

CONJURER: POEMS, by Allan Browne. Published by Extempore, \$29.95 (print book with companion CD), 96pp.

Reviewed by Paul Cliff*

[This review appeared in *The Australian* newspaper (date unknown), with the heading “Rhythms from the jazz age resonate in a freewheeling fusion of words and music”.]

Conjurer is a collection from 67-year-old Melbourne jazz personality Allan Browne. It plays very well. About 40 of the 70 poems (written across 40 years) are substantively about jazz, and for some of these contextual knowledge is necessary for full appreciation. Or you can check the helpful explanatory notes. The *Conjurer* project was conceived as a dual poetry collection and jazz performance CD, the latter featuring Browne's sextet playing pieces framed by seven of his poems. The poems on the 68-minute CD, delivered in Browne's dark, gritty, laconic Australian voice, are mainly read upfront, as lead-ins to the music.



Allan Browne in 2012... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY McAVOY

*Paul Cliff is a Canberra-based writer and editor.

The collection is an eclectic mix, with much fun and playfulness, some deft puncturing and some solid swing, with some slower movements of solid gravitas and a fine rhythmic sense throughout. Some poems contain musical directions, such as "gentle free play in 3/4 in B flat drums and bass in" (*For Gertrude Stein*), and the poet can wield a deft pun, as when recalling playing in a Dixieland band, where "things got Ory" (*Allfrey St 1952*).

Jazz-based themes include the musician's working life, reflections on friends and colleagues and homages to jazz greats played with or admired. There is also a section of 20 ruminations on CD recordings by Browne's past bands.

Non-jazz evocations encompass the natural world and domestic life (with a lovely conflation of jazz and family in the imagery of his loves in *The Three Little Bops*: busily "scattin" about him, each into their own music just like "bop-raptured daddio").



Browne with his daughter Stella, Xmas 1986... PHOTO COURTESY RAY MARTIN

A middle section (*Frail Vessel/Steely Stuff*) touches on Browne's hospitalisation for a single lung transplant because of emphysema in 2002. Here, *I Am in a Submarine at the Pole* is a song of dislocation, ramping up to the cry: "get me out, I am dizzy / real air, wind, rain, anything, get me out before I fall dragging the drips / triggering alarms".

There is also the charming play of poetic v medical in *Big Hearts*, here quoted in full:

*radiographers beware
when examining x-rays
of the great jazz doctors
they have huge hearts
that are not symptoms
of anything sinister.*

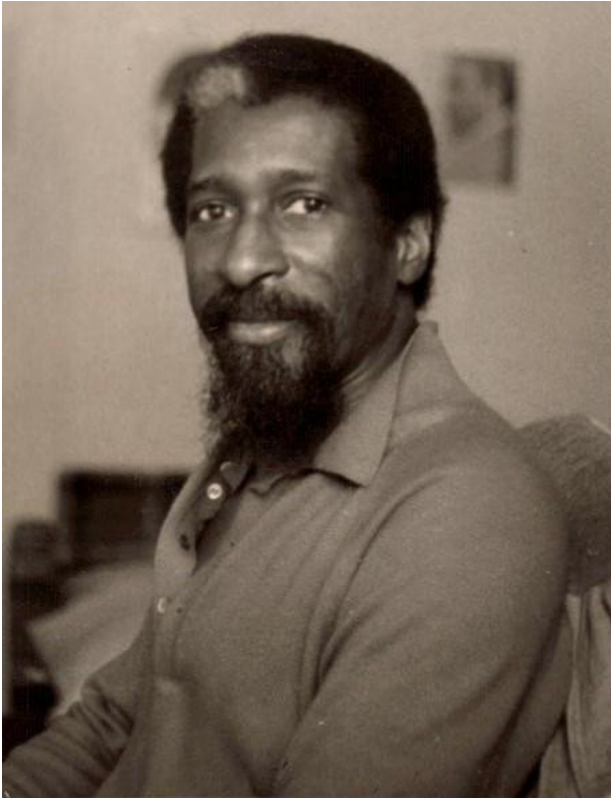
Elsewhere Miles Davis is a beguiling "fragile harmon / crying in isolation spatially perfect". And snatches of remembered jazz conversation serve to connect Australian jazzmen to the universal tradition, as in *For Emily Remler*: "I might look like a good / jewish girl from new jersey / but inside I am a fifty year old / heavy set black man with a / big thumb like Wes."



*Miles Davis (left) in 1982:
"fragile harmon / crying in
isolation spatially perfect"...*
*Emily Remler (below): "inside
I am a fifty year old / heavy set
black man with a / big
thumb"... REMLER PHOTO
COURTESY JOHN FORDHAM'S THE
SOUND OF JAZZ*



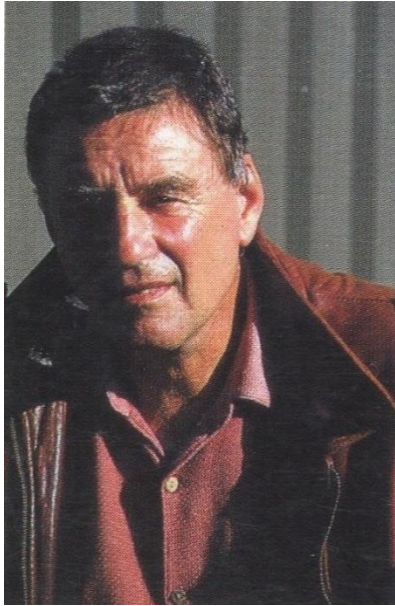
Or again in *For Mal Waldron*: " 'when I nod my head just play' / a free ride, a juggernaut, new york, paris, / mars and the odd black hole, / all in the first set". Similarly, *A Short Verse to a Tall Man* urges bebop vibraphonist Milt Jackson to return to "inspire us again", and open the door "to the aladdin's cave, / of ultimate burn".



Mal Waldron (left): "a free ride, a juggernaut, new york, paris, / mars and the odd black hole, / all in the first set"... Milt Jackson (below): open the door "to the aladdin's cave, / of ultimate burn"...



Introducing this handsome collection (tall, white and classical in format), John Clare touches on the poetry-jazz nexus of the 1920s dadaists and surrealists, and the beats of the 50s. There is a sort of malingering Charles Bukowski in *Percussive Santa*, a self-portrait (I am presuming) of the jazzman's earlier and wilder days.



John Clare (left) introduces this handsome collection, touching on the poetry-jazz nexus of the 1920s dadaists and surrealists, and the beats of the 50s...

But other poetic spirits are also perhaps present. *Boomerang Blues* has echoes of Dorothy Parker's deadpan humour and indeed even of Oodgeroo's *No More Boomerang*: "how I love my boomerang, as faithful as a dog / it is a living thing to me, yet made out of a log".



Browne (left): a vibrant and varied performance...

In some of the collection's iconic Australiana, there is even a sort of jazzy Jindyworobak, as well as in the taut, imagistic portraits of the native birds in *Red Hill* (a kookaburra with "his binoculars sharp / for mouse or snake") and *Magpie Stomp*, with the bird carolling "that famous Australian lick". Like that, Browne's is a vibrant and varied performance.