

UNITY HALL JAZZ BAND: WORLD'S LONGEST RUNNING GIG

by Nick Galvin*

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*The Unity Hall Jazz Band, L-R, Bob Henderson (trumpet), Natalie Morrison (bass), Gary Walford (piano), Graham Hilgendorf (drums), Ben Jones (saxophones)...
PHOTO CREDIT JAMES ALCOCK*

It's another Sunday afternoon in Balmain and jazz legend Gary Walford is holding court from the piano keyboard at the Unity Hall pub just as he has done for the past 44 years. Above him a cheeky lightbox sign reads "I heard Splendour is crap anyways" – not that any of the devotees of the Unity Hall Jazz Band would likely give Byron Bay's upstart festival a second thought.

The older end listens attentively, while a group of 20 and 30-somethings eagerly slip on dancing shoes and hit the small dance floor, sharing the space with a clearly delighted toddler in a blue princess dress twirling energetically to the New Orleans sound.



**Nick Galvin is arts editor at The Sydney Morning Herald.*

Walford and the band are about to officially – as far as these things can ever be "official" – celebrate the world's longest-running jazz residency. Before the show

Walford, a lugubrious figure in red patent leather shoes, sits at a table on the outside terrace sipping a schooner and enjoying a hand-rolled smoke.

At 68, no one is more surprised than him that the gig has lasted such an extraordinarily long time. "I don't know," he says. "It just sort of kept going. I never dreamt it would last so long. Most of the guys originally in the band have died. I was pretty much the youngest of all of them."

Walford's marathon run began in 1972 when he and his then band mates were playing at the Orient Hotel in the Rocks. At the time, the seven-piece outfit was getting \$6 each a gig. The owner of the Unity offered them \$10. "How could we refuse?" says Walford. "That's how it all started."



In the beginning ... Walford on piano with Don Heap (bass), Lyn Wallis (drums), Paul Furniss (clarinet) in 1974... PHOTO CREDIT ROBERT PEARCE

Over the years the personnel of the Unity Hall Jazz Band has changed countless times, all built around the constant that is Walford.

This particular afternoon the frontline consists of Bob Henderson (trumpet) and Ben Jones (reeds) with Natalie Morrison (bass) and Graham Hilgendorf (drums) anchoring the rhythm section with Walford. Walford changes the frontline players most weeks, he says to "keep it fresh".

"They all have their favourite tunes that they want to do so you're not getting the same tunes each week," he says. "I don't really have any favourites. As long as it's swingin' and people can dance. That's what it's all about." And even after thousands of gigs, finding the indefinable chemistry that makes up a great show still excites Walford.

"You never know what's going to happen," he says. "Sometimes, you feel it in the first tune. As soon as you start, you think, 'Good, everybody is in tune and we're really clickin' and it gets better as the day goes on. Sometimes you start and you go, 'Jesus, the drummer's dragging or something else is not quite right' and it takes you a set or so to get it rolling."

But this afternoon, the quintet is "rolling" from the get-go, all orchestrated by Walford from the piano. A nod from him and suddenly the band is "trading fours" (taking turns with short solos) with the bass, then another glance and they are back to the "head" (melody) and closing out the tune. It's almost telepathic.

The Unity Hall gig is well known to jazz players around the world and Walford has lost count of the visiting players who have sat in over the years. One big night he won't forget came 11 years ago when Harry Connick Jnr's band arrived during a day off from their tour.



The American singer/pianist Harry Connick Jnr: his whole band turned up with their horns...

"The whole band turned up with their horns," he says. "There were about 12 of them and the stage could fit maybe eight in total. "We all crammed on to the stage and, well, the place just went nuts. A bloody 15-piece band! We went into something like *Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone ...* It was unreal, the crowd just went crazy. It was just one of those nights."

And if Walford has his way there will be plenty more of those nights at the Unity. "At least we'll get to 50 [years], I hope," he says. "That's going to be some party!"

The Unity Hall Jazz Band is at Unity Hall Hotel, Balmain, at 4pm each Sunday, apart from the first Sunday of the month.