

KEITH HOUNSLOW: A NEW CAREER PHASE

by Gail Brennan/John Clare*

Think of the places where you have heard memorable jazz or even jazz history in the making, or places you have visited in the knowledge that great sessions have taken place there. So many of them have a subterranean aspect, or are reached by fire escape, have a dinginess and claustrophobia, or are simply nondescript. The Jazz Centre 44 at St Kilda, Melbourne, was not like that at all in the late 1950s. Today there is a McDonalds on the site, or near it. Certainly the circular building, like a strange combination of lighthouse and upstairs tea rooms, has gone.



Keith Hounslow at Jazz Centre 44: his playing sparkled and danced. Sometimes it pierced and bit, and sometimes it touched the heart...

It happens that this was the first place I heard modern jazz in the flesh. I could not connect its situation or its airy windows with the night music of Miles Davis. The sessions I heard at Jazz Centre 44 were on a Sunday afternoon. Luna Park was on one side, Saint Moritz skating rink back the other way, and great deserted dance



**In 1986 when this was written Gail Brennan aka John Clare was a freelance writer who had been following contemporary jazz in Australia for nearly 30 years.*

palaces and amusement piers loomed along the bleached Bay front like remnants of a lost Atlantis. It proved to me that great jazz does not wilt in daylight. For this was, in its historical and geographical context, great jazz.

A number of important musicians performed there, including a very young Bernie McGann, American Bob Gillett, Chris Karan, Len Barnard, Graeme Lyall (who would rush up from the Saint Moritz between sets with the Thunderbirds rock-and-roll band and sit in, sporting leather, studs, boots and slicked back hair) and no doubt others whom I missed; but the heart of activities there was the regular band led by Brian Brown on tenor saxophone, with Keith Hounslow (and sometimes Keith Stirling) on trumpet, David Martin, piano, Barry Buckley, bass, and Stewart Speer, drums. I think they were probably the first group of Australian musicians to get the real feeling of 1950s hard-bop.

The most important thing to say about that band was that it gelled, had a great collective feeling, drove together with a warm, deep momentum. But if we must talk about stars, the real stars of that band were Keith Hounslow and Stewart Speer, These made the greatest impact on me and the recording they made in 1958 (reissued in 1977 on the 44 label) confirms quite strikingly just how mature and distinctive were these two stylists at the time. The recording also confirms that the band's level of inspiration and musicianship was no phantom of memory.



The real stars of the Brian Brown band were Hounslow and Stewart Speer (pictured above)...

Possessed of a new but cheap trumpet on easy terms, I could not understand how Keith Hounslow produced such a bright sound with an instrument from which much of the lacquer had worn. This was not the only revelation. I was intrigued, fascinated, by modern jazz, but certain sententious writing had discouraged me from looking there for the forthright excitement and emotion I expected from Louis Armstrong and from the great swing trumpeters. That Dizzy Gillespie's high notes gave me a

thrill I took to be an irrelevance. What we were looking for in this bop stuff was surely the quality of deep thought, of thoughtfulness itself, embodied in music. Keith Stirling's early playing had a slightly muffled, probing quality. That was in order. But this Hounslow fellow! His playing sparkled and danced. Sometimes it pierced and bit, and sometimes it touched the heart. Surely I was missing the point.

If the Keith Hounslow story began or ended there, he would at least have achieved this: he made one, and possibly many another, all too earnest youth go home and listen to his records from a different point of view. To me he also showed how modern jazz was connected to all the other phenomena of the time. He had a crewcut; I knew he worked in advertising; he wore Ivy League shirts. When he spoke to the audience (rarely), there was a tone of wit which instantly rang a bell. Dizzy Gillespie. Stan Freberg. The Goons even! The bop of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie had anticipated *Mad (Mad Magazine even)* humour of the 1950s. I thought Keith Hounslow was so self-assured, on his instrument and in his being, so in tune with modern times, that I might have called him trendy if the word had been in currency.



When Hounslow spoke to the audience (rarely), there was a tone of wit which instantly rang a bell. Dizzy Gillespie (above). Stan Freberg (below)...



Well, that was by no means the beginning nor the end of the Keith Hounslow story. Nor did I see more than one facet of the man at that time. Let us not say that this was a distorted view. I saw that facet clearly and brightly. That projection, is an entity that will exist probably as long as I do. What lay beyond it is the stuff of great irony.

Three things. Keith Hounslow had never played modern jazz before the existence of the Brian Brown band; the job in advertising (secured for him by a close friend Bob Alcock - now deceased) followed some years of scuffling; Hounslow was, and sometimes still is, pierced by self-doubt.



Hounslow in Sydney, 1978: to paint a picture, to leave an image in the air, and yet to dance and swing: these are the outstanding qualities of Keith Hounslow's playing to this day... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

The first of these should be elaborated, as it gives some indication of Hounslow's exceptional musicality. To begin playing bop convincingly at around 30 years of age after having played almost exclusively in New Orleans or Dixieland styled groups is quite an achievement. One thinks of Howard McGhee, but his grounding was in swing and I think he made the transition at an earlier age. Hounslow did not apply an academic analysis to the newer style — to this day he can scarcely read music.

Hounslow's playing today is harder to classify, but his work in the late 1950s was perhaps the most convincing pure bop trumpet that has been played by an Australian. Brian Brown found it hard to believe that he had ever played any other way. Not only was he inventive, relaxed, humorous and exciting in the idiom, but he had the *style* just right. Yet it was his own style! When I went back to my records I reached for Lee Morgan, Clifford Brown, Miles Davis, and a couple of others who had obviously inspired him directly or indirectly, but I had to conclude that this was yet another way of playing the trumpet. To paint a picture, to leave an image in the air, and yet to dance and swing: these are the outstanding qualities of Keith Hounslow's playing to this day.

At one of those Jazz Centre 44 sessions another traditional trumpeter — a musician of not inconsiderable technique — had a crack at this modern thing, and stopped

playing after half a chorus of *Blues By Five*. Hounslow, after encouraging him to go on, finished the solo for him. The hipsters looked at each other and shrugged: hell, it's a blues; what's up? The fact is that he stopped, not because of the changes, but because he had the sensitivity to realise that he was not making the rhythmic thing of bop. Yes, sometimes the difference, rhythmically, between swing and bop was only a subtle one, but that made it harder to get that thing exactly. Hounslow had it so right. He could play semi-quavers in a way that made them seem to bounce off each other, like those kinetic desk toys in which a series of pendulums collide in percussive chain reaction.



Hounslow as a traditionalist, here pictured with the trombonist Jack Parkes...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Hounslow has never since made so radical a transition. Rather, he has reached back to earlier influences, and absorbed and translated more recent approaches, and forged a timeless style. His is one of the handful of instantly recognisable voices in Australian jazz. I think of Bernie McGann, Louis Burdett, Sandy Evans, John Pochée and Stewart Speer. And of the mature Keith Stirling. There are others who have got their own business going, undoubtedly, but could on occasions be mistaken for someone else. By me, at any rate. Never these.

Hounslow improvises on what he hears and feels, as he has no knowledge of chords and related scales, and this probably contributes to the freshness of his lines. Yet, far from being simplistic or primitive, his solos are marked by compact and satisfyingly

complex patterns, by sudden strikes at the edge of harmony, and by a lyricism that sometimes brings Art Farmer or Don Cherry to mind without ever sounding like either of these. More today than ever, the shape and texture of each note are delectable in themselves. Some notes pad softly behind the beat — notes almost devoid of brassy edge — and these might set up a sudden effusion of runs into the high register or a spatter of sharp and grainy notes which seem almost reckless but quickly coalesce into something like a pointillist image.



Hounslow played freely improvised duets as McJad with the Melbourne pianist Tony Gould (pictured above in 1977)... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

The later Keith Hounslow has been heard to best advantage in two settings. The first is freely improvised duets as McJad with the Melbourne pianist Tony Gould, who has said, “Several times when he has been playing flugelhorn, I have been close to tears ... I remember an ABC broadcast we did ... it took me all my time to keep playing, it was so beautiful”. The second setting is small bands in Sydney that play the swing and bop repertoire. These have been made of such compatible musicians as Tom Baker, Glenn Henrich, Freddy Wilson, Grahame Conlon, Dieter Vogt, Steve Elphick, Stewart Speer, and Laurie Bennett. Prior to coming to Sydney in 1984, Hounslow had been playing regularly with Frank Traynor, but I did not hear any of that music.

Hounslow now lives in a unit overlooking Woolloomooloo, with a stupendous view of the Sydney skyline.

“The thing I really like about Sydney music is that there isn’t that hostility between modernists and traditionalists. I went to the Manly Jazz Carnival when I first arrived in Sydney and saw the great Charlie Munro— whose death I still haven’t recovered from. What an innovator, what a superb musician! And he said, ‘Hi Keith, why don’t you come up and do a few numbers with us?’ And this was a concert! I couldn’t believe that someone would have me sit in at a concert. I guess that having never



A historic shot taken at the 1984 Manly Jazz Carnival: Charlie Munro (second from left), just before the concert commenced, invited Hounslow (far left) to sit in with singer Marie Wilson's group... Also pictured is Chuck Yates on electric piano... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

learned to read nags at me. I know I'm a good jazz musician; an improviser; that I have my own voice, but mostly I don't feel a complete musician.

“On the other hand, my not applying myself to reading music over the years has been possibly a subconscious check. I never wanted to be a ‘pro’ in the sense of having to be prepared to play everything, including crap. I've always kept music on a pedestal.”

Hounslow was born in Perth in 1928. His mother played the piano for ‘sing-songs’ on Sunday nights, but there were no professional musicians in the family. One of his first musical thrills was being able to hear an American Naval Swing Band, when they played their music in Perth in the lunch-hour. He lingered and was often in trouble for getting back late to Perth Boys School. In 1945 he took up the trumpet. His first favourites were Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke and Muggsy Spanier. Within two years he was good enough to go to Melbourne and play at the second Australian Jazz Convention. “I walked a good three feet off the ground with elation, because there were so many people my age playing jazz — even though we possibly couldn't play all that well. After that I couldn't settle down in Perth. I came back to Melbourne in 1948 and played with people like Frank Johnson, Ian Pearce, Mark Albiston, Graeme Bell and all the many others. We couldn't play jazz for a living, of course. We did all sorts of things in the daytime.”

In 1949 Keith Hounslow's life moved briefly into overdrive. “We had met a woman called Eve Dennis, visiting from Canada, who claimed that she knew the Ellington band, and that she could get Rex Stewart to come from Paris out here. When you're that young you don't know whether to believe it or not. As it happened, of course, she



*Hounslow (right) pictured in 1949 with Eve Dennis, who knew the Ellington band...
PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN*

was telling the truth. Rex came out here, and it was a toss-up whether he would play with Graeme Bell or a modern group led by Splinter Reeves [the tenor saxophonist]. But it was decided that the Bell band obviously had the name, so he toured with Graeme. Eve subsequently arranged that I should tour with them, because she felt the experience would be invaluable for me. The band already had its two regular trumpet players, so I went along as baggage boy! Actually I got to play once a night along with Rex, Roger [Bell] and Ade [Monsborough].

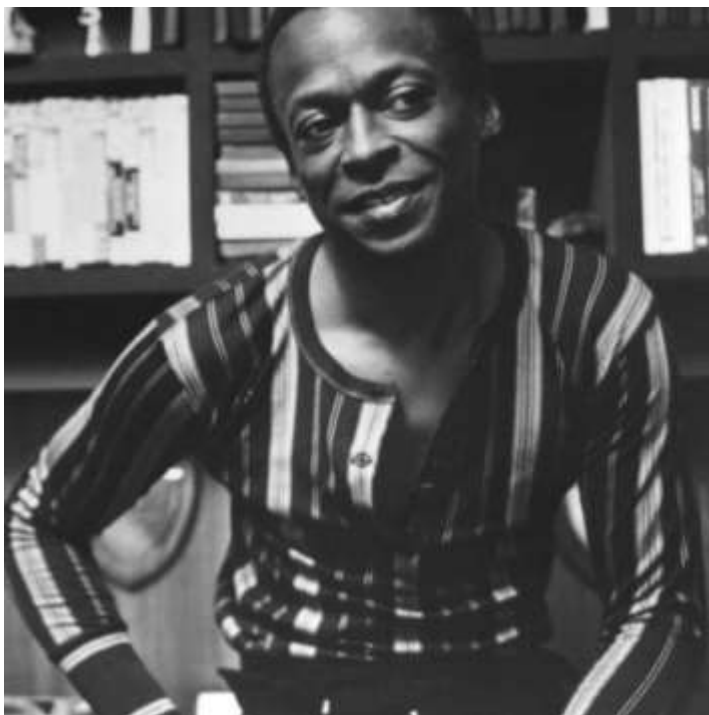


At the Clovelly Surf Club, 1949. The players at the front of the stage are, from left, Rex Stewart, John McCarthy, Ron Falson, Keith Hounslow and Johnny Edgecombe... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

“Rex Stewart was an inspiration. He was fantastic; he was really good to me. He showed me how to use the two mutes in the true Ellington manner. No-one was doing that at the time. And a lot of other little things to do with playing. I have to thank Rex for a lot of things, both about music and life. I was of course only a callow youth!

“When Rex went up to Sydney to play at Sammy Lee’s after the tour with Graeme I went and lived at Bondi Beach in a flat overlooking the beach, with one gig, Sunday nights at the Clovelly Surf Club with a band including Johnny McCarthy. I saw Rex and his lady frequently for meals. Rex returned to the USA and I went back to South Australia to play and stay with Dave Dallwitz and the reformed Southern Jazz Group. Later I teamed up with Doc Willis. We went back to Perth together; came back to Melbourne; back and forth to Melbourne. All the time I was doing all sorts of day jobs: a postman in Perth was one — Bernie McGann hasn’t got all that on his own; I was a Coca-Cola salesman too in Melbourne and Adelaide.

“In 1954 I got married and started in a job in the press-production department at J Walter Thompson in Melbourne. When television first started, they made me their first TV manager and I was sent to Sydney again to study film production. In 1960 I joined a film company making commercials and in 1970 started as a freelancer, directing and writing film scripts. It’s kept me going ever since.



Hounslow felt he could rationalise Miles Davis (above), because amongst other reasons he felt that technically he could get somewhere near Miles’s playing...

“But to go back to the Jazz Centre 44 days: Brian Brown had just come back from England and he introduced me to the records of Miles Davis, Dizzy, and the Jazz Messengers etc. I soon went overboard for all that! I loved Dizzy, but I couldn’t get near to what he was playing. I could however rationalise Miles, because amongst other reasons I felt that technically I could get somewhere near his playing. Although

sometimes I can play things that seemingly require a reasonable technique. I must say, I get surprised when I hear my playing on record. It's got to do mostly with the spirit that's being generated at the moment of making music; and association — who I'm actually playing with. I really need musicians around me with whom I feel a strong empathy. Of course my lack of academic musical knowledge dictates this need to a large extent. People whom I've had particularly close musical rapport with have been a pianist in Perth in my early days, 'Bing' Throssel, Brian Brown and — of course, since McJad in 1977 — Tony Gould. Oh, not forgetting my old mate on the trombone Doc Willis, with whom I'm working again.



Brian Brown: he and Hounslow seemed to be able to read each other's minds in phrasing and playing together... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

“Speaking of Brian, he would write his original things down sometimes. I could sort of read them — sort of — but he'd say ‘Don't worry, you'll get it’; we just seemed to be able to read each other's minds in phrasing and playing together. After the band with Brian broke up, I didn't get to play regularly for a long time. It had to do with rearing our three youngsters, and the fact that I'd put myself offside with the Melbourne traditional scene. They wouldn't ask me to play because they thought I'd gone over to the other side, but really I was never a part of them. Even before I took any interest in bop, I really dug later-period swinging things. The Ellington small groups and individuals like Ben Webster, Buck Clayton, Rex Stewart, and other marvellous people. I didn't really go for playing banjo/washboard music. I've always believed that re-creating old stylists has nothing to do with being you, in today's world! For example I was onto other things early on, like putting cushions in front of bass drums, because most of the drummers then were unaware of that lovely muted bass drum sound. I just couldn't make them see that the booming bass drum thing interfered with the string bass tones. I was also unpopular with [Australian] Jazz Convention organisers, arguing that modern jazz shouldn't be kept out of Conventions.

“A musical turn-around occurred for me in 1954 — the year I was married. It was the Mulligan pianoless quartet. It was so subtle. I just played it over and over. Although

Miles Davis is just sublime to me, I don't think you can hear much of his influence in my playing. Later Don Cherry intrigued me and I made quite a study of his playing.

"I've always been paranoid about my future playing. If gigs weren't in sight for, say, even a two-week period, then it had to be the end of my playing. Even today, if I don't play gigs, I don't touch the horn. I've never been a practiser of the instrument; simply play on the job, or don't play at all! Something to do with age too, I guess, are my feelings of unfulfilled realisations, particularly regarding McJad. Tony and I set out to break the mould of 32-bar songs, a possibly daring — or was it stupid? — adventure in melodic freedom, creating music — ours — on the spot. It's a disappointment to me, although we did get a tour of India out of it all in 1982.

"Summing up, I love living and playing in Sydney. I've got a great quartet, with Grahame Conlon, guitar, Dieter Vogt, bass, and either Stewie [Speer] on Laurie Bennett on drums. It goes under the name of Keith Hounslow's Jazzmakers.



Hounslow (pictured in Sydney in the 1990s), says he should have come to Sydney many years ago... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

"I should have come up here many years ago!

"Look, don't put too much of my negative stuff in. After all, everyone suffers with some doubts. That's just me. There are two sides to everything. If I had applied myself to reading music on the one hand, I might have got a guernsey with John Pochée's ten-piece band, or some other creative reading group, like the Bruce Cale Orchestra. But, on the other hand, over the years, I've seen many good pro' musicians who, through the vagaries of living as a pro', either failed to pursue their personal creative ideals or simply succumbed to the daily monotony of interpreting everyone else's music. No, as I said earlier, I'm glad I kept my music — jazz — on a pedestal, as it were."

Well, that comes close to saying it. Keith Hounslow is an artist, and it seems inevitable that a little agony will accompany the ecstasy.