

## *DisChords*

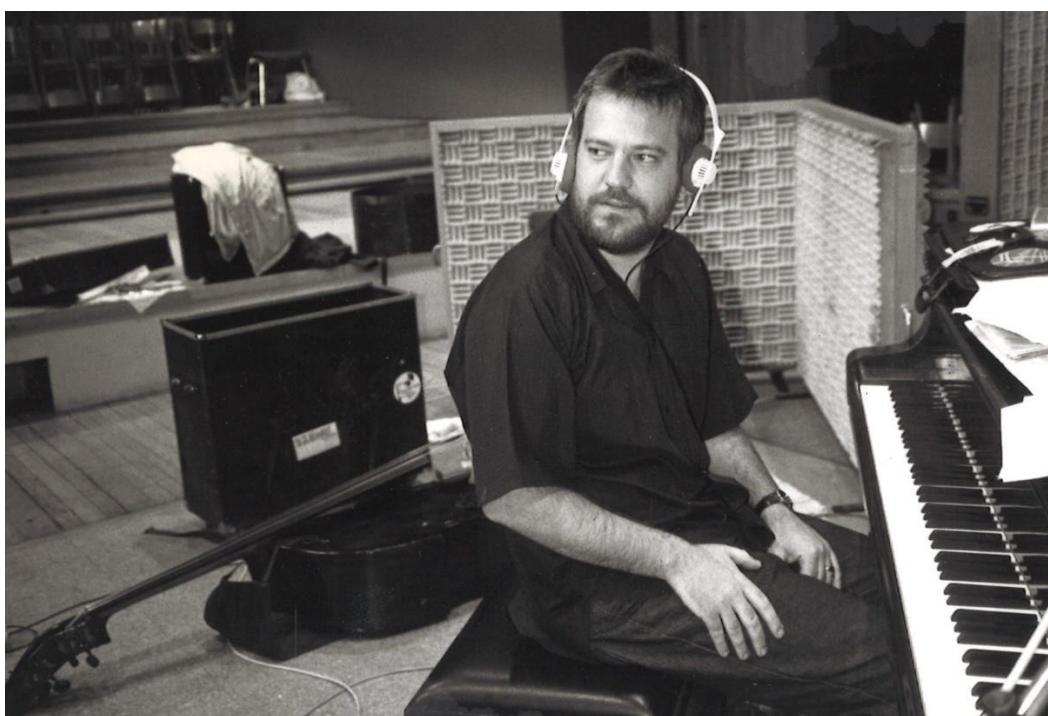
*A column by Jazz Co-ordinator  
Eric Myers*



**JazzChord, Jun/Jul 1999**

---

The following is an unfortunate tale of how the **Melbourne International Jazz Festival** was treated by ABC-TV. In December 1997, Paul Grabowsky was a member of the Board of the Melbourne International Jazz Festival (MIJF), and also commissioning editor for Arts & Entertainment, ABC TV. Paul decided that the inaugural MIJF program, in early 1998, was strong enough for ABC TV to film it. Accordingly artistic director Adrian Jackson negotiated with several artists (as chosen by the ABC) re permission for filming. The American guitarist



*Paul Grabowsky: a member of the Board of the Melbourne International Jazz Festival (MIJF), and also commissioning editor for Arts & Entertainment, ABC TV...PHOTO CREDIT VERA GRABOWSKY*

James 'Blood' Ulmer was the only one who withheld permission, as he had wanted a higher fee. Fees were paid to the artists direct by ABC TV; no fee was paid to the Festival. The following gigs were filmed: Brad Mehldau Trio (two concerts) at Athenaeum; Don Burrows Quartet at Athenaeum; Bernie McGann Trio with Sandy Evans at Assembly Hall; Shelley Scown with Paul Grabowsky Trio at Assembly Hall; Ten Part Invention at Athenaeum; Dale Barlow Band at Athenaeum; Julien Wilson Trio at Athenaeum 2; Lisa Parrott Trio at Athenaeum 2; and Gary Bartz with Barney McAll Trio at Bennetts Lane. Adrian understands that Paul Grabowsky interviewed most of the performers in Melbourne, and some in Sydney. James Morrison was later brought in as the host for a projected 6-part *Jazz Live* series.



*Artistic director of the Melbourne International Jazz Festival Adrian Jackson (the partly obscured person in the background is the Sydney trombonist James Greening)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Throughout 1998, Adrian was often in touch with Paul Grabowsky, or the show's producer/director John Smith. Adrian was usually told that the series would go to air "mid-year", which eventually became "later in the year". By December, Adrian was starting to worry that the series would not go to air at all; or it would be screened after the 1999 Festival; or maybe it would be screened during the 1999 Festival. He rang the office of Paul Clarke, the new commissioning editor for Arts & Entertainment, who succeeded Paul Grabowsky, several times; Adrian usually left a message for Mr Clarke to return his call, and on one occasion, actually spoke to Mr Clarke, who said he was in a meeting, and would call me back. According to Adrian, he never did. "I spoke to an assistant in his office, who told me that the decision as to

when the series would go to air would be made at a programming meeting that week", says Adrian, "and she would call me to let me know the result. She never did."

In April, 1999, Jex Saarelaht mentioned to Adrian that he had seen a promo for Brad Mehldau on the ABC's *Sunday Afternoon* arts show, but no sign of it on the day. He rang someone at *Sunday Afternoon*, and learned that the show had been screened in other states but not Victoria.



*The US pianist Brad Mehldau: a promo for a performance by him on the ABC's Sunday Afternoon arts show...PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE*

Adrian now takes up the story: "I spoke to a producer at the *Sunday Afternoon* arts show. She told me that the Mehldau show had not been shown in Victoria, because the Anzac Day march in Melbourne ran longer than in other states, and this was the first item on the show. She agreed it seemed odd that Victorian viewers should miss out on this, and said they would consider a repeat screening. She also informed me that the programming department had decided against running the 6-part series as a night-time program, and that the *Sunday Afternoon* arts show had picked it up rather than let it go to waste; and that it would start screening on June 6.

"I have a number of concerns here," says Adrian. "From the Festival's point of view (and a personal point of view), I am very annoyed that nobody at the ABC had the courtesy to return calls, or keep me informed of what was going on. It is disappointing that the series was not screened ahead of the 1999 MIJF, to help raise awareness of the event.

"From a broader perspective, it is disappointing that, on a rare occasion of the ABC actually filming some high-quality jazz performances:

- \* they can sit on it for so long (can you imagine them filming Bryn Terfel or Dame Kiri Te Kanawa in Australia, and sitting on it for 18 months?)
- \* they can screen it in such a piecemeal manner (Victorian viewers may or may not see the first Mehldau show; other viewers had the chance to see Mehldau on 25 April, when the series resumes on June 6; we still didn't know for sure if they would screen all the remaining shows consecutively)
- \* they can make no effort whatsoever to publicise it (I did speak to someone in ABC TV publicity in Melbourne, and pointed out that the Festival had enjoyed a good deal of media support, and I could suggest some writers or broadcasters who could probably help with publicity. No real interest was shown)."



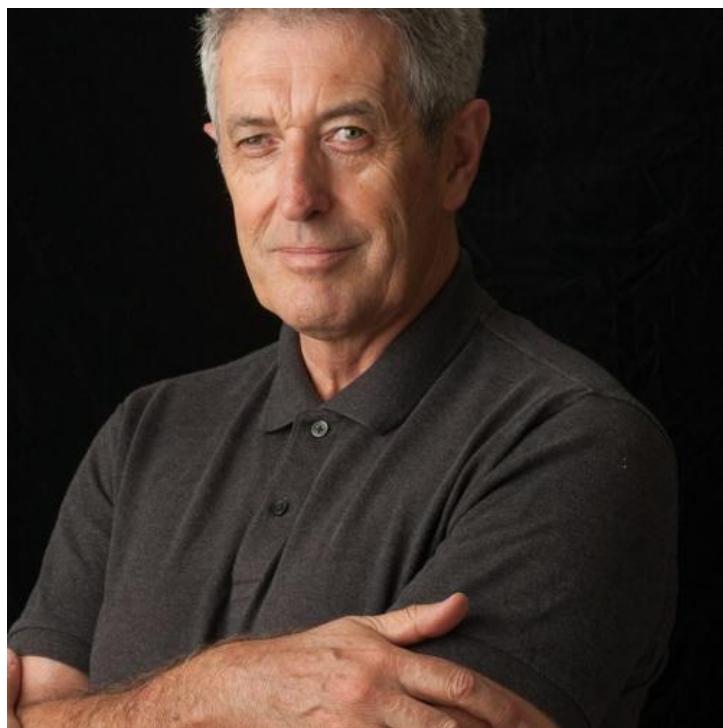
*Dame Kiri Te Kanawa: can you imagine them filming her in Australia, and sitting on it for 18 months?... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

"Another worrying aspect of the whole affair is this: before the series was passed on to the *Sunday Afternoon* arts show, someone in the programming department had vetoed the idea of screening it as a night-time series. The only possible reasons I can imagine for this are:

- \* the standard of the music was not high enough (I think the music itself refutes this)
- \* the music is too 'far out' (again, easily refuted)
- \* the production standards were inadequate (based on the shows seen so far, easily refuted)
- \* there was some political agenda involved, because Grabowsky had commissioned the show
- \* they simply don't see jazz as something that should be screened on ABC TV."

Adrian Jackson therefore has arranged for the MIJF Chairman, Graeme Weideman, to send a letter to Hugh McGowan, ABC Network Programmer, expressing disappointment at the manner in which this series has been handled. Certainly it appears to *JazzChord* that this is a tale of woe. Can't the ABC and the jazz community work together better than this in the future?

\* Conversations I've had with media personalities in the past throw some light on the vexed question of **ABC coverage of jazz**. I've always assumed that arts editors in the newspapers, or producers of arts programs on radio and television, have a responsibility to see beyond their own particular area of expertise. They might themselves be experts in the visual arts, or classical music, the theatre, or whatever. No-one is an expert in all art forms. But this should not mean that a significant art form should be excluded, simply because an editor, presenter or producer has a limited knowledge. Or should it? A conversation I had with Stephen Feneley, presenter of the ABC's former arts program *Express*, at a SAMAG forum on 'broadcasting and the arts' on May 25, 1998, was instructive. Stephen indicated that jazz was rarely on *Express* because there was simply no-one in the unit who knew anything about jazz. Stephen said that his own area of expertise was the visual arts; Madeleine Swain's was film; and Stephen Crittenden's was classical music. Therefore, it was extremely difficult for the program to keep its finger on the pulse of the jazz world. The program simply did not know what to do with information that came in by fax on jazz. What about the Commissioning Editor, Paul Grabowsky, I hear you ask? Well, it appears that Paul's policy was to leave the content decisions to the program makers themselves. And anyway, could we expect Paul Grabowsky, with his overall responsibility for arts and entertainment, to be aware of important events in the jazz world that were not his personal concern?



*Stephen Feneley, presenter of the ABC's former arts program Express...*  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

\* At the SAMAG forum, I also had a word with **Janne Ryan**, producer of Radio National's daily *Arts Today* program. She reinforced what was said by Stephen Fenely. In the case of *Arts Today*, similarly, no-one on the program knew anything about jazz. Knowing that she received *JazzChord*, a national publication with frequent discussion of matters of interest to the jazz community, I asked if there wasn't, from time to time, some jazz issue or event in *JazzChord* which would be



*Janne Ryan, producer of Radio National's daily Arts Today program: she received JazzChord, but "didn't know how to read it"...* PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

worthy of treatment in a national arts program. Janne said that she received *JazzChord*, but "didn't know how to read it." When she received material from the visual arts world, she said, she was able to immediately understand the significance of what she was reading. She knew many people in the visual arts field, and related well to that scene. So, where does this leave jazz? Do we have to wait until *Arts Today* hires someone who is knowledgeable about jazz? Do we have to wait until *The Australian* hires an arts editor with a personal interest in jazz before that newspaper gives its readers decent coverage of jazz? It is difficult to accept that comprehensive coverage of the arts depends on the whims of an individual who might have limited knowledge of particular art forms. Would an arts editor exclude dance because he or she knew nothing about that art form? After all, the *Sydney Morning Herald* has had a procession of arts editors since 1980 who knew little about jazz. But, generally speaking, these editors have seen it as their responsibility to include comprehensive coverage of jazz, in the knowledge that it is one of the most significant of 20th Century art forms and that, in Sydney, for many years there has been a jazz scene of great vitality. This tradition dates back to the appointment of Richard Coleman as the *SMH* Arts Editor in 1980. *SMH* arts editors since then have, on the whole, hired good freelance jazz writers, and taken their advice. Therefore the *SMH* has given jazz in Sydney very good coverage for nearly 20 years.

---

**Editor's Note:** In the following edition of *JazzChord* (Aug/Sep, 1999) Sian Prior (Presenter of the ABC radio Program *Sunday Arts*) addressed a letter to the editor as follows: "Sir, I read with interest and some dismay in the last *JazzChord* about the conversations you've had with ABC arts journalists about jazz coverage. I would like to reassure you and your readers that *Sunday Arts* is an ABC radio



*ABC Radio presenter Sian Prior: since she began presenting Sunday Arts in 1998, the program has featured many interviews with, and performances by, leading jazz musicians...*

*program with a strong commitment to all musical forms, including jazz. I am personally a huge jazz fan, and have been for many years. I spent my teenage years going to jazz venues in Melbourne with my brother (a part-time jazz musician), listening to Vince Jones and Pyramid, and to visiting muso's from interstate and overseas. Since I began presenting Sunday Arts in 1998, the program has featured many interviews with, and performances by, leading jazz musicians, including Kurt Elling, David Hirschfelder, Billy Cobham and Frock, and we regularly play the latest jazz CDs from Australia and abroad. I have also hosted a Jazz Concert at the Myer Music Bowl for the Melbourne International Jazz Festival, and interviewed its artistic director Adrian Jackson several times. Australia has a thriving jazz scene, with an incredible pool of musical talent which we will continue to promote on our program in coming years. I encourage all your Victorian listeners to tune in each Sunday morning from 10am to sample that talent. Sian Prior Presenter, Sunday Arts Tel (03) 9626 1745 Email: prior.sian@a2.abc.net.au.”*

---