

## FOCUS ON NOLAN/BUDDLE SYNDICATE

by John Clare

---

*[This article appeared in the May 1975 edition of Jazz Down Under]*

Back in the *Music Maker* days, I got Ray Sutton to do us a story about Col Nolan. The upshot of this piece, which I thought an excellent one, was a brief angry correspondence in our Letters section between Nolan and Sutton. I always suspected that Ray Price may have influenced the uncharacteristically pedantic style of Col's letter. In any case, Ray parodied that style in his reply: "...may I quote (out of context) a particularly apt and succinct pivot of the late Onkel Wallace: 'Back on your organ, Mother Morgan!'" – which Col now admits was a pretty good line.



*Col Nolan (left) with Errol Buddle: we're in a little niche all of our own... we just like to groove... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER*

The misunderstanding involved is too complicated to go into, but I feel I have to quote the opening paragraph of Ray Sutton's article, simply because it would be presumptuous of me to try and write a description of Col Nolan to match this one:

"Organists and good, solid pianists, all seem to be a little large. A certain ponderous quality seems to pervade them and they all seem to have, not unlike myself, a certain corpulent assertiveness. It may be their instrument and their style of playing; it needs a large man to really lay it down and keep it moving.

"Col Nolan is no exception. He is large and a little theatric. He speaks in confidential tones. His intonation has an oracular quality. His intrigues in my ear sound like sermons whispered to the congregation. He pauses and his eyebrows raise. I almost expect him to say 'Ah, ha!' He has a musician's sense of time in his speech: measured chunks of conversation like solid blocks of organ playing.

"And he is the best organist in town. Always has been."



*John Clare's sketch of Col Nolan: the best organist in town ... COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER*

A few years later Col Nolan and Errol Buddle sit before me at a table in The Old Push, Sydney, where they play.

Col Nolan, as is not rare. has something to say:

"You know, Errol and I must have the only band playing the way we do - I don't know what you'd call it. Mainstream? I don't know what that means either - it's just a name that sounds good. Perhaps we're a bebop band. You haven't heard us play *Salt Peanuts*? Okay, I don't know what we are. We're probably old hat, but we enjoy doing it, and the people enjoy it.

"But we're in a little niche all of our own. We just like to groove. I love the traddies - I can't play it (I disagreed: his playing one night with Bob Barnard, Ray Price and company contributed to some of the most enjoyable jazz I've heard in Australia). A lot of the traddies don't like what we do, but they don't put us down.

"I'll go and listen to the avant-garde. I'll go and listen to Serge Emoll's band or Jazz Co-op, and I'll enjoy it, and even things that I can't feel; well, okay, they're expressing themselves, they're grooving in their own little way. Their own big way.

"I've played with [John] Sangster so many times, and I've tried to play avant-garde, and I can't. Well, maybe I can play it, but I mightn't really feel it. Everybody knows that, and they put me down. Old hat. You know. These young guys that just come along and they don't want to know about anything that isn't in at the moment."



*John Clare's sketch of Errol Buddle: it makes me think that a lot of Australian musicians don't understand jazz ... COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER*

Errol Buddle stops eating and remarks. "But it's always been the same, Col. I can remember this little group of guys who didn't dig anything but Lennie Tristano. Oh, Gerry Mulligan was okay. One night I played baritone, which I don't normally do, and one of these guys said. 'You sounded like Harry Carney' - and that was supposed to be a put down! I played with Pepper Adams in the States, and his idol was Harry Carney. A very modern pianist I worked with took the night off because Teddy Wilson was coming to town."

"Yeah," said Col. "Geoff Bull lent me a record of Captain John Handy, and it was too much. Well, you saw Roland Kirk. Incredible, right? You know who his idol is? Yeah, Coltrane, yeah and Don Byas, but really, you know who he really idolises? Captain John Handy!



*Roland Kirk: he idolises Captain John Handy... PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER*

"I might be old hat. I must be getting old. You're getting old too, Errol. But if someone doesn't like it, that's alright. I just don't know why they've got to put it down."

Such a humble self-appraisal may strike some as being slightly out of character, as indeed the artistic tolerance (Col has not been slow in the past to say he doesn't like something, and Ray's quoting him in the article caused most of the trouble), but we cannot but agree with the sentiments. A certain contempt for, and ignorance of the

past has lent an anonymous, colourless quality to quite a bit of Australian 'modern' jazz.

"Remember the Giants of Jazz concert?" Errol asked. "A lot of guys were putting down Sonny Stitt, saying nothing happening there. He knocked me out. The sound, the feeling. It really does make me think that a lot of Australian musicians don't understand jazz."



*A lot of guys were putting down Sonny Stitt (above)... PHOTO CREDIT BARONESS PANNONICA DE KOENIGSWARTER*

I also remember meeting at half time a group of young musicians, polished studio players, who were rubbishing the Preservation Hall band. I ran into the late Jackie Dougan, a (drummer who played with most of the big names at Ronnie Scott's, and whom these young musicians respected very highly. "You'd better straighten out your young friends." I said. He was incredulous when I told him what they'd been saying, and he hurried off to do just that.

Now there is no doubt that Nolan and Buddle have got themselves into their own little niche. The kind of hard, straight ahead jazz that stormed back in reaction to the cool school, and which damn near everyone was playing in the late 50s. The sound of the El Rocco. Smoky jazz club jazz. Funky soul jazz. Turgid soul, perhaps. Even guilty soul. Rent overdue, I hope that chick's not pregnant — to hell with it, tonight we swing: tss shuck a tss chk, badum badow! poom poom poom sock! a tssssock a

tsssock! And now Nolan and Buddle, and their current drummer Allan Nash are about the only ones doing it. And they are doing it six nights a week.

I must confess, there are times when I've been of half a mind to go and hear Col Nolan's latest group. and I have sometimes put it off, because, well, hearing Col Nolan is no novelty for me. He'll always be there; I'll catch him sooner or later. And I do, and that thing is happening: the off-beat is snapping and the music is sort of loping in an awful hurry, like men going rhythmically along a rope over a river full of piranha. The Jimmy Smith jungle walk. Or the next one might be way up. The Oscar Peterson sizzle. Get it along. Steam it along.



*Col Nolan on piano with the Warren Daly Big Band in the early 1980s: rocking and pounding, harumphing through his moustache like a bull walrus... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

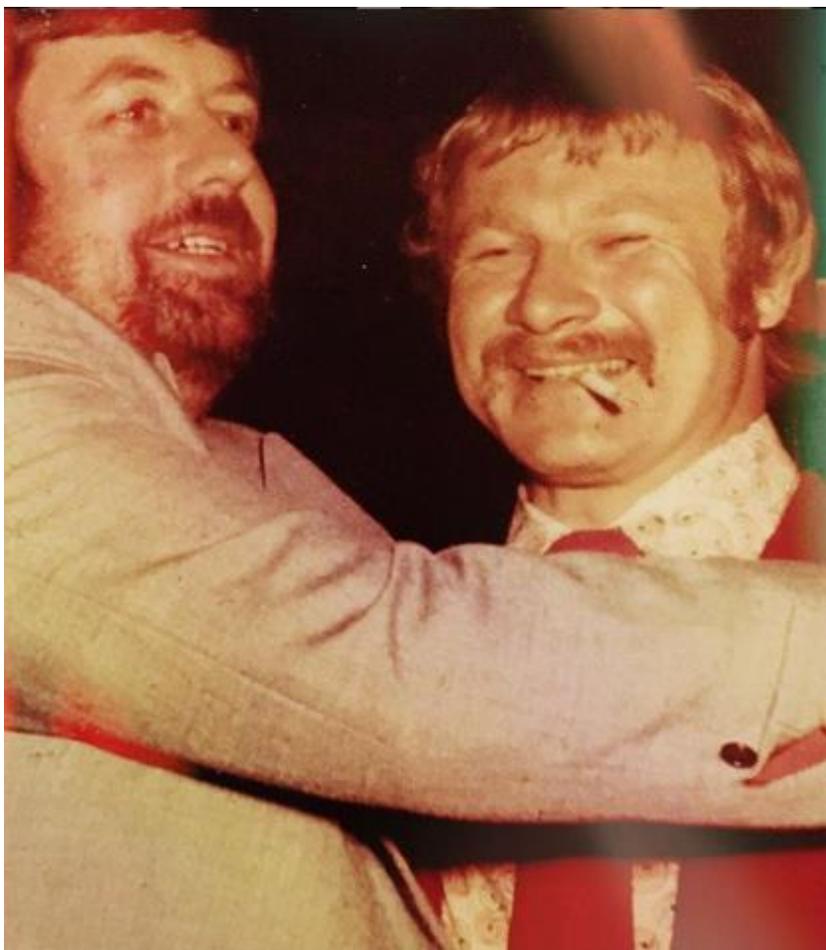
I really prefer Col on piano. I remember one night the Daly-Wilson band set up one of those Force Nine gale tempos. The rhythm section started it, Col stabbing short phrases, very nearly like Count Basie. Then he began to rumble in the bass, attack and hold bluesy treble figures. The band began looking back towards him and shouting encouragement. He was rocking and pounding, harumphing through his moustache like a bull walrus. By the time the band burst in, they were way off the ground.

There are not many places these days with a good piano, so Col totes his organ with separate keyboard for laying down a bass line. And that thing still happens. Errol Buddle has been with him for some time, and they are well paired. He has that elegant power in reserve quality that used to make Don Burrows sometimes appear to be trying too hard when they played together at the El Rocco. And he can fly. He never forces it. Lets it build. When he is really going you can hear that he has been listening to the contemporary reed players. He is much admired by Roger Frampton

of the more adventurous Jazz Co-Op, and indeed he must be admired by any reed player who did not expect him to mechanically change his whole style to conform with fashion.

It is a very difficult, sometimes a long and painful thing in any art to develop a coherent and stylistically unified expression. When it all comes together, it is not much less than a miracle. For some, it never happens. When you have found something of your own, as both Nolan and Buddle have, it is very nearly criminal to break it all up again just in order to copy something more fashionable.

Serge Ermoll said that it was a mistake for someone to try and play in the new idiom just to 'keep up'. Col Nolan has tried to play in what he terms an avant-garde style because Sangster invited him to. No doubt he will do it again, and one day it could really happen. In the meantime, there is little point in putting him down for doing what he does best. There is little point in doing anything but getting along there and grooving with it.



*Col Nolan (left) pictured with pianist Serge Ermoll, who said that it was a mistake for someone to try and play in the new idiom just to 'keep up'...* PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Errol Buddle has perhaps more successfully incorporated recent developments. but there are still elements in his playing of one of his early inspirations, Lucky Thompson. And hell, I would hate not to be able to hear that kind of tenor anymore.

It is not true that all young musicians put the Buddle-Nolan groove down. John Hoffman, the excellent young American trumpeter who visited Australia with the Buddy Rich band and then came back to stay often jams with the Syndicate. You will hear Hoffman, incidentally, playing in Horst Liepolt's 'Music Is An Open Sky' festival at the Basement.

While I was at the Old Push, I took the opportunity to talk to Errol Buddle for the first time, having seen him on the stand many times over the years. Col Nolan has not changed at all - maybe mellowed a bit - but Buddle has. His appearance used to be somewhat tense and imposing, to suit his authoritative tenor sound. With his



*When young Buddle (above) was something like a cross between chairman of the board and impassive Buddha. These days (below) he looks a bit shaggier...*



strong nose, clipped moustache and slightly hooded eyes, he was something like a cross between chairman of the board and impassive Buddha. These days he looks a bit shaggier, more approachable, and as is often the case with people fortunate enough to be involved with something they really like, the weatherbeating of the years serves to make him look paradoxically younger.

Buddle went to the States during the 50s. "I had no thought of playing jazz. Out of the question. I didn't think I was good enough. I thought I might be able to do some commercial work, and hear a lot of jazz. As it happens I went along to a club to hear Yusef Lateef. He talked me into sitting in, and he lent me his new tenor, which is ironical, because the club owner came up to me afterwards and asked if I'd like to take over the group! Yusef was getting the sack. I don't know what was going on. The guy thought they couldn't get it together or something."



*The saxophonist Yusef Lateef: he was getting the sack... PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER*

I asked was it a good group?

"Well... Ha ha. Elvin Jones was in it! Tommy Flanagan! This was in Detroit. Elvin used to accompany Miles and Sonny Stitt when they came to town. He was already playing in a very individualistic style. At about the same time, I saw Earl Bostic, and he had a young tenor player called John Coltrane. I thought he was okay. I was really

more impressed by Earl Bostic. Not long after that, Coltrane began to be heard on records with a totally new concept. The transformation was amazing. It was very advanced for the time.

"When I went to the States, I began playing in a cooler style, because, well, everybody was. The Negroes didn't like the cool thing, and the West Coast players didn't like the Negro thing. That was very marked. When I played with that band with Elvin - which I did for some time, with various personnel changes - I found I preferred the Negro style.

"After that, of course Bryce Rohde and Jack Brokensha turned up, and we formed the Australian Jazz Quartet with Dick Healey. We got work straight away, sound unheard. One agent had heard there was this group of Australians, and he rang us up and booked us. For a while we backed Carmen McCrae. Then we began to be featured on our own."



*The Australian Jazz Quartet: Bryce Rohde (at the piano) then, clockwise, Errol Buddle, Dick Healey, Jack Brokensha... PHOTO COURTESY LEE BUDDLE*

Errol Buddle speaks very quietly. The self-deprecating chuckle which accompanies stories of success or plain good luck are very Australian: the world is falling in our lap, ha ha; maybe we don't deserve it: that's funnier still. Amazing what a boy from Sydney can get away with. They also lead me to believe that what seemed like dignified reserve was probably shyness.

Buddle likes the free blowers like Archie Shepp and Albert Ayler. "I've been working for a year now with the ABC, and of course Charlie Munro has put me onto a lot of that stuff."

Nolan and Buddle are perfect foils for each other. Mr Gentle, and Mr — what shall we say? Nolan hams up the announcements, wobbles his cheek with his tongue in imitation of his own bass line, frowns and scrutinises the people sitting close to the stand until they are forced to look away, laughing self-consciously. Buddle watches this cheekiness with amusement and apparent surprise, though he's seen it all before.



*Trumpeter John Hoffman, here on flugelhorn: he requested I'm An Old Cowhand...*  
PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

"We've got a request for something different, *I'm An Old Cowhand*. It was requested by the trumpet player, Mr John Hoffman." He points at Hoffman, the guilty one, with a dubious expression. Knew he was a cowboy at heart. They swing it of course, and as soon as it has finished, a mock-drunken voice comes from the little knot of musicians by the bar (though he doesn't have to fake it too much): "I-I-I'm an o-o-old cowhand...."

He is joined by two others, "Fro-o-om the Rio Grande...."

For a moment I think the whole place is going to join in and sing it right through, but it stops and the original singer calls, "But can you play it my way?" Nolan looks astonished. Buddle smirks, slipping the tenor reed into his mouth (he has not played alto tonight).

The night ends with a storming version of *Things Ain't What They Used to Be*.