GRAEME BELL AUSTRALIAN JAZZMAN: HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY *by Graeme Bell. Child & Associates Publishing, 447pp, $39.95. Published 1988, ISBN 086777 171 2.*

Reviewed by Gail Brennan/John Clare

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Graeme Bell, often called the father of Australian jazz, does not need a ghost writer — his prose has the cumulative strength of even cadences and transparent simplicity — but he might have benefited from an interrogator. Fear of pretension has actually robbed his autobiography of an important dimension.

Some friendly prodding over his shoulder might have drawn a more detailed consideration of the significance of his contribution, which was made at an intriguing stage in Australia's search for cultural and political identity. These are lumpy words in the face of the passions and the good and bad tyros so warmly recalled in this book, but the importance of jazz as a focus for social change has been the subject of vast neglect.

In the 1950s, rock and roll became the focus for a kind of tribal youth uprising, while modern jazz and folk music drew a more diverse following, including some concerned with social change. In the 1940s, however, the music with which socialists, bohemians and foursquare communists identified themselves was in fact a revival of early forms of jazz.

The Bell band at the Uptown Club in Melbourne, 1947. L-R, Cy Watts (trombone), Pixie Roberts (clarinet), Sid Kellalea(drums), Ade Monsbourgh (trumpet), Lou Silbereisen (bass), Roger Bell (trumpet), Graeme Bell (piano).

Also drawn to this music was a group of rebellious Melbourne artists, of whom Nolan and Tucker are among the best known. For musicians like Graeme Bell, the collective improvisation of New Orleans and Chicago jazz represented a liberation from the regimented dance bands on the one hand and the frequently maudlin offerings of Tin Pan Alley on the other. But did this music mean the same thing to the other parties?

There is little speculation about this, although the general sense of excitement is conveyed, and Max Harris is quoted to the effect that jazz was part of what was happening - a distant pre-echo of the terminology of swinging London. What Bell does do very well is evoke the atmosphere of bohemian Melbourne in the 1940s — the coffee shops and greasy-spoon cafes down lanes, the back-room jam sessions.

Bell chose long ago to live in Sydney, but his book is shot with a perhaps unconscious nostalgia for a particular Melbourne. The title “Father of Australian Jazz” is of course problematical, but the Bell band did put Australian jazz on the map in the late 1940s, forging international links that still exist. A trip to Czechoslovakia was organised by the Eureka Youth League, and while this had a profound effect on Bell, it was the impact of his freewheeling band on the stuffy British revival scene that has gone down in jazz history.

Those who know the latter-day Graeme Bell as the leader of bands not dissociated with straw boaters and striped blazers will be astounded by the life he has led.

Bell’s mother Elva Rogers, pictured here in 1906, was a distinguished contralto who toured with Melba…

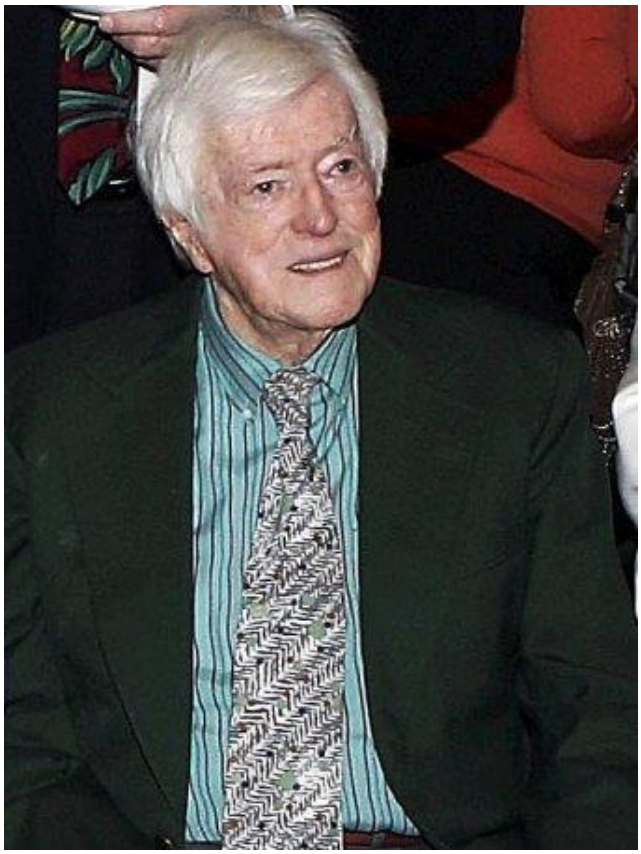
Like most of our traditional jazz musicians, Bell had a middle-class upbringing. A curious sidelight here is the contrasting working-class element that was drawn to modern jazz in the 1950s. Bell's mother was a distinguished contralto who toured with Melba. An interest in the arts was encouraged, but jazz was his own discovery. His autobiography reveals a broad-minded and sometimes adventurous traveller. Bell and his brother Roger, who played trumpet and cornet in his band, built one of the first mud-brick houses at the famous Eltham art colony outside Melbourne.

During his long career as jazzman and all-purpose band leader, Bell has accompanied such diverse artists as sob star Johnny Ray and black trumpeter Rex Stewart, who made a sensational tour of Australia in 1949. The vivid recollection of Stewart's impact, notes lashing like whips from his trumpet, is heady stuff. Of interest is the fact that Stewart treated young local trumpeter Keith Hounslow as his protege.

In Clovelly, Sydney, 1949. A shot which includes both Rex Stewart (left on cornet) and Keith Hounslow (on trumpet, crouching, second from right). Others are, L-R, drummer unidentified, bassist unidentified, John McCarthy (clarinet), Ron Falson (trumpet), pianist unidentified, Johnny Edgecombe (guitar)... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

A man of passions, romantic and social, steps out at intervals from behind the modest prose. During World War II Bell was playing in a night club when two black American servicemen came in and dazzled patrons with their jitterbugging. The owner ordered them out. When Bell announced that he would not play in an establishment that applied a colour bar, the owner trotted out the old lunacy about blacks marrying our sisters, etc. Says Bell: “When a man talks like that I have an

obligation to quit his presence immediately." I find this very moving, like many of the warm and uncomplicated sentiments in this book.



Bell: many warm and uncomplicated sentiments in this book...

As might be expected, there is no appraisal of Graeme Bell's own elegant piano style. The latter sections are taken up with accounts of his world travels — these have considerable charm — and of his show business activities. The selection of photos will hold great interest for jazz fans, and surely an equal fascination for anyone interested in our recent past. Indeed, this is the readership to whom one must commend the book. Everyone, in short.
