

## CHARLIE MUNRO

by John Clare

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*[This article appeared in the January/February 1977 edition of Jazz Down Under.]*

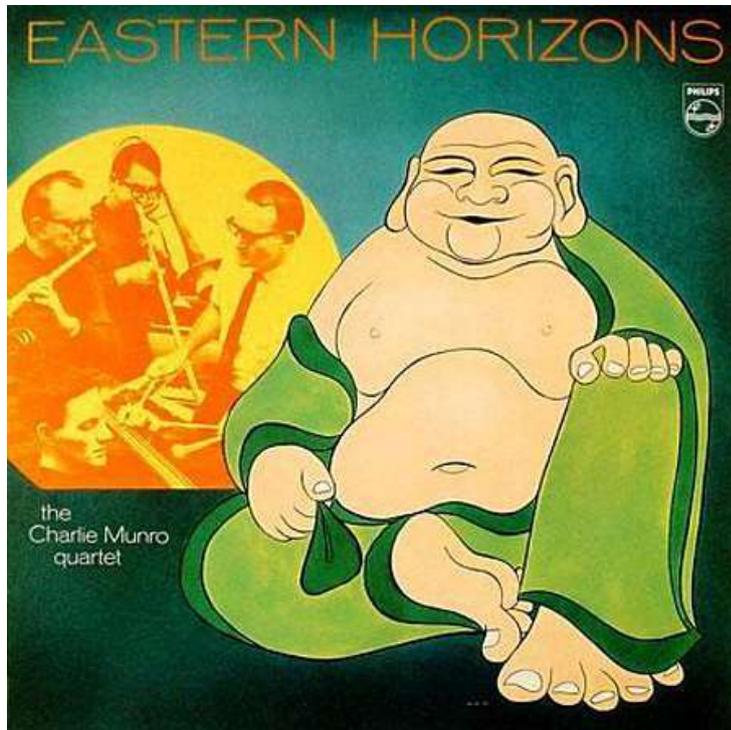
I'm not at all convinced by the old cliché that "we need heroes". We indulge ourselves with heroes, that's all. We are all made of the same stuff, shuffled about in different ways. Charlie Munro was a hero to me. So was Bernie McGann, John Pochée and Bob Barnard. Later I got to know them too well for that. I gained a few friends, lost a few heroes.



*Charlie Munro on cello: for that kind of tone and intensity, you'd have to go to someone like Casals... PHOTO COURTESY ENCORE MAGAZINE*

Recently I had my Charlie Munro records stolen, those under his own name and those under Bryce Rohde's, along with *Boulez Conducts Debussy, Vol 1*, the Debussy and Ravel String Quartets played by the Viach Quartet, and a few other very important records to me. I found I could live without them. They had changed my life in several ways.

Just when I no longer needed them, Charlie's *Eastern Horizons* was re-released on the 44 label. Not only that, I found a copy— probably my own — in a second-hand shop. Now that it is a luxury rather than a necessity, I enjoy it even more — but the point I'm making is that the record was that important to me.



Charlie was one of the pioneers of contemporary Australian jazz, but his music was more than just an attempt to catch up with what the Americans were doing; it had its own singular strength and tone. I remember playing *Eastern Horizons* to Bill Motzing, now head of the jazz course at Sydney Conservatorium, when he first came to Australia. He said it was one of the best things he'd heard in the idiom, and immediately got in touch with Charlie.

It all started with Bryce Rohde. Charlie sat in for the tenor player in the Australian Jazz Quartet, and struck up a friendship with Bryce, who was originally a New Zealander\* like himself. Charlie was doing additional study on the cello, his first instrument, at the Con, and was torn between jazz and classical music, which he still loves to play. He is self-taught on reeds and flute.

“Bryce asked me if I'd like to play some different music he'd written, based on the Lydian mode, and he took Bruce Cale and me along to rehearse it. Well, we laughed at the music then, and a lot of people laughed at it for a few years, but it started something for me. When Bryce went to America, he left it with us. It was up to us to carry on. I got Bob McIvor, Bruce Cale and Mark Bowden and we began rehearsing on the weekends. When Bruce went to America we got Neville Whitehead. We had

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\*Editor's note: John Clare is probably in error here. Bruce Johnson's *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz* has Bryce Rohde being born in Hobart, Tasmania, on 12/9/23.

those workshops going for about five years before we made the records (*Eastern Horizons* and *Count Down*).”



*When John Clare heard Munro’s soprano playing at the beginning of Eastern Horizons, he thought it would lift his head off.... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN COURTESY OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ*

By the time the records were made it had become Charlie Munro’s music. Modes were still important, but Charlie had absorbed the influences of Albert Ayler and Joseph Jarman. He had also made a study of Eastern music.

Not gifted with a flair for self-promotion, Charlie was known to most of those who knew him at all as a super-competent tenor, soprano, alto and flute player who did club and session work and wrote interesting but middle-of-the-road oriented arrangements for the ABC Show Band. I believe he once had a drinking problem, but he now seems a rather sober character, a quiet family man, undemonstrative. His daughter is doing very well at the Conservatorium.

It is almost as though he had two lives. When they have intersected, the inevitable results have caused him bemusement rather than anger. He once played me an Albert Ayler record and told me how he had taken it in for the blokes in the ABC Dance Band to hear. “Blimey! They laughed their heads off,” he said.

You’ve got to know him for a while and get used to his low-key expressions of enthusiasm to realise that he did not give up the ghost shortly after 1967 when *Eastern Horizons* was made.

He has been listening to what's going down, and he is really excited about it. Of Brian Brown, he said, "I don't think they're getting the credit they deserve, do you? No, I don't think so. They're very good." He's also enthusiastic, in his quiet way, about Free Kata. He has the record and he wrote, without success, to the Arts Council recommending that Serge [Ermoll] get a grant. He also praised Roger Frampton.

He had been approached by Craig Benjamin to sit in with Out to Lunch during the Sydney Festival, but had planned a holiday trip. "I was very disappointed. I hope we can do it later. No, I haven't heard their record. I'll get that. Wait until I get a pen, I'll write that down."



*Charlie had been approached by Craig Benjamin (above) to sit in with Out to Lunch during the Sydney Festival...*

Charlie Munro has a nice brick cottage in a pleasant suburb, just out of reach of the bad airs of one of Sydney's heavily polluted areas. The incongruity of this made him an even more appealing hero for me.

This is the man, of whose cello playing a friend of mine said, "Pardon me, if I rave, but for that kind of tone and intensity, you'd have to go to someone like Casals." When I heard his soprano playing at the beginning of *Eastern Horizons*, I thought it would lift my head off. I still feel that rush when I hear it. Charlie come back. I think the time is right.