

## CHARLIE MUNRO: SURVIVAL WITH SPIRIT

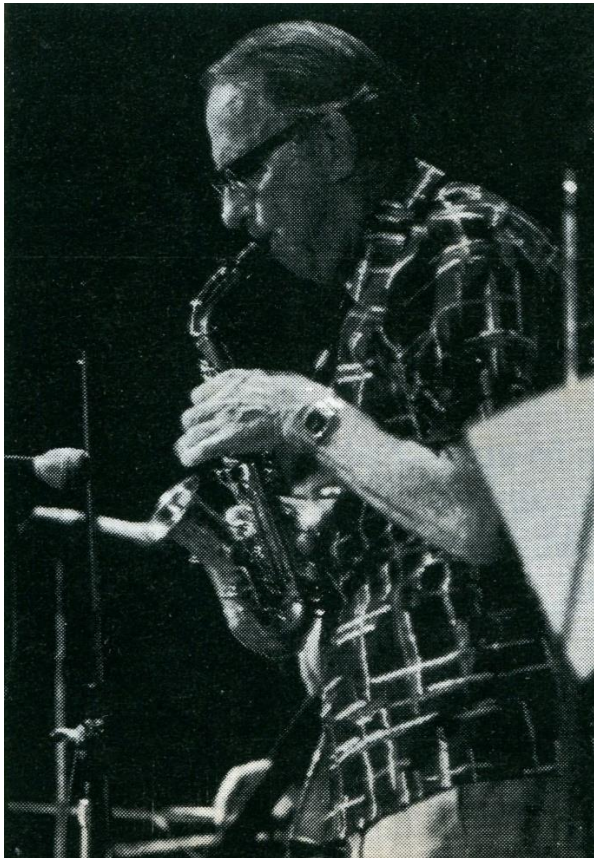
by John Clare

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*[This appeared in the July 1979 edition of Encore Magazine]*

One of the most gratifying turns of events over the last few years has been the recognition of Charlie Munro's contribution to Australian music. What is still not fully realised is that Charlie has been a major influence in areas that might seem mutually exclusive: light entertainment music and experimental jazz.

On the one hand there are the many inventive, entertaining, but scarcely outrageous charts Munro contributed to the Sydney ABC Show Band; on the other his uncompromising, and at one time controversial, work with Bryce Rohde and his own bands. The former, allied with his extensive club and session work, has given him financial stability, but no great fame outside professional circles. The latter had until recently brought him neither recognition nor financial reward: just the misunderstanding incurred by anyone who is ahead of their time.



*Charlie Munro: the most remarkable multi-instrumentalist we have ever had...*

*PHOTO CREDIT WALLY GLOVER*

Add to this the fact that Charlie Munro is the most remarkable multi-instrumentalist we have ever had — a superb cellist, a world class virtuoso on soprano, alto and tenor saxophone, and a distinctive stylist on flute, clarinet and bass clarinet — and we

might begin thinking in terms of an isolated and bitter genius, muttering to himself as he takes his seat in the saxophone section for yet another commercial session.

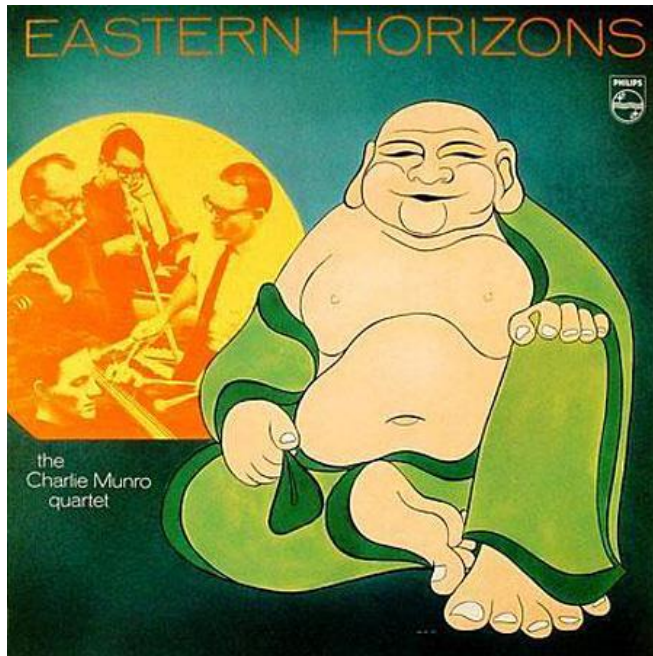
I have known Charlie Munro for about 12 years. He is one of the most modest and even-tempered people imaginable. He is a man who is happy with the company of family and friends. Music is his livelihood and passion. It continues to give him a pleasure that outweighs fame a thousandfold.

Perhaps I might be allowed some small excess of sentiment in this matter. Charlie Munro, Bernie McGann and John Pochée are the most inspiring people I have ever known, apart from my own father and mother. That is saying an awful lot, but I can't think of anyone else I have known who has so sensibly taken care of the business of survival without stifling the spirit.



*Bernie McGann (above right), John Pochée (above left) and Charlie Munro are the most inspiring people I have ever known, apart from my own father and mother...  
PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH*

Two events have brought Charlie Munro out of obscurity: the re-release a year or so ago of the album *Eastern Horizons*, which he made in 1968, and the return from America of bassist Bruce Cale, who worked with Charlie in Bryce Rohde's band. *Eastern Horizons* is available on Horst Liepolt's 44 label, as is *The Bryce Rohde Story Vol 2*, on which you can hear Cale and Munro together.



*Eastern Horizons* presents a number of Munro compositions based on Indian and Arabic modes, which are improvised on freely by Munro, trombonist Bob McIvor, bassist Neville Whitehead and drummer Mark Bowden. Charlie uses all his instruments except the clarinets, but his tenor, cello and soprano in particular have astonished many young musicians who had no idea that sort of thing was happening here in the sixties.

The cello work on *Islamic Suite* is so sonorous and intense that I am inclined to think Charlie would be an international concert artist today if he had concentrated on that instrument exclusively. He began cello studies in New Zealand at the age of 11, having taught himself saxophone at an earlier age. He went on to post-graduate level at the Conservatorium, but decided that jazz was the idiom in which he could best express himself.

His soprano solos on *Islamic Suite* and *Malahari Raga* display an understanding of the nuances of Eastern playing far beyond that of most jazz musicians who have dabbled in this area. His tenor work is firmly in the contemporary jazz idiom. This is his hottest instrument. On it he projects a sometimes violent emotionalism that is hard at first to reconcile with his own personality.

I think that Charlie, and the other musicians I have named, are students of the human condition. They explore it and delineate it in sound, without surrendering themselves to all its vagaries. To strive for control of oneself without sacrificing feeling. That is the lesson they offer.



*Two shots of Charlie Munro at the Sydney Town Hall in January, 1979, with the Bruce Cale band. Above on cello... PHOTO CREDIT ABOVE WALLY GLOVER, below on soprano sax with Bruce Cale(bass) in the background, and Alan Turnbull (drums) just in the frame...PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS*



Many people may never have had the opportunity to hear Charlie Munro in person if Bruce Cale had not featured him on soprano and cello in his band. As the result of a concert at the Sydney Musicians' Club last year, and another at the Town Hall on the same bill as Mike Nock and Americans Chico Freeman and David Friesen, the Bruce

Cale band with Charlie Munro will appear for a week at the next Adelaide Festival, and has been nominated for a Musica Viva tour of Australia and the East\*.



*Munro (far right) with members of the Bryce Rohde Quintet circa 1964. Others L-R, are Bruce Cale, Rohde, Mark Bowden & Sid Powell... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CALE*

In the meantime, Charlie does many sessions and plays happily at the Epping RSL club on Friday, Saturday and Sunday each week. There are a number of reasons why he is happy there. In the band with him are the fine lead trumpeter Bob Boofler, pianist Jack Thorpe, whom Charlie describes as, "the most inventive pianist I've had the pleasure of working with", old colleague and friend, drummer Mark Bowden, and virtuoso bassist Graham Ruckley, who shares Charlie's love of both classical music

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*\* The Bryce Rohde reference in Charlie Munro's story is interesting: Bruce Cale and Charlie actually played together on three albums in those days, with the Rohde band, and the albums were recorded using the Lydian Concept. This is a clear concept of a vast range of chords and their related scales, useful for improvisation and composing. The Concept (attributed to George Russell) is now being taught by Bruce (together with general music theory), and his students divide equally between professionals and beginners. If anyone is interested, they can call Bruce on (02) 92 4327. Bruce's new album, "Bruce Cale Quartet at the Opera House", is to be released at the end of this month, and in September, Bruce's symphony is being recorded for the ABC by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.*

and jazz (Graham is one of the few bassists who can play the Bach *Cello Suites* on his instrument).

Charlie also speaks highly of the club committee, particularly secretary Alby Kissel. "He is one of the rare guys in his position who loves musicians. He has a great sense of show business and believes in giving the members value for their money. He is responsible for the club's Mo Award for the best artists' facilities. They also got the award for the best ballet, and the band has been nominated twice.

"We're also lucky that the members like jazz, so we get a couple of chances to play our kind of music — on the Friday dance night, and before and after the talent quest on Sundays. Of course we have to play older, pretty straight ahead jazz, but it's great to be able to have a blow, because to play jazz you've got to keep it up. Some very talented musicians just bury themselves in session work and they lose that ability.

"Saturday night is show night, and we've had most of the overseas acts. Billy Daniels was particularly enjoyable to work with. He has incredible stagecraft — the essence of professionalism.

"Some of the acts are not so exciting. Some of the arrangements are pretty simple, to accommodate club bands, only eight or ten of which are fully professional. Those arrangements are adequate, but not very exciting to play."

Charlie Munro was with the ABC Show Band for 23 years, up until its disbandment in 1973. It was there that he taught himself composing and arranging.



*Munro pictured performing with the ABC Show Band... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE*

"I was really lucky to be under the leadership of Eric Cook, who is a tremendously knowledgeable arranger and composer, and a wonderfully helpful man. He was always diplomatic and kind with my efforts. He had a way of putting you on the right track without hurting your feelings."

In the late sixties Charlie did a 12-weeks arranging course with Russ Garcia, whose visit to Australia was initiated by Don Burrows. Garcia was impressed by Munro's talent and they became good friends.

Munro also credits producer Cleon Dennis with creating opportunities at the ABC for people like himself, Don Burrows and Don Andrews.

"He produced the program *Now Hear This* for which I was able to do some quite adventurous things in the pop jazz vein. It is a great pity that the Show Band was scrapped. It was a great training ground. People like Neil Thurgate and George Brodbeck had the opportunity to hear their work played. Probably the Conservatorium Big Band offers some of those opportunities now."



*Munro (left) with L-R, Roger Frampton & Col Loughnan in the sax section of the Bruce Cale Orchestra... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CALE*

Among Charlie Munro's current projects is a suite dedicated to the late Lloyd Adamson (who was once my trumpet teacher). Charlie has asked me to write or improvise some words to be integrated with a section of the work. We had planned a similar collaboration some ten or 11 years ago, but it did not come about. When you talk to Charlie Munro you feel that things will come about in good time.

"I've had many years of great enjoyment in music," says Charlie, "and I hope to have many more."