

## THE RHYTHM SECTION THAT PLAYS TOGETHER STAYS TOGETHER.

by John Clare

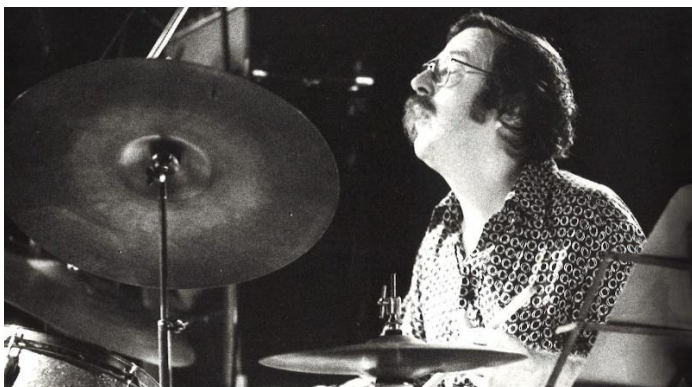
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**T**he heartbeat of Billy Burton's award-winning band is its flexible and dynamic rhythm section: Tony Esterman, piano; Darcy Wright, bass; and Alan Turnbull, drums. The key to their effectiveness is a combination of ability, attitude and mutual enjoyment. They have been playing together at Marrickville RSL for just on six years. They are all happy to play jazz jobs when they do not conflict with their nights at the club — but they are happiest of all when those jobs involve their playing together as a rhythm section.



*A flexible and dynamic rhythm section: Tony Esterman, piano (above); Darcy Wright, bass (below); and Alan Turnbull, drums (far below)...*



The truth is that they play jazz together all the time — if you can accept the ability to draw the maximum rhythmic potential and musical enjoyment from any piece of music as one definition of jazz. It is a sad fact that many musicians, when they are confronted with a very routine arrangement or with music they consider corny, will play 'dead straight' — like machines in fact. All they give of themselves is a certain dry ironic ring, which seems to proclaim: 'I am playing this because I have to. I am playing all the right notes to show that I am a craftsman, but basically I am bored.' The least sophisticated audience can perceive that the band sounds dead.

In contrast, Esterman, Wright and Turnbull literally 'play' the music. They have fun with it, enriching its harmony, hinting at cross rhythms, deftly inserting ingenious little fills —without ever obscuring the basic and simple guidelines that some performers need. As a result, all the music they play sounds alive with possibilities, with humour and enjoyment. Far from alienating club performers or 'unsophisticated' club audiences, the Burton rhythm team have won appreciation from both.

As they walk down the sidelines to the stage door, they are greeted by name by many Marrickville club-goers. Club performers have voted the Burton band their favourite for the last three years. That speaks for itself. Alan Turnbull says he is better known in the Marrickville area for his work with Burton than for his work with Don Burrows, Roger Frampton, Howie Smith and other jazz names, but he sees no reason to be bitter about that.



*Billy Burton: just as hip in his own way...*

"Billy Burton is just as hip as they are in his own way," he says. "He gives me complete freedom to play the kind of drums that I judge to be appropriate to each piece of music.

"A lot of people have a completely negative attitude to the clubs, and the gambling thing. I come from Melbourne, and there's nothing like the entertainment Sydney has, and nowhere near as much work for musicians and entertainers.

"Sydney is an easy town to play the drums in. You can work even if you can't really play. That is a situation that will level itself out in time.

"I like playing at Marrickville, because there is a range of music. However, I wouldn't enjoy it if I wasn't with flexible musicians like Tony and Darcy. That kind of flexibility

is what gives you a full playing experience — where you can play any music and get the most from it.

"The ability to play the music accurately and enter the spirit of it is what has got us nice jobs like playing with Billy Eckstine and Cleo Laine."

Darcy Wright, who is from Perth, agreed that some musicians have a negative attitude to club work. "If they're confronted with a Dick Buchanan chart, they just groan. Now those charts are very basic, but they can make a barely competent band sound passable. The reason a lot of acts have them is that there are still a lot of bands that don't read well enough to handle anything more.

"If you approach them in the right way, you read through what is written to the more interesting changes beyond the simplifications, and you play what should be there. They are just a very basic guide."

On Sunday afternoons the rhythm section accompanies entrants in the talent quest. Tony Esterman admits, "You have to have a sense of humour, or you'd go mad. At the same time, you have to realise that this is a very serious thing for these people.

"If they go into the wrong key, or move the time around, you have a smile to yourself, but you try to get them out of trouble.

"Generally I stick to what's written — particularly if it's music I'm not familiar with — in the hope that they'll come back to the right key. If they're obviously not going to, then I'll go with them.

"You have to be aware of the effect it has on people to walk out in front of an audience for the first time. Sometimes they'll come to the piano to work out a key. Then when they get out there, they forget everything and start singing in a completely different key.

"Sometimes they'll start a fourth higher, and you just have to sit there waiting for the awful moment when they go out of register. Some of the sounds they make to reach the notes just break you up. And they all go off muttering to themselves. So you have to retain a sense of humour."

Humour and sympathy is what characterises these musicians, in their work and in their casual conversation. They are quick to bestow praise when talking about artists they have worked with, and not averse to laughing about some of the disasters. When they laugh, they also wince a little, because there is a genuine sympathy there. They all agreed that a concern for musical values was increasing amongst club acts, though they admitted that there were still performers around whose interest in music was limited to songs that might make a good vehicle for them. A limited interest in music often means limited musical competence, which makes, for instance, the learning of a new arrangement a long and frustrating process.

"I think," says Turnbull, "that some of the younger performers are more concerned to really do the thing properly on a musical level. The only problem is that they have to perform to an audience whose average age is well over 40. Therefore they have to sing old songs which may not be completely appropriate for them. That is one of the drawbacks of club work."

Sunday night is big show time at Marrickville. Max Bygraves headed the bill when I was there, and he had bought his own long-standing drummer and pianist. However, the stars of the first half were Denise Keene and Happy, and behind them the rhythm section blew up a storm. The whole band blew up a storm in fact, and Billy Burton's trumpet solo was a burster.



*Denise Keene (right) & Happy: behind them the rhythm section blew up a storm...*

Denise Keene is an exceptionally gifted singer. With full confidence in her abilities, the rhythm section played with a lot of freedom and dynamic contrast. They played with dash. The result was not baffling to the audience at all. Their applause left no doubt that they could feel the life, colour and excitement of an inspired team effort.

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