

MICHAEL GRIFFIN: PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF

by Bob Doerschuk*

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In 2013, alto saxophonist Michael Griffin treated himself to a trip to New York City. Though he was only in his early twenties, he had already reached the peak of the jazz community in Sydney, Australia. He'd been leading his own groups there since he was 17. So he figured he'd spend six weeks in the jazz capital of the world, listening to and hopefully sitting in with the elite of the hard-bop school he loves. What he didn't know, when he bought his ticket, was that the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition would be happening there during his stay—and that saxophone was the focus of that year's event.



Michael Griffin, photographed while competing in the 2013 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Saxophone Competition... PHOTO CREDIT BRIDGET ARNWINE

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Upon learning about the competition, Griffin called the contest officials and persuaded them to accept an online application, an exception to the usual snail-mail/CD requirements. He cobbled together some iPhone recordings from a recent gig, which luckily included a performance of *Round Midnight*, added an unaccompanied blues that he cut in his bedroom and sent it off. He made the cut. Griffin subsequently progressed all the way to the semifinals.

"I think of myself now as 'before New York' and 'after New York' because I learned so much," he said. "Quite frankly, the first week was the hardest because I got my butt kicked. Seeing the quality of musicians at jam sessions made me remember that I always had to bring my 'A' game. So by the second week, I started to stand out at jam sessions. And then at the competition after that, I got to hang out with Roy Hargrove, Branford Marsalis, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Marcus Miller and Kurt Elling.

"Jimmy Heath even had me to his home in Queens and gave me a picture of himself with Charlie Parker and John Coltrane. Getting his approval was one of the proudest moments of my life."



This is the photograph that Jimmy Heath gave Griffin in New York. Charlie Parker is on alto at the mike, Heath is conducting with his back to the camera, and John Coltrane can be glimpsed behind Parker... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Nowadays Griffin is winning kudos throughout Australia and beyond with his debut album, *Unexpected Greeting*. Fronting his quintet on a set of originals and

standards, he flaunts an assertive tone, with an advanced harmonic sensibility and technical fluency that confirm his reverence for Bird and Cannonball Adderley. With the same initiative that earned him a last-minute invitation to the Monk Competition, Griffin persuaded the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to release his project.



"Around 2010, when I was 19 or 20 years old, I asked them if I could be interviewed on one of their programs," he recalled. "At the time, I really had nothing to talk about; all I could say was that I play saxophone. But they told me to send some stuff that I'd done to Malcolm Stanley, who has a radio program called *Jazztrack*. He was very impressed and he said, 'I want you to record for ABC,' which I did in 2011."



ABC broadcaster Mal Stanley: he arranged for Griffin to record for the ABC in 2011...

As with a growing number of young musicians, Griffin's album was released in digital format only. But, he insists, this wasn't because of any mandate on his part. "The ABC decided not to put it out on CD. I thought about doing it, but I would have had to pay for printing it. And I almost did. I actually like CDs. But I wondered how many people buy them these days. Most of the time, people seem to listen to music on their

iPod or their computer. Quite a lot of people do ask me if they can buy it on CD from me, but it's one of those things where I might print 500 or 1,000 CDs [that would be] sitting around, as most people buy it online."



Griffin on the cover of the January 2019 edition of FM 102.5 Fine Music Magazine: he takes a DIY approach to marketing his projects...

Griffin took a DIY approach to marketing the project. "Getting reviews, setting up interviews—that was all done by me," he said. "I'm very grateful that the ABC released it and that they made it available on Amazon, iTunes, Xbox Music, Google Play and all that stuff. But I'm the one who had to fight to get it out there."

Griffin maintains hands-on contact with every aspect of his career. Part of his approach involved setting up a Facebook page, where he posts articles and reviews. He also stocks performance footage on YouTube, including videos from the Monk Competition.

"The beauty of the internet is that the whole world can see what you're doing," he said. "But you still have to get things reviewed and get yourself known in the right places. If you're on YouTube, it takes [effort to get a] review in a newspaper or a major magazine. It's a nonstop hustle. You have to keep going, no matter how big you get. You have to keep putting yourself out there and trying to create opportunities."



Some of the musicians in the Michael Griffin Octet, L-R, Griffin (alto), Brendan Clarke (bass), Lachie Hamilton (tenor), Lachlan McKenzie (trumpet), Dave Panichi (trombone), Nick Bowd (baritone)... PHOTO COURTESY MICHAEL GRIFFIN

Griffin is based in Sydney, a city he has always loved but whose borders have begun feeling a little cramped. "There are some nice jazz places here," he said. "Venue 505 is a major one. It actually started out as sort of a secret, underground club. I did my album launch there earlier this year. Another is Foundry 616, which has some great stuff going on; international artists often play there. But those are the only two major places.

"The downside of Sydney is that a lot of stuff closes by 11:30. That's the beauty of New York City: You can go to Smalls until 4 in the morning."

Griffin has his sights set on returning to the Big Apple, this time for a much longer or even permanent stay. "I'm trying to get my artist visa and move there in January," he said. "I'm a bopper. New York is a bop town. So that's where I have to be, because I do live and breathe jazz."

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

Eric Myers, "Michael Griffin Quartet: Pub Jazz Springs to Life in Sydney's Kings Cross", The Australian, November 27, 2019, at his link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-15>.