

RONNIE'S PLACE

by John Clare*

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In the auspicious year of 1965 my ex wife Pamela Greaves and I sailed to England on a budget Italian liner. It was cheaper to sail than to fly in those days. A kind of war broke out between the Aussies and the Poms. Well a faction of each. The Poms were gangsters of a kind going back with their tails between their legs. At one point the master at arms was called. But reality in the oceanic world moved on many levels. We saw a very small fishing boat with a single sail far out on the blue. Maybe two men were on board. No islands were visible, no shoreline. Where were they from? Their tiny craft shuddered violently when our bow wave hit them, but the two we could see watched calmly as this massive white vessel passed. Also surprisingly big were the flying fish that left the water at the tips of waves and glided some distance, slowly falling in the air, until they hit other waves and disappeared. We were quite near the Equator.

Once we had found a flat in Hampstead we went with some excitement to Ronnie Scott's well established jazz club in Soho. It was known as the Old Place because a much larger new club, also Ronnie's, had recently been completed. Next time. We wanted to see Ronnie's Old Place before it disappeared. In the line of people filing in after us I turned and recognized drummer Chris Karan, who had played with Mike Nock's celebrated Three Out Trio in the Embers in Melbourne and El Rocco near the top of William Street in Kings Cross, Sydney. He now played with Dudley Moore's trio in London. Dudley was a very good jazz pianist, and he had gone to Oxford on an organ scholarship. Chris had grown a substantial moustache which was very black, and this was not surprising as he was of Greek origin.



Dudley Moore Trio, circa 1965, with Chris Karan on the drums...

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"There's Chris Karan," I said. "No it's not" said my wife. "Yes it is," said Chris. This was the beginning of a very pleasant friendship. One night Chris rang me and asked if I wanted to go and see the Dusty Springfield show in the BBC studios. Sure. I liked her and I had heard her singing brilliantly with Dudley's trio, singing a song from *My Fair Lady* at breakneck speed, holding a polyrhythm - or cross rhythm if you prefer - without effort. The reason for Dudley's presence was that the trio wanted to hold over some of Dusty's audience for about five or ten minutes while they re-recorded a piece they were not happy with. As it happened they were all, or most of them, happy to stay. As a bonus Dud began singing at the piano in every style known to man, including a freakishly high falsetto, not exactly a counter tenor. A BBC chap in a beautiful suit collapsed against a pillar and almost sobbed, "But he's so funny! He's so funny!"

Dudley and I sat together and watched the show from a room adjacent to the studio on a closed circuit television. There was one guest who was an American stand-up comic wearing a beautiful tan suit with auburn hair. His name was Woody Allen. I was not the only one who had no idea who he was. I told Dudley that I thought he was quite good. Dudley pulled a sour face and said, "No, I didn't like him. He's got that American thing." Hmm.

A handful of American unknowns began appearing at that time on British TV. They included Jimi Hendrix, Paul Simon.. and someone else who also became very famous. It might come back to me. In a break Dusty came in to say hello. She mimicked my accent. Having got that off her chest she was very sweet.



Al Cohn: he played with a much larger, darker tone than Zoot Sims...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

The month's special guests from America at Ronnie's on our first night there were well established tenor saxophone duo Zoot Sims (the improbable name was real, though a comic writer in *Downbeat* magazine persisted in calling him Zoot Finster.) and Al Cohn. More of them shortly. Or why not now? Our man Zoot, a slight, sharply dressed man had a light, beautifully modulated tone. His playing was mostly understated, in the cool jazz manner that had passed its point of dominance, which

was in the 1950s. But any well played historic style would be welcome. We were in London and we wanted to hear everything. We felt we had come to it over the sea. As it happened we looked back and saw Spike Milligan taking the seat he occupied almost every time we came.

Sims presented a kind of softened geometry that was both abstract in part and lyrical in turn. Softened as his angles were, his tone actually had a subtly grained edge. Cohn played with a much larger, darker tone that made it seem deeper, as Elvis's big hollow echoic low notes could make you think he was a baritone, whereas he was a rare tenor for a pop singer. While Cohn too had a subtly modern style, his big tone reminded me of forceful tenors of the swing era, as for instance Coleman Hawkins. He did not, however, produce the wide emphatic vibrato which could emphasise a quality often projected by the earlier masters: a kind of belligerent emotionalism which could be humorous. His phrasing was often more sensual and curvilinear than Sims' and his tone reminded me of black silk.



The fascinating Stan Tracey, who had his own take on the rhythmic and harmonic intrigue of Thelonious Monk...PHOTO COURTESY SUMP MAGAZINE.COM

The rest of the band were locals, Londoners, and they included the fascinating pianist Stan Tracey, who had his own take on the rhythmic and harmonic intrigue of Thelonious Monk. Also drummer Jackie Dougan, also a special talent, who migrated to Australia and was killed driving home from a job soon after going on the wagon. He was hit by a semi trailer. I still have a Sonny Rollins album with Clifford Brown and Max Roach that he had lent me.

Let us jump further into our London time and go to Ronnie's New Place. By this time I was writing for *Town Magazine*, which was owned and edited by Julian Critchley, an upper class chap whose father was in the House Of Lords. And so was he in time. In truth he was a very decent fellow... Not all of them were.

One of the first pieces I wrote for *Town* was a profile and review of Rahsaan Roland Kirk, a very brilliant, original and deep musician, whose habit of playing two and sometimes three saxophones simultaneously distracted the determinedly critical



Rahsaan Roland Kirk: incidentally he was blind...

listener from his considerable powers of musical invention and his ability to create gales of excitement and great depths of emotion. He also played the flute wonderfully, sometimes in a mesmerising vocalised manner which clearly influenced a rock player. In fact the fellow, who did not lack talent, confessed the influence.

Roland, incidentally was blind. When I walked early into the club and told him I was the fellow who had rung him to arrange a meeting, he whipped around and shouted "Follow me!" and charged off, weaving between the as yet unfilled tables, blowing a claxon horn which sat at the top of his white walking stick. This had a tiny wheel at the other end. I found it very difficult to keep up with his wildly twisting and turning course. Once we were in the dressing room he released an unstoppable flow of musical opinion. This flow included some formidable theory which I would dearly like to be able to remember.

Roland began his set with his feet planted on the very edge of the stage. Three saxophones hung round his neck and once he had stamped out the time and pirouetted they lifted about him almost horizontally and whirled like a metal cloak. More than once I thought he would crash down on me, for I sat right up close, and so did Spike Milligan. Soon we were crowded out by most of the Woody Herman band who had just come in and had a couple of nights there themselves between concert hall performances.

Two of the saxophones wielded by Rol were unknown to me. They were called the stritch and the manzello. During our meeting he told me a story many others may well have heard. Nobody seemed to have seen or heard one of these saxophones and he claimed to have seen it in a dream before buying it in a second hand store and repairing it. Some who knew him said that he often adjusted and repaired instruments while listening to two radio stations at once: a classical station, a rock

station, and a jazz. When he heard something specially interesting he turned the other two down and the pertinent one up.



Sonny Rollins: wearing a beret and smoking a Gauloise... PHOTO COURTESY MOSAIC IMAGES

One of the most influential tenor saxophonists who also played there while we were in London was Sonny Rollins. I'll spare you all but one Rollins story. One night Ronnie and a friend walked by the club late at night and heard someone moving. They slipped in quietly and there was Sonny - who was black, as was Roland Kirk - regarding himself in a mirror, wearing a beret and smoking a Gauloise or Gitane and declaring, "I am Pierre the Frenchman".

Pamela and I lived quite near Hampstead Heath and our son Mathew was born in Hampstead hospital nearby. Down the road was the Swiss Cottage Odeon, which was the headquarters of the Royal Philharmonic. Among special events there we heard and saw Sibelius's sixth Symphony conducted by a pupil of the composer. Also a Sibelius song sung by Janet Baker, who was not yet a Dame. At Christmas we strolled down with friends from Perth and heard them play *The Messiah* of course, with the Philharmonic Choir.

I must apply the brakes. It would be easy to go on for an hour about London at that time. I actually had three poems read on the BBC. And one more thing. An expatriate Australia artist Tony Underhill had his studio in the basement. He had come to England with Sidney Nolan and others in the first Antipodean Exhibition. His fellow artist Jack Yates from Yorkshire who lived down there too, had a student who was painting a portrait of George Harrison, who came and sat regularly. I saw the portrait but not the actual George I'm afraid.