

ADRIAN CUNNINGHAM: AUSTRALIA'S FINEST JAZZ EXPORT?

by Samuel Cottell*

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Adrian Cunningham, who has made his mark on the Australian and New York jazz scenes. Gordon Rytmeister is on drums in the background... PHOTO CREDIT AARON BLAKEY

Multi woodwind player Adrian Cunningham has made his mark on the Australian and New York jazz scenes. Growing up in Sydney, he studied music at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and formed his quartet (featuring Billy Risby, Gordon Rytmeister and Dave Pudney). He recorded albums with them and released a live DVD (*With All Due Respect: The Benny Goodman Centennial Concert*). In 2005 Adrian was nominated for two MO awards: Jazz Instrumentalist of the Year and Best Jazz Group. He has also been a member of two prominent jazz groups, *Galapagos Duck* and the *Sydney All Star Big Band*. After a

**In 2015 when this was posted Samuel Cottell was a pianist, arranger and composer based in Sydney. He was then completing his PhD in Musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, where he was writing about the music of maestro Tommy Tycho. Samuel has contributed entries to the "Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians" and was writing about big bands in the Sydney jazz scene. In his spare time he enjoys drinking a strong cup of coffee.*

trip to New York he realised that it was where he needed to be. Moving there in 2008 he has made his mark on the scene performing in a wide number of projects and groups. He regularly performs with his own quartet and with trombonist Wycliffe Gordon. Cunningham has recently released a recording of Neal Hefti's music, "Ain't That Right! The Music of Neal Hefti". Hefti, a trumpeter, wrote the themes for "The Odd Couple" and the "Batman" TV series in the '60s, as well as various songs, such as the perennial ballad "Li'l Darlin'". As an arranger, he worked with Frank Sinatra and the Count Basie Orchestra. Cunningham recently visited Sydney to perform with his quartet at Venue 505. I caught up with him, to chat about jazz, New York and his latest album.



You perform in trad and modern settings. How important, for you, is it to still play trad jazz and do you have a preference between the two?

That's a great question. In my mind, I don't really differentiate between 'old' and 'new' jazz. It's all the same language to me. When you listen to recordings of Lester Young or Coleman Hawkins, these guys are playing harmonically adventurous ideas. Likewise when I hear current masters I hear the tradition in their playing as well. When you play with integrity to the tradition of the music, I believe the context is not so important.

Is there a difference between the trad and modern scenes here in Sydney and NY? What would you say the differences are?

It's hard for me to comment too accurately on the Sydney scene (I'm a little out of the loop these days). However what I've noticed is that in NY there is a generation of 'serious' bad-ass young players playing in a traditional style. In Sydney, there is an emphasis on original music- to find its own identity away from the American tradition. Hence the term 'improvised music' instead of 'jazz'.

What is about New York, compared to Australia, that has that authentic jazz? I mean in NY there is this tradition, do we have this in Australia?

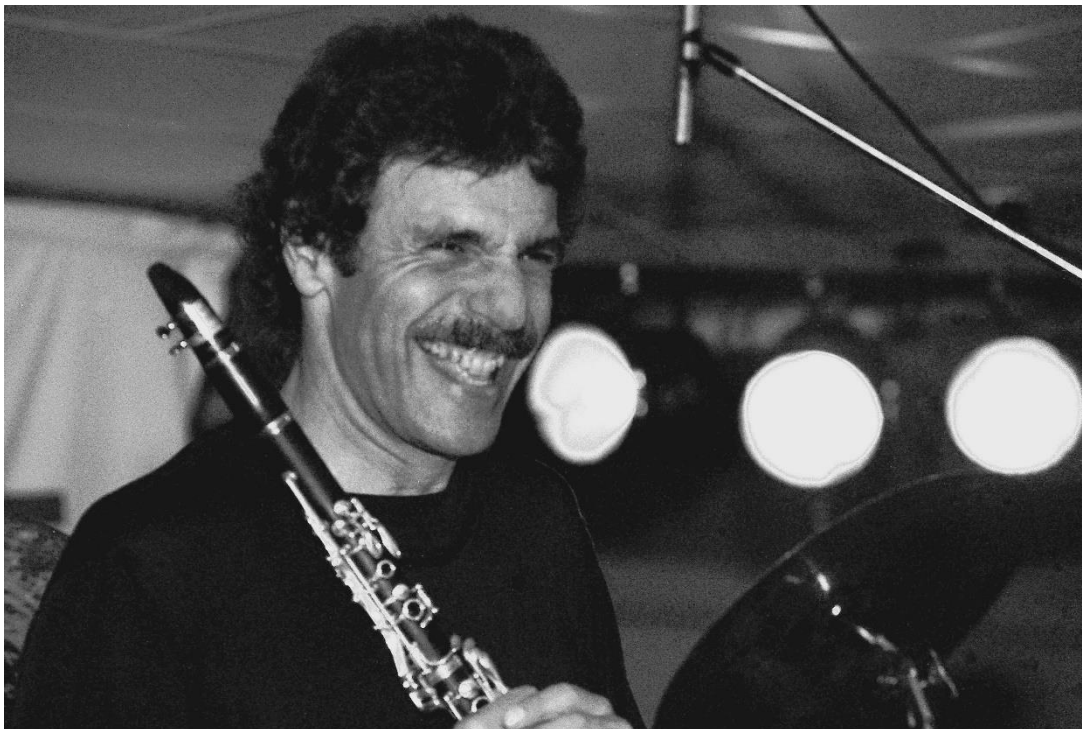
Following on, of course jazz is an American art form, one that continues to grow and take on new forms. That's not to invalidate any other countries playing this music. Australia has a great heritage of musicians and music. The difference in my mind is that jazz is an expression of a powerful time in American history and was an expression of a people's struggle expressed in a musical tradition. Australia doesn't have that sort of heritage reflected in its music. Perhaps we've yet to find our musical identity.

What made you move to New York? Was there something specific that made you say "I'm moving here"?

A year before I moved, I visited NY to get a few lessons and to just soak up the scene. It's funny, I can't say I fell in love with the city as such, but I realised that I would never get to play at the level of those guys by living in Australia. So I organised a visa and took my chances!

You started out on the piano, then went to clarinet. Was there a particular moment when you decided that you were going to play jazz clarinet?

I remember coming home from school and putting on one of my Dad's records (*Ambassador Satch* by Louis Armstrong – check it out!) and would play along, pretending I was in the band. A year or two later my clarinet teacher Terry Stirzaker gave me a tape with Eddie Daniels on it and I was hooked.



Clarinetist Eddie Daniels: Adrian heard a tape of Daniels, and was hooked... PHOTO CREDIT STUART NICHOLSON

How did you come to doublings and learning the flute?

I picked up flute while at the Con (Sydney Conservatorium). Don Burrows was always an inspiration for me. Flute took me a while to get the hang of. But now I really love it. It pays to be stubborn!



On flute, which Adrian picked up while at the Sydney Conservatorium, Don Burrows was always an inspiration for him... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

How did you first learn about jazz?

I discovered jazz from my Dad. He loved Louis, Fats Waller, Mills Brothers, and had a great 78 collection. Hard to think of what the first tune I listened to was, but *Blue Skies* comes to mind.

How did you start out in jazz in Sydney? Were there any musicians or gigs that really set it off for you?

I'm lucky to have been around when Tom Baker was playing. His band would blow the roof off every Saturday at Strawberry Hills Hotel. I'm grateful to him and Paul Furniss who were great mentors and taught me a lot. I started out like most of the other cats, doing small gigs around with my classmates from the Con. Ralph Pyl was a big help to me too. He passed me a lot of great commercial work and gave me a spot with the Sydney All Star Big Band.



Adrian is grateful to Tom Baker and Paul Furniss (pictured above, second & third from left) who were great mentors and taught him a lot. On the left is trombonist Roger Janes... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ LOVERS. Also Ralph Pyl (below, on the far left, pictured with Don Burrows & James Morrison) was helpful, giving Adrian a spot with the Sydney All Star Big Band... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN





Neal Hefti (above) who, according to Adrian, flies under the radar in jazz history... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM P GOTTLIEB. Hefti is pictured below in 1961 at a recording session with Frank Sinatra... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



When did you first hear the music of Neal Hefti? What interested you about it and what made you want to record it?

I wanted to do a swinging album, and while thinking about Basie I ended up looking at Neal Hefti – who wrote and arranged a lot of Basie’s well-known tunes. I thought he’d be a good choice as he flies under the radar in jazz history. As I checked out Hefti further I discovered how prolific his writing was - from orchestral to big band to TV and movies. The hard part was narrowing down the tune choices.