

DR JAZZ: THE LAST DAYS OF THE STRAWBERRY HILL

Film review by John Clare*

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This is not an objective review, for two very good reasons: David Perry is a very old friend of mine, and I speak briefly three times in his truly fantastic movie, which, as it turns out, chronicles the last days of the Strawberry Hill pub as a jazz venue. It also catches Clarion Fracture Zone co-leader Tony Gorman's last performance - one of the most extraordinary moments in any music film I have seen. These two events were not foreseen when David and his crew began to film.

Perry was a member of the Sydney bohemian association known as the Push (I was not and I scarcely knew him then) and a leading creative force in the independent filmmaker's cooperative known as Ubu (they also presented futurist plays and mounted 'underground' rock and jazz concerts in the psychedelic era). He is a very fine photographer, painter and



Cameraman Toby Oliver (right) shooting Bernie McGann at the Strawberry Hill for the film Dr Jazz... PHOTO CREDIT BRUCE HART

cinematographer, and a maker of highly enjoyable (if you will accept some naive self-indulgence along the way) films. Usually he works alone, but *Dr Jazz* shows the influence - in the editing particularly - of his collaborators, including producer Tom Zubrycki. It is easily his best effort, and it is the best jazz film I can think of for the moment, except the Monk doco *Straight No Chaser*.

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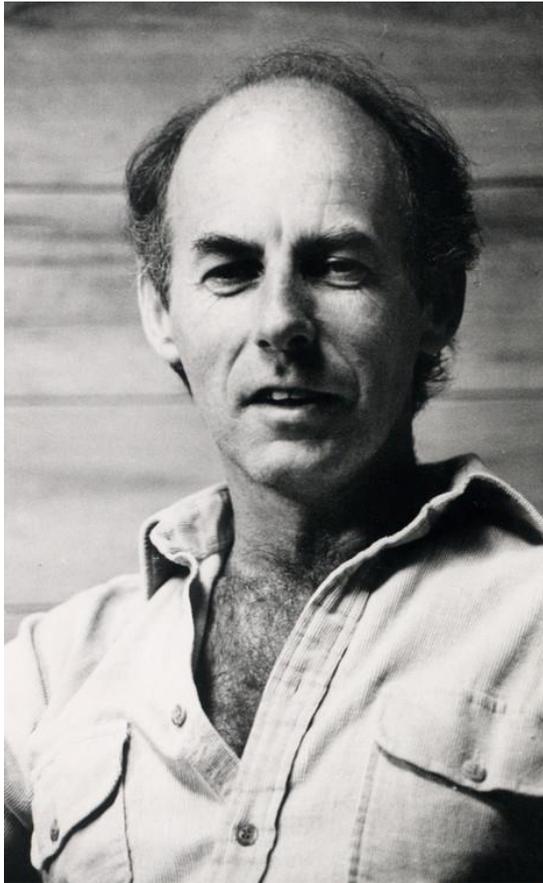
Tony Gorman (third from left) with other members of Clarion Fracture Zone: (L-R) Lloyd Swanton, Alister Spence, Toby Hall, Sandy Evans. The film Dr Jazz captures Gorman's last performance... PHOTO CREDIT MICHELLE AGIUS

Dr Jazz is like the best parts of *Beyond El Rocco* (the great atmosphere of the performance scenes, the articulate interviews) and *Jazz On A Summer's Day* (the several felicitous marriages of music and image) sustained from beginning to end. It begins in fact with Perry walking across the Sydney Harbour Bridge toward Strawberry Hill at that time in the early evening when the light turns blue. The camera is angled to create a congestion of charcoal grey girders, pierced by the cool pelting of cars. The fluid glide is echoed by a beautiful running bass and the harshness of girders finds its counterpart in the terse thrust of an alto saxophone and the hiss and chatter of drums. There can be no mistaking those sounds: the Bernie McGann Trio. This is one of three bands featured. The others are Mike Nock and Clarion. All play with thrilling vitality, and they are all beautifully shot and recorded. David White of Counterpoint Sound was responsible for the film's fantastic sound. Let us hope that unsympathetic projectors do not turn the large and immediate sound down in future showings (as I heard the good old boys in the box at Sydney's Mandolin Cinema do to a film about Eric Dolphy).



The actor Tony Barry: recommended by John Clare as the narrator in the film Beyond El Rocco...

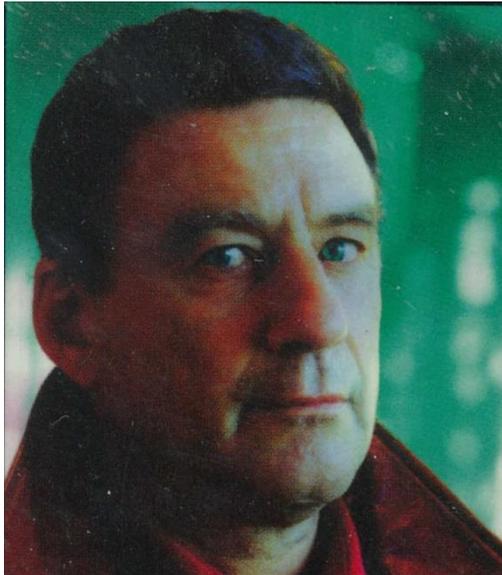
Some readers will be aware that I wrote the narration for Kevin Lucas's ground-breaking film *Beyond El Rocco*, and that I conducted many of the interviews. Why, then, do I think that Perry's film is the better of what are undoubtedly the best two films about Australian jazz? With all its virtues, Lucas's film has a tendency to translate Australian as ocker. I recommended Tony Barry as the narrator. He is a superb, if somewhat underrated actor, but the part he plays is far more ocker than I ever envisaged. Clubs like El Rocco were for many an escape from ockerdom! The tone of Perry's film is set by the part he himself plays as observer and quiet ponderer. He is unmistakably Australian, but in no way a stereotype. The same can be said for all the participating musicians, who are almost startlingly articulate in their interviews.



The pianist Mike Nock: his group is one of three groups featured in the Dr Jazz film...

And there is one more small thing. In a collaborative project like a film you can expect to lose some of your own favourite lines. These were my favourite lines in the *El Rocco* narration: "While earlier jazz, and rock and roll, carried the broad rhythms of the twentieth century, modern jazz seemed to catch the cross-rhythms of wobbling bobbins, eccentric spindles: not just the momentum of a train, but the queer veering and lurching you felt as you crossed between one carriage to another." I wanted the music to come up under this against urban images brought into closer and closer focus until all the details became abstract patterns. This bit never appeared. You can't win them all, but Perry's film does succeed – better than I could ever have hoped - in doing pretty much what I was attempting with that idea. And that is to show how jazz caught the imaginations of many of us by effortlessly shuffling abstract and literal or anecdotal elements - the one constantly transforming itself into the other - and by pursuing the structural, the sensual and the emotional, spontaneously and simultaneously: engaging the whole consciousness of the listener. Perry several times alludes to both analytical and synthetic cubism. Exactly!

If this doesn't mean anything to you, let me reduce it to this: for some of us, jazz found an aesthetic in the modern environment, as convincingly as any other art form. Perry's film manages to communicate this to many people who previously couldn't hear it at all. After its preview at the Chauvel Theatre in Paddington, I heard people saying that they wished they had gone to Strawberry Hill while it was happening (our most illustrious jazz critic might even feel the same way, if he bothers to see the film!). The preview was packed and the film was resoundingly applauded. People who had not been interested in jazz, or who had thought that traditional jazz was the only "real" jazz, told me that they were simply impressed by the force of the music, and by the conviction of the people playing it. They were interesting people on the screen, they said, and they seemed to be good people. They are good people.



John Clare: this film will startle many people who maintain a blasé attitude toward Australian jazz...

For those who did miss all the great nights at the Strawberry Hill, or for those who stayed right out at the margins of the pub, this puts you in all the best positions for sound and vision that the place had to offer. It is just fantastically exciting. Unusually, the drum sound is sensationally good - or is it more the editing, which brings the drums smashing in at exactly the right moments? This film will startle many people who maintain a blasé attitude toward Australian jazz, and it will certainly surprise overseas audiences - both for the level of the music here and its unusually successful translation into filmic terms.

Editor's Postscript

David Perry died in 2015. He was described by the Sydney saxophonist Sandy Evans as "an extraordinary artist, filmmaker, and dear friend to many jazz musicians, including me." Sandy dedicated her concert at Foundry 616 on Thursday 30th April, 2015 to honouring David Perry's life and work, and excerpts from the film Dr Jazz were screened.