

HORST LIEPOLT IN NEW YORK

by Gordon Dodd*

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The striking thing about lobbying into New York City from Australia for a bit of jazz these days is that it is not hard to know that Horst Liepolt is around. The advertising for two of Greenwich Village's top jazz spots, Sweet Basil and Lush Life, proudly announce that they are under the management of Liepolt and two American partners.

The media have not been slow to acknowledge that this 'blow-in' from Australia with the strong German accent has almost single-handedly created a new scene for contemporary jazz in the Big Apple. And if you are there around August or early September you will certainly be aware of the Village Jazz Festival and that, yes, one of its two co-producers is Horst Liepolt.



Horst Liepolt (far left), with (to the right) Ray Brown, Joe Newman and Joe Williams, Washington Square Park, Greenwich Village Jazz Festival, New York, 1983... PHOTO CREDIT MITCHELL SEIDEL COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE

Horst, of course, is no slouch in keeping a high profile in jazz but, let's be honest, he achieved some splendid things in Melbourne and Sydney, in particular, amid indifference from many quarters.

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There were his days of running Jazz Centre 44 in the southern capital in the '50s, offering a home to a whole range of performers who are still enriching the Australian scene today — people like Brian Brown, Keith Hounslow, Ted Vining, Bob Bertles and many others.



Some of the musicians who found a home at Liepolt's Melbourne club Jazz Centre 44: L-R, Bob Sedergreen (keyboards), Ted Vining (drums), Brian Brown (flute), Barry Buckley (bass)... PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS

And there were his more than 20 years based in Sydney as group manager, magazine publisher, record producer, festival organiser and originator of an exciting concept called Music Is An Open Sky, which offered a platform for experimental and original 'today' jazz — a concept he has carried over to the Big Apple with stunning results.

Finally there were his several years organising the jazz content of the Festival of Sydney, which did not do wonders for the box office but exposed people to such innovative overseas artists as the Art Ensemble of Chicago and the German pianist Joachim Kuhn, recently back in the country for a tour.

Still, New York City was another bag and, despite some reconnoitring of the scene, it was a big gamble when he uprooted himself in 1981 and left the cosy familiarity of Sydney for the tough, competitive environment of the Big Apple at the age of 54.

In a recent interview with me in New York City, Horst explained: "I had taken things as far as I could for my own satisfaction in Australia. I had come to the end of creating new situations.



*From left, David Murray, Ed Blackwell, Butch Morris, Horst Liepolt and Amiri Baraka at Sweet Basil, New York, during the 1984 Music Is An Open Sky festival...
PHOTO CREDIT ALICE SU COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE*

“I could have stayed in Sydney and continued to make a reasonable living. There was nothing wrong with the scene, but I just wanted to be where all the stuff I had heard on record was actually being played, and that was New York.”

At first, he was content to mainly listen, though he soon linked up with American vibist Harry Sheppard, with whom he did a record on the 44 label in Australia. Apart from managing Sheppard in the US, he also produced another record featuring him, called *Symbiotic*, on his own label, Evidence Records.



Ex-singer Phyllis Weisbart who, with her husband Mel Litoff took over Sweet Basil in August, 1981...

Horst's big fortune, however, was in meeting up with Mel Litoff, a former school principal, and ex-singer Phyllis Weisbart, who took over Sweet Basil in Seventh Avenue South — just down the road from the much longer established Village Vanguard — in August, 1981.



In them he found a couple of like souls. "We all believed there was so much music around that was not being heard enough," he told me. Appointed music co-ordinator at Sweet Basil, which is more an attractive restaurant than your usual jazz club image, Horst did what many said could not be done in New York and be successful — and that was to put contemporary jazz into an essentially commercial setting.

His Music Is An Open Sky productions — in which he has been able to call on such people as Anthony Braxton, Oliver Lake, Lester Bowie, Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand) and Henry Threadgill — and his overall brave programming has won him the tag of 'jazz renaissance man extraordinaire.'



The elderly trumpeter Doc Cheatham, who played every Sunday at Sweet Basil's for many years...

Sweet Basil might still feature your Art Blakeys, James Moodys and Bobby Hutchersons but a Monday night could be a jazz and poetry evening and then someone like violinist Leroy Jenkins might take up residence with a group for a five-night run. Sundays regularly feature New Orleans jazz.

Horst said: “Sweet Basil is regarded as the top jazz spot in New York. It is like a social club, where so many of the jazz names drop in to see what is happening.”

Lush Life, upstairs at the corner of Bleecker and Thompson Streets, is more of a place to just drink and listen. Horst and his two partners took the room over only quite recently and the music policy at this stage looks a bit more conventional. However, Toshiko Akiyoshi’s New York Jazz Orchestra with Lew Tabackin has made it as much a place to be on Monday nights as the Village Vanguard with the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra.



Toshiko Akiyoshi (left) and Lew Tabackin (on flute) performing in Sydney, Australia in 1980: their New York Jazz Orchestra has made Lush Life the place to be on Monday nights...

Then there is the Village Jazz Festival, which in three short years has become a highlight on the New York calendar and for which both Liepolt and Litoff share the credit in getting things rolling. As opposed to the Kool Jazz Festival, which is mainly focussed on big concert venues such as Carnegie Hall and the Lincoln Centre — and is a constant source of disappointment for those seeking exciting jazz — Liepolt wanted to reinforce the sense of community in the vibrant, somewhat bohemian Village area.

His first notion, it seems, was of a street celebration but this was ruled impractical. Litoff thought the festival should be centred on the many clubs in the area — the number varies constantly, such are the vagaries of the jazz scene even in

New York. The other club owners, among them the legendary, stooped figure of Max Gordon at the Vanguard, eventually came to the party and generous sponsorship from the Dewars whiskey people has enabled the festival to expand from its initial seven-day duration to one of 11 days.

This year's festival, held from August 24 to September 3, began with a free outdoor concert in Washington Square Park in the heart of the Village, with 'The King', 77-year-old saxophone great Benny Carter leading an all-star orchestra including the likes of Frank Wess and Cecil Payne on saxophones, Lew Soloff and Jon Faddis on trumpets, Benny Powell on trombone and George Duvivier on bass.



Saxophone great Benny Carter: leading an all-star orchestra in Washington Square Park in the heart of the Village... PHOTO COURTESY JIM COLEMAN

The club fare included Freddie Hubbard and Herbie Mann at the Blue Note, Illinois Jacquet and the Jazz Legends Big Band at Fat Tuesdays, McCoy Tyner at Lush Life, the Gil Evans Orchestra, the David Murray Octet and Pharaoh Sanders at Sweet Basil; Oliver Lake, Hamiett Bluiett and Junior Mance at the Village Gate; and the Branford Marsalis Quintet and Art Farmer Quintet at the Village Vanguard.

There were also lectures, special programs for children and senior citizens and a fascinating film festival with more films on jazz than it is hard for us in Australia to think exist. One of the beauties of the festival is that a ten-dollar pass allows discounts and even free admission at the clubs, great for the visitor with limited time who likes to catch a set here and a set there.

That's not the end of Horst's activities — he is producing more records with some of the best talent around. When I spoke to him in August, just before the festival, he had already done a live recording at Sweet Basil with pianist Dollar Brand and alto

man Carlos Ward and he was just preparing to do another 'live' album with the Gil Evans Orchestra, which like Brand has been a frequent fixture at the restaurant.



It's a heady scene for someone who so recently had to worry about who to book for a free lunchtime gig in Sydney's Hyde Park during the annual January festival or seemed to be carrying on a one-man crusade around the streets and haunts of Sydney with his 'I Love Jazz' stickers. His enthusiasm, which this year sees him celebrate a 40-year working association with jazz, has obviously won 57-year-old Horst a lot of respect from the American jazz fraternity.



L-R, Dizzy Gillespie, Horst Liepolt, Mel Lewis, Benny Carter in New York in 1983...
PHOTO CREDIT MITCHELL SEIDEL COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE

Yet it is interesting that posters of old Australian gigs adorn the walls of his flat in the Village and he won't rule out leaving his jazz Shangri-La to return to Sydney someday. In fact, he hopes to be back in the country next year on a working trip involving laying down the music soundtrack for a new Australian film.