

ONIONS: THE BAND THAT BROUGHT TEARS TO YOUR EYES

by Sylvan (Schmoe) Elhay*

This article came about as a result of a request from the SA Jazz Archive to Sylvan (Schmoe) Elhay to write about the band he was in called Onions. This piece was completed on November 27, 2022.

In order to be as faithful as possible to the history of the band, earlier this year I interviewed Freddie Payne, Grahame Conlon, Dean Birbeck and Geoff Kluke by Zoom. I love these guys to bits and always have but trying to extract meaningful information from these miscreants is a Himalayan challenge so I hope I'll be forgiven if factual errors have bypassed my BS-detectors and crept into the text. Of course, if they have it's entirely their fault and not mine.

The core of the band Onions was Freddie Payne on trumpet, Grahame Conlon on guitar, Geoff Kluke on bass, Dean Birbeck on drums and yours truly on tenor saxophone. There are many who sat in and jammed with Onions but some, like Bob Jeffrey, Phil Cuneen and Jerry Wesley-Smith were considered sometime honorary members because of the significance and value of their contributions: many jam sessions, some gigs and some recordings.



Onions, L-R, Grahame Conlon, Geoff Kluke, Schmoe Elhay, Freddie Payne, Dean Birbeck... PHOTO COURTESY SCHMOE ELHAY

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Like the world's great rivers, Onions came from the convergence of several tributaries: Paragon, Paint, Impact, Schmoe & Co. The overlaps between the many versions and variations of these bands are far too many and convoluted to tease out in any meaningful degree. We were all amazingly busy in the period during which the band formed: gigs, jingles for radio and TV, recordings, live TV bands, live radio, symphony orchestras, recording film scores, concerts, tours and more, and these naturally used different combinations and permutations of core members in their line-ups.

Paragon was a band with Geoff Kluke, singer, guitarist and tap dancer Bill O'Grady, saxophonist Doug (Knobby) Clarke and drummer Bill Ross. Paint was a band put together by Freddie Hampton and Grahame that included most of the Onions core and some others. It sometimes experimented with two drummers, Dean and Trevor Frost, and had Grahame and Bill O'Grady on guitars.



Geoff Kluke: he was in Paragon, and the soul and R & B band Impact. Neither he nor Dennis Byrd had ever played jazz... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The Soul and R & B band, Impact, had Geoff on bass, Dennis Byrd on drums, Paul Cowie singing and Dennis Kruesler or George Bunea on drums. They were playing at the 20+ Club in the late 1960s when my band, Schmoe & Co. was playing opposite

them. During one of the breaks I asked Geoff and Dennis Byrd if they were interested in playing jazz because I was about to lose my rhythm section. Neither of them had ever played jazz but both were interested and so we started rehearsals at my then pianist, Don Bond's, house and a little later my line-up became Don Bond, piano, Dennis Byrd, drums and Geoff on bass. I soon had to replace Dennis when he fled Adelaide to the safety of Perth to avoid the potentially violent consequences of a cuckold's displeasure.

At around this time I had met Grahame, who had relocated to Adelaide from Sydney, and had him frequently play with Schmoie & Co. at North Adelaide's Lord Melbourne Hotel, where we had a residency, and elsewhere. Grahame was quite young then and kindly said of that period "It was like going to college for us young players."



A young Grahame Conlon, who kindly said of that period "It was like going to college for us young players"... PHOTO COURTESY GRAHAME CONLON

My band also had a residency at the Somerset Hotel in Pultney Street, Adelaide (it's no longer there) and one night Grahame asked me "I have a mate from Sydney visiting who plays trumpet. Can he sit in? He's a good player." That's how I met Freddie. Grahame was wrong - he's a great player.

The last piece of the puzzle was Dean. He returned to Adelaide in 1972, from London, to re-form Paragon which had disbanded after some touring. With the core all now in Adelaide it was inevitable that we would crystallize into a band. It's a bit hard to

separate Onions from Schmoe & Co. because much of the time when the band operated as a quintet it was called Schmoe & Co. but when we were joined by singer Sue Barker it was labelled "Sue Barker and Onions".



From Sydney, the trumpeter Freddie Payne: a great player... PHOTO COURTESY SA JAZZ ARCHIVE. When singer Sue Barker (below) joined the band it was labelled "Sue Barker and Onions"... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK



Basically, Sue heard the band at a gig somewhere, sat in, and then told us “I’m joining this band”. Sue was a difficult woman but while she was singing you could forgive her anything. She lifted the band with her energy and passion for singing. We made an album with her called (surprise, surprise) Sue Barker. Aside from the core we had Phil Cuneen on keyboards and Bob Jeffrey on saxophone. I see that a CD of this album is available for purchase from this link <https://www.discogs.com/release/8814842-Sue-Barker-Sue-Barker>. The groove on these tracks is something of which the band is still proud although nowhere on the album cover does the name “Onions” appear.



L-R, Geoff Kluke, Sue Barker, Dean Birbeck, Grahame Conlon, performing in Melbourne in 1977... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK



*L-R, Grahame Conlon (guitar), Sue Barker (vocals), Freddie Payne (trumpet)...
PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK*

Onions/Schmoe & Co wrote and recorded scores for several short films. Some of the scores, I wrote on my own and others in collaboration with Grahame. Apparently, one of these called “Outback Festivals of Australia” (1976) won some prizes according to this website <https://www.acmi.net.au/works/75420--outback-festivals-of-australia/>. Grahame and Freddie Hampton wrote the music for a film by Rodney Fox and the score was recorded in Adelaide by Onions and a few ring-ins.

Every band has its stories. The core was very well-known at the recording studios then in Adelaide: Max Pepper’s in Moger Lane, Gamba (Derek Jolley’s outfit) in Melbourne Street. One hilarious time Grahame, Geoff, Dean and I were booked by the lovely Phil Skinner, who was then working at Myer, to play for a Saturday morning fashion show at the store. We played and, as usual, the models were delighted but, when we finished, the bloke in charge came over to us and said “You guys are great. Come in to the office.”

Inside the office he told us again how great we were and added "... but what I'm really looking for is this LA black disco sound." And he played us a tape. We looked at each other in embarrassment and told him "That's us." It was a jingle we'd done for Myer that week at Pepper's.

The other story I remember comes from 1975 when Robyn Archer hired us (the core) to back her in a concert celebrating International Women's Day the first time it was celebrated by the UN. The concert was held in the Adelaide Festival Centre's Playhouse. We were a bit hesitant but Robyn assured us it would all be fine. Not long after we started, a rowdy bunch of women in the dress circle who didn't want men on stage for this event began to call "Cocks off! Cocks off!" There were countercalls to us from the stalls "Turn it up, boys. Turn it up." We were deer caught in the headlights. But after not very long the disrupters were roughly escorted out of the theatre and the rest of the concert went smoothly. Robyn was a pillar of strength throughout.



Robyn Archer (above, pictured here in 1977): she was a pillar of strength throughout... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

One of the things I love most about these guys is that, like me, they have to play. If there's a gig, all well and good, but if there's no gig we'll get together and play anyway. In the mid 1970's Grahame and his lovely Wendy had a place at Longwood in the Adelaide Hills. Every second Sunday night was a jam session at Grahame and Wendy's and the core with Bob Jeffrey and/or Jerry Wesley-Smith and/or Phil Cuneen would gather, and play the jazz we love.

There were, of course, short food and drink breaks, but the main purpose was always to play and, not surprisingly, we became so familiar with each other's playing that very little needed to be said about the music. It was just played. For my part, I know that there were times when the rhythm section got so tight, the beat so secure and firm, that I almost couldn't play: they were locking it down so clearly and simply that nothing else musical need be said. Performed music is a conversation. When you're playing with the people who are so eloquent and articulate it is sometimes so complete that there is nothing to add. Playing with a rhythm section like that is a great feeling to which words cannot do justice.

In the mid-1970s two jazz lovers were the caretakers of Carclew, the vacant, ancestral home of the Adelaide establishment family, the Bonythons. The house sits at the top of Montefiore Hill with spectacular views of the city. When the caretakers heard that we looking for a place to play where folks could come by with a cushion and a glass of wine, they invited us to use Carclew. The grand house has a large and ostentatious ballroom which we decided was the perfect place for us to play. It had no furniture so folks could simply wander in, sit on their cushions, and enjoy the music. The crowds that came learned about the scene by word-of-mouth. For quite a long time every Saturday, and sometimes Friday or Sunday, night we would go there, set up and play acoustically. Often Sue would join us. It was Adelaide's version of the "loft scene" in New York City where bands played in vacant lofts and listeners wandered in at their leisure and enjoyed the music. The shot below of the magazine *Get Out*, shows a photo taken at Carclew, probably in 1975, on one such Saturday night: Freddie on the right, your humble correspondent on the left.



Carclew, the vacant, ancestral home of the Adelaide establishment family, the Bonythons: Adelaide's version of the "loft scene" in New York City...



The cover of Get Out magazine circa 1975. The photo was taken in the ballroom at Carclew, North Adelaide, where Onions regularly played free concerts...

Around 1976, Sybil Graham, a great pianist and singer in the tradition of Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae, fled a “disastrous love affair” in Sydney and ended up in Adelaide to run the band at a nightclub off Hindley Street called the Trocadero. She had Ron Nicholls on bass, Billy Ross on drums and I played saxophone.

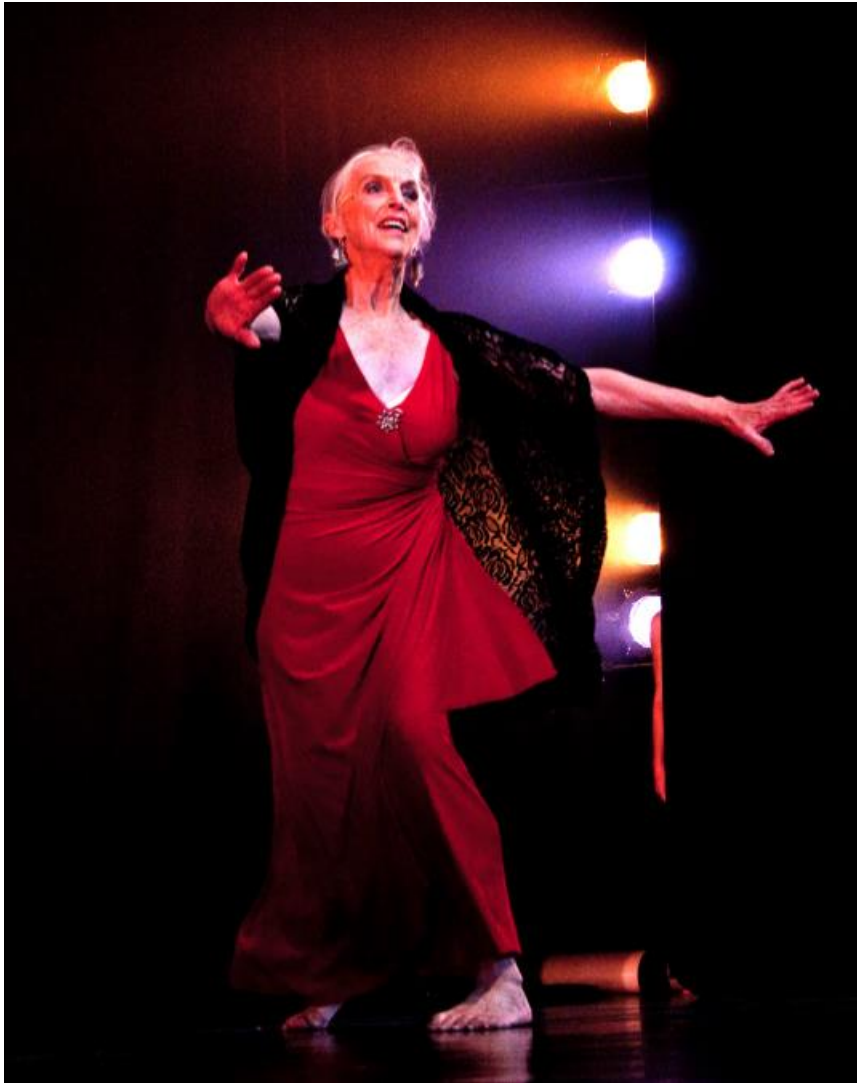


Sybil Graham, a great pianist and singer in the tradition of Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae... PHOTO COURTESY YOUTUBE

Sybil knew Freddie and Grahame from Sydney and she and her gigs quickly became focal points for Onions and associates. Every Monday night there was a jam session at Sybil’s house in Stanley Street, North Adelaide. When the Trocadero gig wound up she took a solo piano gig at a wine bar called Bogart’s in Melbourne St, North

Adelaide. Sybil was a magnet for us. We congregated there in all sorts of bizarre combinations to sit in and she always gracefully had us join her.

The year 1975 was a wonderful year for the band. Schmoe & Co has had a long association with the Australian Dance Theatre (ADT), particularly when Elizabeth Dalman was running it. In the early days when Schmoe & Co was Don Bond, Phil Langford, drums, and Benni Seidel, bass, we played for ADT performances held in the ADT studios, upstairs in Gays Arcade.



Choreographer Elizabeth Dalman: she was very adventurous and choreographed works where we and the dancers improvised jointly... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

In 1975 Onions had a wonderful tour of WA with ADT and some follow-up performances at the Playhouse Theatre in Adelaide (although the band was billed as Schmoe & Co). Liz was very adventurous and choreographed (if that's the right word for something which involves dance improvisation) works where we and the dancers improvised jointly. It was a treat to be a part of such bold programming. And working with such lovely dancers didn't hurt at all.

In 1977, Michael Strautmanis set up one of Adelaide's iconic jazz joints, The Creole Room. It was located upstairs in O'Connell Street and ran until 1980. All the guys in the core played at different times at the Creole Room but I don't recall the band as a whole ever playing there (that may be an artifact of my fading memory). But certainly we all hung out there on the way home from a gig or for no real reason and sat in with whoever was playing.

In 1980 Grahame left Adelaide for his present home in Sydney and Geoff left Adelaide for Queensland and then Melbourne. Needless to say both of them have carved out formidable careers since leaving Adelaide.

In 2011 I suggested to the core that we have a reunion in Adelaide, about four decades since we had started playing together and about three since we had last played together. Fred, Dean and I live in Adelaide and Grahame and Geoff quickly agreed to be part of it. We did two nights at Maxim's Wine Bar in Norwood and the place was packed both nights. It seems like a lot of people remembered the band. When we eventually had finished setting up on the first night (it seemed to take so long for starting time to roll around), someone counted us in and within a bar the band had locked up as though we had never stopped playing together. It was so good it was frightening and I thought to myself "Uh, oh. Is that how the whole night is going to be?"



Onions reunion in 2011 at Maxims Wine Bar, Norwood, Adelaide. L-R, Freddie Payne (trumpet), Dean Birbeck (drums), Schmoe (tenor), Geoff Kluke (bass), Grahame Conlon (guitar)...



Some moments from the 2011 Onions reunion at Maxim's...

Everyone in the band was so comfortable with the same old groove that we had always had and all I could see all night was broad smiles in the band. The second night was every bit as good and after we had packed up our stuff and reluctantly made our way down to street level we all stood around for quite a while not wanting to leave. I felt completely satisfied but I wanted more. For the next week we all got calls from each other talking about how great it had been and wishing it could go on for a lot longer.

Freddie and I still play in Adelaide but Dean has not played for a while - he's had health issues. Geoff is pretty well retired in Melbourne and Grahame still plays a lot in Sydney. I would love to drag them all back for another reunion.

Other articles on this website which may be of interest:

Sylvan (Schmoe) Elhay, "The Stanford Jazz Workshop" at this link
<https://ericmyersjazz.com/dischords-12>

Ted Nettelbeck, "Schmoe (Sylvan Elhay): Leading Adelaide Jazz Saxophonist and Personality" at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-28>

Sylvan (Schmoe) Elhay, "Ted Nettelbeck: He Tested Positive for Jazz", at this link
<https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-101>