

MIKE NOCK CONFOUNDS OZ JAZZ'S KNOCKERS

by John Clare*

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Excessively old readers who hung around the El Rocco at Kings Cross will remember Mike Nock, the small and rather goblin-shaped New Zealand pianist who played as though his bum was on fire. He had a big influence on Australian jazz (so many of our best jazz and rock players actually came from New Zealand). He helped re-establish a hot attack more in keeping with the place than the cooler sounds that had been briefly fashionable.

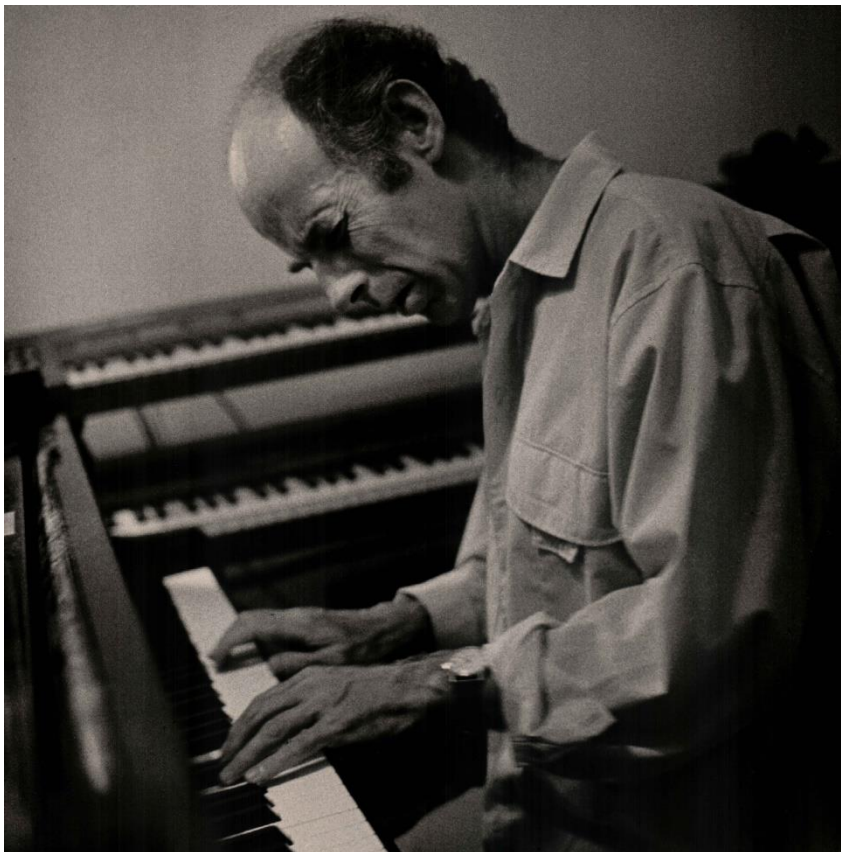


The Three Out Trio circa 1960: Mike Nock (piano) with Freddie Logan (bass) and Chris Karan (drums)....

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Yet he was best known for his work with a band whose name is so redolent of *Downbeat* magazine, Peter Gunn and post Kerouac ivy league hipness that I am embarrassed to type it. Okay, it was called the Three Out Trio.

These silly names, this association of jazz with private eye shows and with businessmen and college boys going a bit far out during a night on the town present as easy a target for jazz haters as the more commercially packaged rock bands do for those who would see rock music as nothing more than the most forthright celebration of capitalism since the roaring 20s. Behind all this there is the deeper stream of music, and it scarcely matters what the idiom is called when the individuals who play it have the fire in their bowels.



Mike Nock: he played with a lot of musicians not acceptable to the middle of the road brigade...

Mike Nock had the fire, but he was not the only one. Outside the famous Three Out Trio — which was one very fine band — he played with other jazz renegades like John Pochée, Bob Bertles, Keith Stirling ... I can't remember him playing with Bernie McGann, but he played with a lot of people not acceptable to the middle of the road brigade which is so solidly behind Don Burrows and the Galapagos Duck.

Now, I am not against either of those institutions, nor would I have people listening to that which they do not want to hear. But I get annoyed at times by radio announcers and daily paper writers who like to spread the assumption that Don and the Duck are so much better than anyone else. They are better for you if that's what you like, and there are more of you than there are of us, but that's as far as it goes.



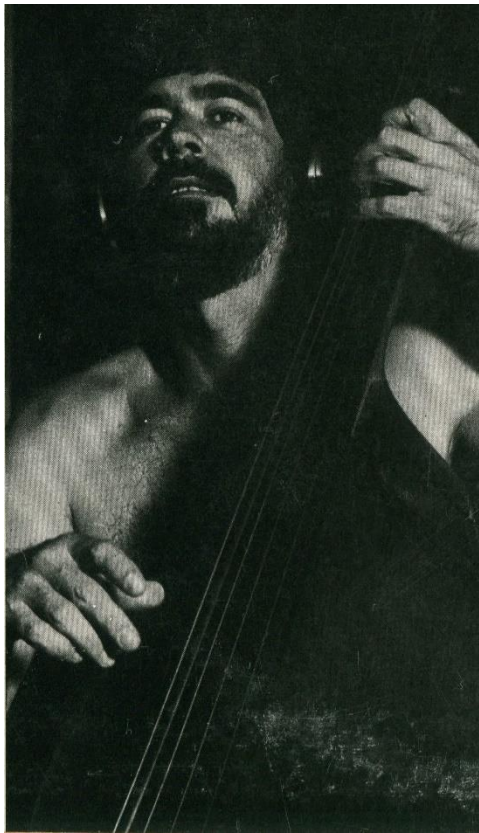
Drummer Chris Karan (right) cracked a job with Dudley Moore (left)...

Sometime in the 60s the Three Out Trio went to England, where they broke up. Mike Nock got a scholarship to study in America and drummer Chris Karan cracked a job with Dudley Moore. I hear news of bassist Freddie Logan from time to time, but I'm not sure what he's doing now. Nock recorded in America with people like John Handy and Michael White (also Yusef Lateef, if I remember rightly) and later led bands of his own. He was written up and interviewed in *Downbeat*, *Cashbox* and other magazines and he represents indisputable proof that the best jazz musicians in Australia are good enough to make it in the States, given the right breaks. Some other time I'll tell you about Errol Buddle, Barry Duggan, Bryce Rohde, Bruce Cale and others who have done just as well.

Mike Nock came back to Sydney for a holiday a couple of weeks ago. He was prevailed upon to give three concerts. One was at The Basement, one at the Conservatorium (where he played piano duets with the outstanding Roger Frampton) and one was at the Musicians Club — which was the one I caught.

It was a stirring occasion. The men Mike chose to have about him were not Caroline Jones' nor Margaret Throsby's nor Jill Sykes' pinup boys, but they were certainly mine, which was gratifying, as I sometimes like to feel I know nearly as much about music as these influential ladies. They were John Pochée, drums; Keith Stirling,

trumpet; Bob Bertles, saxes; and Dave Ellis on bass. To be honest I had heard Ellis with everyone from the Sydney Symphony to Jeannie Lewis, but didn't know if he could really play jazz. He left me in no doubt. He was wonderful.



The bassist Dave Ellis: he left me in no doubt, he was wonderful...

All the tunes were Mike's and they were brilliantly played despite limited rehearsal time. A lot of it was somewhere in the direction proposed by Miles Davis, minus the commercial packaging to which that idiom has become subject. The funky tunes were jazz-funk, with all that jazz freedom and interaction; not disco-funk where the obvious is stated remorselessly and musical interplay is so mechanically preordained that each musician could happily record his part on a separate day.

One thing was in a kind of funky stop-time, reminiscent of Miles. The beat and all its faster and slower multiples are alluded to so cryptically at times that you feel a multi-directional tugging and a very slippery forward pelting that is like running on the independently moving segments of a crazy funhouse floor. The hazard of the soloists flying over this, touching down in unexpected places, getting split-second kickoffs from the sudden forward pulse an instant before it reversed, was the kind of hair-raising experience that only mad jazz, surfing, the *Rite of Spring* and maybe shooting rapids can provide.

We all know how well Keith Stirling can play the trumpet but, owing to a range of esoteric obsessions which I won't go into here, his playing sometimes has more thought than substance. On this occasion he couldn't help but let it rip, his lovely sound prancing and glancing, hitting the pineal gland with high notes like silver hammers, growling and wailing and bursting everything open with shuddering trills



Trumpeter Keith Stirling: on this occasion he couldn't help but let it rip...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

played with alternative fingerings to give, ah, quarter tones; bringing the cyclic breathing into play to sustain a demented repeating phrase. Keith is into all that, but all the theory was now subsumed - is that what you say? It was all there and forgotten, melded into this spontaneous outpouring.

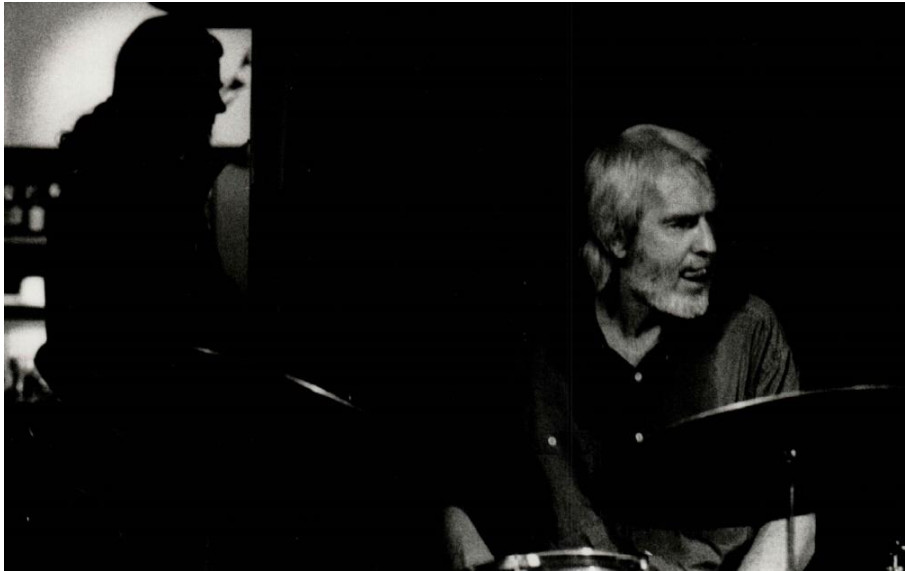


Bob Bertles: he was roaring, that's all...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Bob Bertles, who can be relaxed even unto drowsiness with Col Nolan, likewise called on his most outrageous avant-garde, free jazz, what you will devices, but you didn't experience it in those terms. He was roaring, that's all.

And young Michael he overcame the typically appalling Musicians Club piano and played with all the authority and intensity you would expect. He stood up in the middle of one unaccompanied phantasmagoria, in a kind of trance, like a sleepwalker

rising to set forth, like a rock and roll pianist playing harder than Jerry Lee Lewis with something like the complexity of Cecil Taylor, and the music seemed to swell as he rose, stood playing and sat, having touched whatever it was he got up to reach. You then had an opening of the door on New York, on the black jazz places, the consuming intensity of it - an opening of the furnace door.



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CREDIT JOE
GLAYSHER*

For all that, it was really John Pochée’s day. A percussionist with the opera orchestra said it — “They all played fucking great, but it was John Pochée’s day”. I pull in this endorsement desperately because I know you would otherwise take more notice of Eric Child, Arch McKirdy, Caroline Jones et al than of me. Pochée is off to America and then to Asia with Judy Bailey. If we’re still here when he gets back, in a couple of months, I’ll tell you where you can hear him. Meanwhile go to The Basement this Monday night and hear Roger Frampton. Just go and listen.



*Roger
Frampton:
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