

IMPROVISATIONS: JAZZ PIANIST ANDREA KELLER

by Anna Goldsworthy*

[This article appeared in the March, 2008 edition of The Monthly.]

To get to Melbourne's Bennetts Lane Jazz Club, you have to drive down Little Lonsdale Street and park by the church. It is dark down there, and the laneway across the road is even darker - surely that can't be the one? But the map says it is, so you lock your car and venture gamely into the darkness.

There are dim lights, at last, and a group of young musicians sitting alongside their instruments, smoking. You smile at them in recognition and also relief; they scan your face and then look away. You're not one of them. You're a classical musician, a 'reader'. (Can they tell by the way you walk?) When you push open the door, it takes your eyes a while to adjust. It is dark as a cinema inside, apart from the neon lights of the bar and the bright stage, where the Andrea Keller Quartet plays its first set.

"Hey there! How *are* you?" asks the girl sitting at the door, as if you're an old friend. She has dazzling pale skin, litres of hair. "I love your purse - is that new?" "Not that new," you answer, too loudly. "I've probably had it for about six months." Heads swivel around in the darkness: "Shh!"

You quickly pay your entrance fee and put your almost-new purse away. All the tables are taken and you feel the childhood panic of musical chairs. But there's a stool free at the bar, next to that man in the beret. "That's the shit I'm talking about!" he calls out, as you approach. He's not talking to you; he's talking to the drummer. You nod knowingly as you perch beside him and try to look as if you belong.

Andrea Keller drifted into this scene as a teenager, herself flotsam from the classical world. Raised by Czech parents in Sydney, she trained as a classical pianist before being drawn to jazz at the city's Conservatorium High School.



**Described by The Australian as a 'musical ambassador', Anna Goldsworthy is one of Australia's most versatile artists. Celebrated as a pianist, she is acclaimed also as a memoirist, essayist, playwright, librettist, and festival director.*

"Jazz didn't offer me a good way of making money," she tells me later, when I visit her at the suburban home she shares with her husband, Mick, a bass player, and her son, Jim, whose exuberant drawings grace her album covers. She is laconic and easygoing, and speaks with a broad Australian accent. "But I thought I'd have a more exciting time, and I'd enjoy myself better, making a living out of playing this kind of music."

Now in her thirties, Keller has performed around Australia and Europe with the Andrea Keller Quartet, received an MCA-Freedman Foundation Jazz Fellowship and won two ARIA Awards for best jazz album. Despite these successes, she is reluctant to describe herself as a jazz musician, preferring "contemporary pianist and composer".



The Andrea Keller Quartet, L-R, Ian Whitehurst (tenor sax), Keller (piano), Eugene Ball (trumpet), Joe Talia (drums & percussion)...

"I was never comfortable with the term 'jazz'," she tells me. "I never felt I fitted into that box, because I'm a woman, because I'm an Australian. I didn't grow up listening to jazz but grew up listening to Bach. I didn't have that sound."

Who is comfortable with the term 'jazz'? Not a lot of its practitioners, who have always struggled to define it. Drummer Chick Webb suggested, "It's like lovin' a girl, and havin' a fight, and then seein' her again;" Miles Davis was even more evasive, saying, "I'll play it first and tell you what it is later". In his ten-part series of 2001, the film-maker Ken Burns attempts a more comprehensive definition, featuring the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. Marsalis has been criticised for his curatorial approach to jazz, but he makes an eloquent spokesperson. "The real power and innovation of jazz is that a group of people can come together and create art," he says, "and can negotiate their agendas with each other, and that negotiation is the art."

Tonight, as the Andrea Keller Quartet performs, that negotiation is clear. Trumpeter Eugene Ball and saxophonist Ian Whitehurst have been playing together since they were 14, and have a seamless rapport. "It's hilarious," Keller tells me later, "but



The filmmaker Ken Burns: in his ten-part series he attempts a more comprehensive definition of 'jazz', featuring the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis...

sometimes they actually make mistakes together at exactly the same spot." Drummer Joe Talia is a more recent addition, introducing a rock element to the group. Keller thinks of the quartet as "chamber music"; as in traditional chamber music, conviviality lies at its heart. "Even though one person might lead the group and organise the gigs and write the music," she says, "it's still very much a shared experience and it couldn't happen without that specific bunch of people."

Next week, the quartet will tour Germany. "We've all got new haircuts," Keller announces, blushing. She sits down and hunches over the piano, her thin arms incandescent under the stage lights.



Trumpeter Eugene Ball: he and saxophonist Ian Whitehurst have been playing together since they were 14...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ REAL BOOK

"I get my focus in my playing through the sound," she explains to me later. "I listen to my sound more than harmonies or anything. It is the sound that really inspires what you play or how you play." As a leader, she does not draw attention to herself. Her playing is graceful and agile, but there is also a humility to it. "I feel that I've always lacked confidence," she admits. "I just love writing music and playing with the people I do, and everything else just fell into place." There is something a little private about her playing; listening to it, you start to imagine you are eavesdropping. You can hear her second thoughts: she moves her hands into position and then hesitates, and sends them elsewhere.



Andrea Keller: her playing is graceful and agile, but there is also a humility to it...PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL AUSJAZZ.NET

Any art form is an insiders' club, with its knowing winks and complicit smiles, but jazz seems even more so. It carries an extra freight of cool. There's that elusive concept of 'swing', which - like a private joke - you either get or you don't. From an outsider's perspective, it looks like a great club to belong to, and much more supportive than the classical music world. It makes a fetish of mutual support, in all the gestures and nods and appreciative *yeah mans* that frame the music. I wonder: Could this be genuine?

"Absolutely," Keller says. "The encouragement and communication and that relaxed attitude are really important parts of the music, because it's such a personal expression. That was one of the things that drew me to the scene."

At the same time, jazz is fiercely individualistic. Showing off is an element of most music, but in traditional jazz there is no effort to hide it, to pretend it is something else. The soloist improvises, to hoodlum shouts from the audience; another steps in and tries for one-upmanship, to greater applause.

"I could do without the applause," Keller says. "I think it's more old-school. It then becomes about the ego thing. I'm more into the idea of ensemble, of creating things together."

She founded the Andrea Keller Quintet in 1999 to play her original music; when the bass player moved to New York, the group continued as a bass-less quartet, which Keller found liberating. "Without a bass player there, I'm responsible for all the harmonic direction and rhythm and form," she tells me. "It really allowed me to open up. I could do that now with a bass player, but it took not having one for me to realise this."

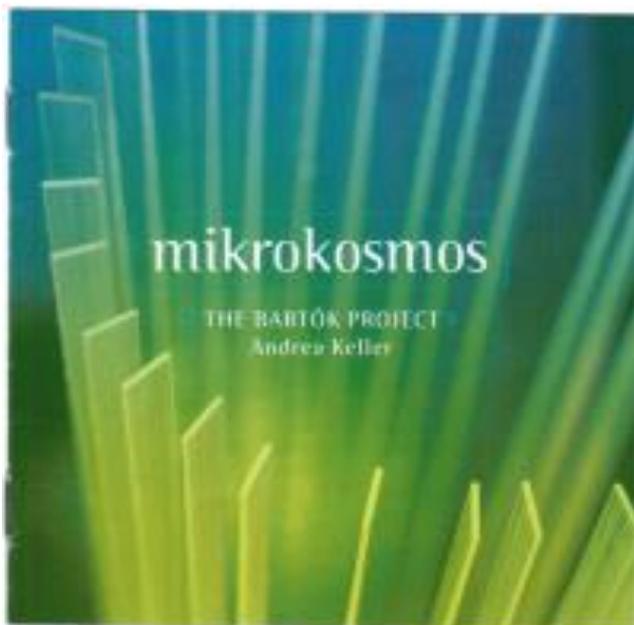


The Little Claps album: Keller moves away from jazz harmony into simpler harmonic structures...

Keller explores this freedom in the quartet's new CD, *Little Claps*, in which she moves away from jazz harmony into simpler harmonic structures. Some tracks swing, such as the 'secret' track *Little Claps*, but others are fiercely introspective, opening into an emotionalism that propels them well beyond cool. The disquieting *Moments in Parallel* begins with minimalist textures that recall Philip Glass, before expanding into desperate exultance. Keller explains that writing the tracks for *Little Claps* had "therapeutic value" for her. "I went through a period of depression and not sleeping and anxiety, and was just trying to get through the days. Part of those problems is that you are so internally focused and unable to see the big picture. To sit down to write was actually quite healing. To get outside of myself, and focus on something else."

When she composes, Keller focuses on listening. She describes the process almost as an act of dictation: "I decided a few years ago that I didn't want to be so specific about everything. I didn't want to sit and search for the perfect idea. I started to believe that whatever idea comes naturally is what I want to be writing. Now I tend to sit down and just *listen* for a while, and just find something and play it, and let things build."

To an ear trained in the clear destinations of classical music, improvisation can sound like a fidget, a fiddle, a way of marking time. Structural complexity is traded for improvisatory freedom, so that, despite its surface kinetic movement - its swing, the drummer's insistent beats - it can feel like stasis. The classical pianist Susan Tomes writes, "Great music often exploits the layers of different emotions and moods that can co-exist in the human soul ... This kind of complexity is very rarely encountered in improvised music."



Keller's 2002 Mikrokosmos album, for which she received an ARIA Award...

When I first read this, I registered it as a truth; after listening to Andrea Keller for several months, I no longer think it is. Keller achieves a layered complexity in her music, which she marries to the freedom of improvisation. Perhaps this is clearest in her 2002 recording, *Mikrokosmos*, for which she received an ARIA Award. On this disc, Keller reinterprets Bartok's great piano work for improvising musicians. In the liner notes, the pianist Donna Coleman writes that Keller "returns the music to its roots in the aural/vernacular tradition, reversing and in a sense balancing the Hungarian composer's efforts to draw it into the world of the cultivated". But Keller does not abandon the cultivated world altogether. Her arrangements are fresh and spontaneous, but they are also meticulously constructed. "My classical background is such a huge part of how I hear music," she tells me. "Harmonically, texturally, the intricacy of form. But the way I hear and perceive music working always involves improvisation."

Improvisation is almost a lost art in classical music, which perhaps explains its compositional decline. Most of the great composers of the past were also great improvisers. Chopin improvised musical caricatures at parties, and his published compositions - though perfectly constructed - feel tactilely generated. As a classical performer, you have to imagine yourself an improviser to bring these works to life. When Keller returns from Germany I ask if I can sit in on one of her improvisation

lessons, the better to understand this process. She seems bemused by the attention, but agrees.



Keller: the goal for me is just to be able to express myself really freely...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ REAL BOOK

"At first I was scared of improvising," she admits when I arrive, "and I was clinging to any bit of practised rehearsed knowledge. And then I used to aim for perfection in it. That was partly my classical training, but also a personality thing. With improvisation, you don't reach that perfection. I started to realise that this isn't actually the goal of it. The goal for me is just to be able to express myself really freely."

Her student, Bronwyn, is preparing for a second-year exam at the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE, and arrives with a bag full of charts. Keller sits beside her as she plays, clicking her fingers, getting into the groove. "Maybe coming down here will be a bit of an anticlimax," she offers. "Double these notes to fatten it up a bit."

"I'm trying to practise soloing with a story in mind," says Bronwyn, "so it's not just playing notes."

"You don't need to have too many ideas," Keller says. "Just have a couple. And then variations on them." She demonstrates a possible solo for *Foxy Lady*, her bare feet providing percussion against the polished floorboards. As a teacher, Keller is collegial and relaxed. She has been reticent when talking about herself, but is strikingly articulate about musical process.

"What's wrong with having this here as a burst of mayhem," she asks, "after all this intricate conversational stuff? I always hear this bridge as being really lush. Really modal, really linear."

The concepts are not that different, I realise, to those in my world. It is only the extras that vary: my teachers always wore shoes, and rarely said 'maybe'. But the aim of either discipline is freedom. There is a lot of preparation that goes into being

spontaneous. "You build up your wings step by step," my teacher always told me, "and you secure them, and then you can fly."

After Bronwyn leaves, I turn off my recorder and stand to leave. As she sees me to the door, Keller mentions something about a solo-piano CD. "What solo CD?" I ask. I have been speaking to her for some weeks now, and it's the first I've heard of it.

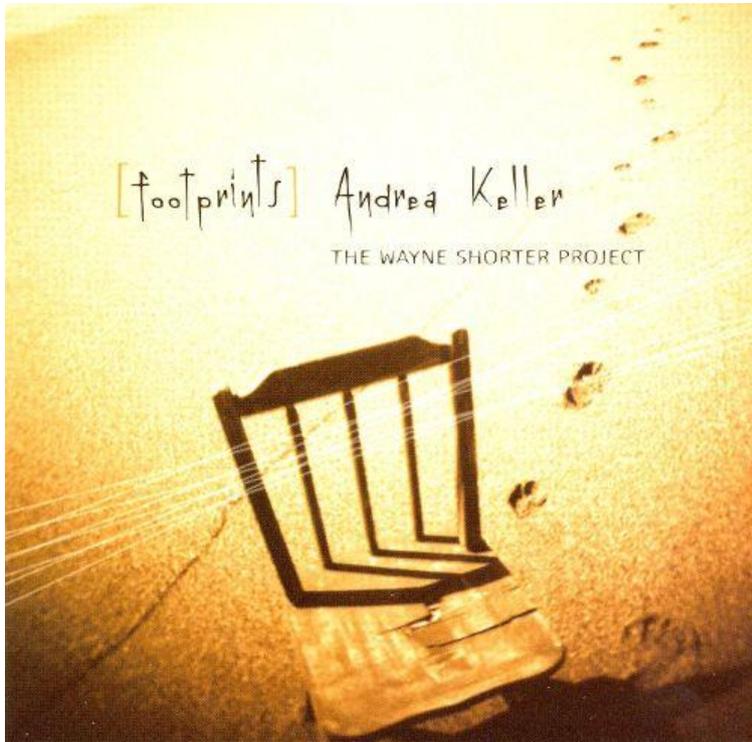


The American saxophonist Wayne Shorter: there were all these layers going on...PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE

"Oh, a project I did for ABC Classics, *Footprints*, based on the saxophonist Wayne Shorter," she says, a little sheepishly. "My copies arrived this morning, actually. I'll get you one. Hot off the press." She goes into the other room and returns with a copy. "Wayne Shorter came out for the Melbourne Jazz Festival one year," she explains, "and it was one of the most amazing things I ever heard. It blew me away. It totally baffled me - I couldn't understand it. It was so seamless, these really intricate forms. There were all these layers going on. Months later, I couldn't stop thinking of it. It's unusual for something to be that new."

I take Keller's album home and listen to it, and am enchanted by it. It comprises a number of Shorter's tunes, mostly from the 1960s, in deft and varied arrangements, packed with references to more recent versions. The first track is a lilting, whimsical rendition of *Footprints* for solo piano, but in the following tracks Keller introduces other elements. Ever the chamber musician, here she plays chamber music with herself. In *Mahjong* she overdubs a second piano track, in which she plays the melody in parallel octaves so that it rises sinuously above the harmonic background, as Shorter's saxophone might against a band. The overdubbing of the piano is a reference to Bill Evans, but Keller's spacing also recalls the transparency of Schubert's four-handed textures and his command of sonority. Elsewhere, Keller overdubs her piano tracks with the Nord (her beloved electronic keyboard, specialising in old sounds, which she carries to gigs in a backpack). In *Night*

Dreamer she ingeniously weaves the Nord sound into the piano ostinato; in *Lost* she creates a collage effect out of references to various Shorter tracks and improvises against them with the Nord, which creates a bumpier, three-dimensional texture.



The Footprints album: a number of Wayne Shorter's tunes, mostly from the 1960s, in deft and varied arrangements...

"I took my son to the art gallery," she says, when I phone her the following day, "and I bought a book for him, and I realised I was really attracted to anything where there was texture in art. I had listened to and transcribed so much of Shorter's music that I wanted that to inform this version." In each track she reinvents her sound and her approach. "I think 50 minutes of solo piano is difficult to listen to, so I really consciously wanted to create a lot of variety."

Keller is launching the CD in Federation Square, as part of the Melbourne Women's International Jazz Festival. "I'm a little anxious about it," she tells me, "because it fits into the huge solo-piano tradition. Playing solo has got such a huge history, and it's such a daunting history."

As she walks out on that evening, Keller does look a little daunted. The stage is set for an ensemble performance later on and is large and cluttered, emblematic of the huge tradition she is taking on. Keller is dressed in a black skirt and flats, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail and clipped smartly behind her ear. She looks small and pale, like a shy schoolgirl.

But when she sits at the piano, she recovers her authority. There is a lot of ambient noise coming in from around the square, snatches of a rock band. Audience members turn to the back of the auditorium and glare. But Keller launches into a lyrical rendition of *Orbits*, in which she releases the melodic line into the air, free as a saxophone; it makes its way to the back row and reels the audience in. In *Sweet Pea*,

she moves to a richer harmonic palette, immersing the hall in great washes of colour and then retreating into sparser, more questioning phrases.



Andrea Keller: I never did the solo piano-bar thing, and I'm kind of glad about that...PHOTO CREDIT SHELLEY TONKIN

"I never did the solo piano-bar thing," she mentions in one of our conversations, "and I'm kind of glad about that, because the few that I have done have been really lonely gigs." Keller no longer looks lonely out there: she looks like she is listening. Through force of concentration, she seems to have silenced the whole of Federation Square. As she hunches over the piano and turns her ear to the sound, the audience leans in, rapt, and listens to her listen.