah Sanders's *Jewels Of Thought* and some young listeners thought that these had been recorded this year.



When John Clare as a guest DJ played John Coltrane's *Africa Brass* (above) and Pharoah Sanders's *Jewels Of Thought* (below), some young listeners thought these had been recorded in 1992....



Third, ours is not the only period in which elements of the avant-garde have been enthusiastically received. Ornette Coleman's New York club appearances were consistently packed, and Coleman remains an international attraction. John Coltrane left a substantial estate. While many critics called him inaccessible, large audiences greeted him rapturously.



Don Cherry (left) & Ornette Coleman, pictured in the Five Spot club in New York, which was consistently packed... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The terms 'avant-garde' and 'free jazz' began to be used in the late 1950s, although 'avant-garde' had cropped up as a description of earlier modern jazz. Under these sometimes misleading headings a diverse range of musical activity flourished, and sometimes struggled. Basically, the practitioners were trying to stretch the range and means of expression with reference to everything that had gone before, in jazz and several other strands of music. This meant not only essays in extreme improvisational freedom, but the incorporation of elements of folk and classical musics from various parts of the world. Not only were fierce rhythmic and arhythmic onslaughts employed, but the music also explored the tranquil and meditative effects of a seemingly pulseless flow, and of ethereal still points, elements previously only hinted at in jazz and found more often in European classical music. Once the ideal of freedom had been proclaimed, who could complain if a musician suddenly broke into country-and-western or a Swahili song? The only relevant question is: does it add meaningfully to the group endeavour?

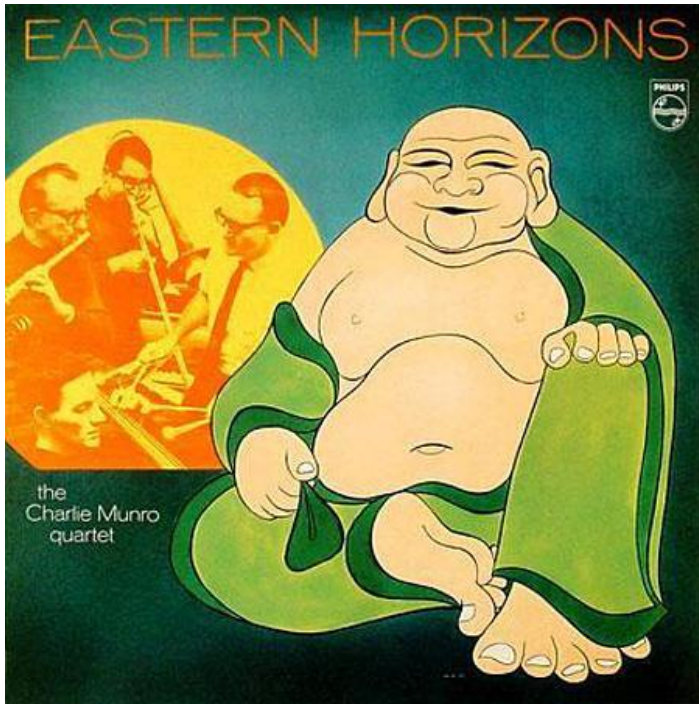
Masters of the sound collage, like The Art Ensemble Of Chicago and Sun Ra And His Intergalactic Arkestra, were Postmodernists before their time. The term World Music was actually being used decades ago by so-called avant-gardists, such as Lester Bowie and Don Cherry.



*Masters of the sound collage, like The Art Ensemble Of Chicago (above) and Sun Ra (below) and His Intergalactic Arkestra, were Postmodernists before their time...
PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN*



An Australian landmark of avant-garde and world music was created in 1968 by the late Charles Munro, on his album *Eastern Horizons*. Munro, born in New Zealand, was, amongst other things, the most authoritative multi-instrumentalist Australian jazz has known. On *Eastern Horizons* he made powerful use of the cello (on which he had received extensive classical training), the tenor, alto and soprano saxophones, and the flute. On all his wind instruments he was basically self-taught.



On Eastern Horizons Charlie Munro made powerful use of the cello, on which he had received extensive classical training... PHOTO CREDIT WALLY GLOVER

Two things are immediately apparent on *Eastern Horizons*: that Munro has studied Eastern modes, and that he can elicit extremely convincing Eastern and avant-garde jazz effects from all his instruments. Improvisations which are initially based on an oriental mode soon move out into areas of extreme freedom. The transition seems seamless and completely natural.

Munro's new directions were first apparent within bands led by pianist Bryce Rohde, who had begun working with modes in the 1950s as had pianist David Levy. Rohde and important bassist/composer Bruce Cale often played at Sydney's El Rocco, and so did multi-instrumentalist and composer John Sangster, who is probably unique in that he has contributed importantly to Australian traditionalism, modernism and the avant-garde.



The Bryce Rohde Quintet, L-R, Bruce Cale (bass), Rohde (piano), Mark Bowden (drums). Sid Powell (saxophone), Charlie Munro (saxophones & flute)... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CALE

In the late 1960s, Sangster began a period of radical experimentation, mainly in the El Rocco. The club was in the basement of a Kings Cross building and Sangster lived on the roof. Musicians who participated included Alan Turnbull, Judy Bailey, Graeme Lyall and Bob Melvor (who is also on *Eastern Horizons*). Sangster was keen not only to explore improvisational freedom, but to have musical accidents happen. In some ways he was reverting to the strange noises and happy accidents that are to be found in some early jazz. As bandleader for the rock musical *Hair*, Sangster was able to use some of his stranger devices, particularly during the LSD trip interlude.

Pianist Bob Gebert (described by Sangster as the most advanced pianist in Australia) was another important contributor at this time and in the 1980s, when he played with saxophonist Mark Simmonds. Gebert, Munro and Sangster can be heard together on the album *Jazz Australia*.



Pianist Bob Gebert, described by John Sangster as “the most advanced pianist in Australia”... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

From the early 1960s to the present, drummer John Pochée and alto saxophonist Bernie McGann have often stretched their hard-bop-based music into areas of avant-garde freedom. Even when they stay more or less within a modern jazz format, they create an interplay and execute solo figures of such originality that they are always of interest from an avant-garde, or any other, point of view.



Drummer John Pochée (left) and alto saxophonist Bernie McGann have often stretched their hard-bop-based music into areas of avant-garde freedom... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Pianist and composer Roger Frampton, one of the most important figures in the avant-garde (and in other areas) began working in a trio with bassist Jack Thorncraft and drummer Phil Treloar in 1972. With the addition of American saxophonist Howie Smith, this Jazz Co-op spearheaded a quite prolific, and often very well-attended and received, burst of contemporary music activity at Sydney's Basement. Frampton also toured Europe with an improvisation group led by avant-garde composer David Ahern. Free improvisation was, however, only one facet of the Co-op's approach by the time it played the Basement (as it was of John Pochée's The Last Straw). Absolute commitment to free improvisation with no premeditated structure whatsoever was epitomised by Free Kata, a group led by pianist Serge Ermoll, which, in its final manifestation consisted of Ermoll, drummer Louis Burdett, saxophonist Charles Bronson, and myself. At various times it also included English violinist Jon Rose and bassist Richard Ochalski.



Jazz Co-Op, pictured in 1974, performing at The Basement: they spearheaded a quite prolific, and often very well-attended and received, burst of contemporary music activity at Sydney's Basement... PHOTO CREDIT HARVEY SHIELDS COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER

Ermoll's instructions to me were that I should improvise a flow of words as fast as the musicians were playing notes. This was impossible, but the energy and drama of Free Kata's performances were at times actually frightening on stage. How good we were is not for me to say, but we got standing ovations. Ermoll recorded the band independently (*Free Kata Vols 1 & 2*). He has recently reformed Free Kata with Burdett, and my son Matthew Clare on alto saxophone.

The next wave of activity is the one that has most directly affected today's music. This began with the formation in the late 1970s of the Keys Music Association (KMA), a co-operative inspired by the black American co-operative from which bands like the Art Ensemble sprang. A very diverse range of approaches were tried under the KMA umbrella. In 1980 promoter Horst Liepolt found them a regular outlet at the Paradise Room at Kings Cross. Here, bands such as The Benders and The Freeboppers were formed.



The band Keys, flagship orchestra of the Keys Music Association, L-R, Robin Gador, bass, Azo Bell, gtr, Brett Butler, percussion, Searle Indyk, viola, Daniel Fine, alto sax & flute, Peter Fine, piano & clarinet, Paul Roger, drums & percussion, Peter Dehlson, drums & percussion, Mark Simmonds, tenor sax, clarinet, trumpet, Raoul Hawkins, trombone & bass... PHOTO COURTESY ENCORE MAGAZINE

Other important combinations included Great White Noise and Women And Children First. KMA members Mark Simmonds, Chris Abrahams, Sandy Evans, Lloyd Swanton, Dale Barlow, Jason Morphett, Andrew Gander, Miroslav Bukovsky and Tony Buck play today in many of the bands mentioned at the beginning of this condensed history.

More so than previous generations of experimentalists, the KMA movement incorporated hard rock and funk. Swanton and Bukovsky in particular developed a strong interest in various ethnic musics. Many of these players have relaxed from any extreme avant-garde positions they may have held, but bold and free use of colour, texture and rhythm still characterises their highly accessible work. Those who still push into the more severely avant-garde regions offer an experience of sometimes

spine-chilling intensity, and young people seem to like this too. Strange as it may seem.



Lloyd Swanton (above) & Miroslav Bukovsky (below) in particular developed a strong interest in various ethnic musics... PHOTOS CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY



Personnel of Wanderlust & Clarion Fracture Zone (See pics on page 1):

Wanderlust, L-R, Adam Armstrong (bass), James Greening (trombone), Fabian Hevia (drums & percussion), Alister Spence (keyboards), Jeremy Sawkins (guitar), Miroslav Bukovsky (trumpet, flugelhorn)...

Clarion Fracture Zone, L-R, Alister Spence, Lloyd Swanton (bass), Sandy Evans (flute, saxophones), Tony Gorman (saxophones), Toby Hall (drums)...