

## ED GASTON: JAZZ, CLASSICAL MUSIC, GARY BURTON AND GOOD TASTE

by Trevor Graham

---

*[This article appeared in the March, 1972 edition of Music Maker]*

Whenever the conversation turns to acoustic bass players in Australia, it inevitably commences with Ed Gaston. Ed, from Atlanta, Georgia\*, came to Australia with the Australian Jazz Quintet in 1958, returned to the States during 1962-63, and has been a member of the Don Burrows Quartet since his return in late '63. During his '62-'63 visit, Ed worked with Frank Rosolino, Stan Levy, Joe Gordon, Helen Merrill, Richie Kamuca, Conti Candoli, Russ Freeman, Shelly Manne, Victor Feldman, Jack Sheldon, Terry Trotter, Jack Marshall, Chuck Flores, Clare Fischer, Bill Perkins, Joe Burnett and Bobby Short.



*Whenever the conversation turns to acoustic bass players in Australia, it inevitably commences with Ed Gaston (left)...*

January of 1972 again found Ed, and his wife Diane, in the States. Although this trip was not made to hear music, only to visit Ed's parents whom he had not seen for ten years, it was at a party at Colin and Janet Bailey's home in Los Angeles that Ed got to talk with many of the leading studio musicians on the West Coast of America.

---

*\*Editor's note, March, 2021: Ed's daughter Victoria Gaston/Young says this is an error. Ed was actually from Granite Falls, North Carolina, although he later lived in Atlanta, Georgia for a time.*

This party, Ed's birthday on January 9, included Julian Lee, Ron Pervis, Bruce and Kathleen Cale, Victor Feldman, Frank Capp, Chuck Flores, Al McKibbon, Alan Copeland, Chuck Domanico, Joyce Collins, and a young bassist who made a strong impression on Ed, Jim Hughart.

It was at this evening that Ed Gaston was given a personal insight into the current working rates and working environment that he discusses in the final question of this interview.

### **Was bass your first instrument?**

My idea was that I was going to be a baseball coach although for years I was torn between music and baseball. You see, I had started to play clarinet in my High School band and had also become pretty good at baseball, and it was not till a university coach dropped by my school and saw me pitch that I got an offer of free board at a university. So to further my interests in professional baseball coaching I obtained a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Physical Education at the University of North Carolina.



*This is a shot of Ed Gaston as a young man on clarinet, playing with a group in the United States, apparently at a time before he took up the double bass. There are many such early shots of Gaston in his memorabilia, but unfortunately most of them are undated, and musicians unidentified...PHOTO COURTESY VICTORIA GASTON*

### **Did you find employment as a baseball coach?**

No, because when I came out of the University in 1952, the Korean war was on. I had already had two deferments, due to my uni studies, and found myself immediately drafted into the army for two years. The strange thing about that was that although I had a uni degree in Physical Education — which was what the army was about — it was my music that saved me from going to Korea to fight. My first camp was at Fort Jackson in Carolina and I found myself in the clarinet section of the camp band and it was at my second camp, Fort McPherson in Atlanta, that I first took up the bass; more in self-defence than anything else, as we were always lacking in bass players! They did not allow coloured people in the southern camp bands, so in addition to our band at Atlanta they also had a Special Services Unit that comprised a quintet with Wynton Kelly on piano! When Wynton left, Phineas Newborn joined, and would you believe that they gave Phineas the axe because he wasn't making it backing acts!



*The army had a Special Services Unit that comprised a quintet with Wynton Kelly (left) on piano. When he left, he was followed by Phineas Newborn (below) who was given the axe...*



## When you left the army?

Trumpeter Willie Thomas found me playing bass at my first gig in a hotel bar in Atlanta and got me into the Hal McIntyre Orchestra. When I say that Hal's band was a road band, I mean it—we travelled over 50,000 miles in 12 months of one nighters! My next gig was with Al Belletto's sextet which I later left to rejoin Hal's band until I tired of travelling again.



*Gaston (second from left, holding the bass) worked with the Hal McIntyre Orchestra in the 50s (above) and with the sextet led by the New Orleans saxophonist Al Belletto (below)...McINTYRE PHOTO COURTESY VICTORIA GASTON*



Thus I found myself in St Louis when the Australian Jazz Quintet were passing through. I had met the guys a month previously in Chicago and the group comprised Bryce Rohde, Errol Buddle, Jack Brokensha, Jack Lavender and Dick Healy. Anyway, Jack Lavender had just given two weeks notice and they offered me his gig. My first gig with the AJQ was in Los Angeles in early 1957 and we came to Australia in 1959 to tour for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, after which we played in all States, recorded, did radio shows, and performed on the first Sammy Davis tour of this country.



*The Australian Jazz Quintet in 1958: Bryce Rohde is in the front (centre) then clockwise, Dick Healey, Ed Gaston, Errol Buddle, Jack Brokensha... PHOTO COURTESY ERROL BUDDLE*

### **When did you start working with Don Burrows?**

I worked with Don Burrows and Bryce Rohde during the late 50's and early 60's with the exception of 62-63 when Diane and myself returned to the States. That came about when the AJQ toured Australia with the Kingston Trio and as a result were offered the same tour back in the States. After that brief tour the AJQ disbanded and Bryce and Colin Bailey stayed in the States—that was when Colin started working with Vince Guaraldi—and I returned to Atlanta, as that was the only place I had a current local union ticket. Later I returned to Shelly's Manne Hole and did a lot of deputising in Los Angeles. We returned to Australia in October '63 and Don, George Golla and myself started to work together, and since then have played all the important jazz spots in Sydney including the El Rocco, Graeme Bennett's Sky Lounge and for the past three years the Garden Court Supper Club at the Wentworth Hotel.



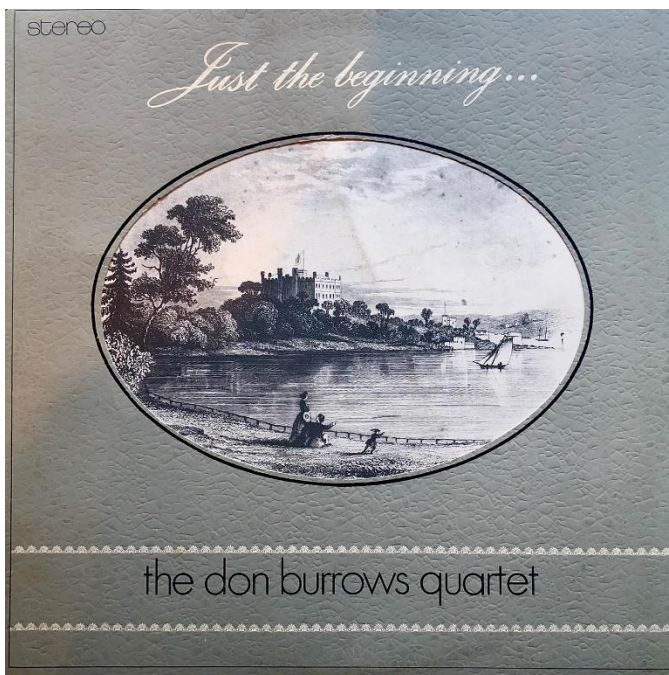
*The quartet that worked at the Sky Lounge, L-R, John Sangster, Ed Gaston, Don Burrows, George Golla... PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS*

### **How do you treat the Wentworth Hotel?**

The Wentworth Hotel is not treated as a jazz room—it is a supper club—although we are allowed to play whatever we like, within the realms of good taste. We play according to what Don senses the crowd will accept on that particular night. Over the period of a night we play a broad scope of music; we play good standard tunes: bossa novas, Burt Bacharach, and sometimes if Don feels the audience is not interested in dancing, we will play tunes that involve tempo changes, or out of tempo things, or some of our classical pieces.

## **I first heard this classical format at the Beecroft Music Club.**

We find that we can get to these audiences musically as our repertoire and our latest LP, *Just The Beginning* on the Cherry Pie label (CPS-1008), includes a sizeable collection of the Quartet's semi legit material. We are doing things like *Sixth Variation* which is the C minor organ work of Bach, and George Golla's arrangement of the beautiful Francisco Tárrega guitar study *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*, and we include these because (1) we are playing more and more to classical music people — and this is their choice of music; (2) we enjoy doing classical material; (3) we are trying to get a wider audience for jazz, or something like jazz, anyway. We do not consider ourselves a jazz group in many ways — in fact we are trying to get the word 'jazz' out of the group — it is just the Don Burrows Quartet, as far as we are concerned. This is because we are only playing what we consider good music and do not want to be contained musically, or audience participation-wise, by only performing within the confines of one type of music.



## **The Quartet performed for the Baroque Music Societies of Bathurst (pop 16,000) and Cowra (pop 6,000) last year.**

We need people to support the Quartet, and since we started doing these legit music society concerts we have gotten a whole new audience. Nigel Butterley booked our initial concert date for his Beecroft Music Club in 1970 and out of that one concert we must have gotten at least a dozen other gigs from suburban and country music clubs. For a lot of these audiences, that have previously only been exposed to legit fiddle players, violinists, etc. Don will often make a little introductory speech in which he explains improvising as it is utilised within the Quartet. He will follow this by a simple demonstration on flute, playing maybe on the F scale, after which we will join in utilising only notes on that scale for a couple of minutes. You can't just walk out

and play jazz to these people, you must give them some insight into what you are doing. Don's musical ability and personally articulate manner communicate to the classical audience very well, and thus this type of demonstration establishes that we really know what we are doing —that we are making some musical sense, and are not just playing a whole bunch of notes at random.

**I consider the 1969 Donald Westlake series *Best of Both Worlds* to be amongst the most important concerts to be presented in Australia.**

I agree with you. It is stimulating to be part of a concert that features two opposite approaches to a common cause —good music. Donald Westlake's New Sydney Woodwind Quintet were selling classical music to people who had come to hear the jazz, and our group was selling jazz to that part of the audience that had come to hear the classical group. The thing that impressed me most about that series was the tremendous audience appreciation for both groups. We have done several similar concerts since 1969, such as last year's performance with the Renaissance Players. That concert was most enjoyable, their musicianship and knowledge of their instruments was astounding, and we got a kick out of just being on the same stage and listening to them. Last year's Town Hall Gold Series concert with harpsichordist Winsome Evans was one of our most rewarding performances in the 11 years we have worked together. The audience loved our performance and gave us a five-minute standing ovation. That concert, under the direction of John Hopkins was, for us, one of the most important concerts we have been involved in — because it was part of the prestigious Gold Series for the Australian Broadcasting Commission; which is about as high as you can go in this country.



*Donald Westlake: he was behind the 1969 series “Best of Both Worlds”...*



**John Hopkins, Nigel Butterley, The Don Burrows Quartet, Donald Westlake. These are the type of people who, to me, are important to the musical evolution of this country.**



*John Hopkins (left) was a bit apprehensive about having the Burrows group on the concert but he came backstage afterwards and was overjoyed with the way things went... Nigel Butterley (below) has always got something interesting going... a tremendously interesting person as well as being such a fine musician...*



I think John Hopkins was a bit apprehensive about having us on that concert but he came backstage afterwards and was just overjoyed with the way things went. Nigel Butterley has always got something interesting going, and everything we have done for him has been most enjoyable as he is such a tremendously interesting person as well as being such a fine musician. Donald Westlake is one of those rare talented musician/writers who knows no musical boundaries and I am certain he was as personally disappointed as we were that his *Best of Both World* concert format could not obtain national sponsorship. Another guy from the ABC whom I would especially like to mention is Richard Connolly, whom you interviewed last year in *Music Maker*. His sessions are always enjoyable because of his original scores which, even when written for unusual instrumentations, are so well written and so musical. He has just returned from six months overseas on a Churchill Fellowship, and one of his programmes *Nocturne*, utilising local musicians improvising to some of the greatest poetry of our age, is one of the major artistic contributions to radio in this country.



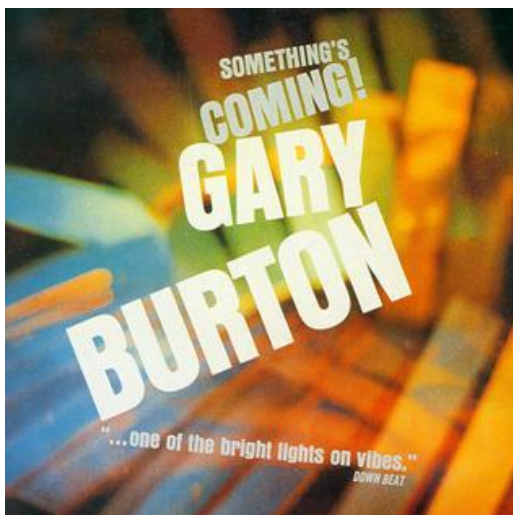
*Composer Richard Connolly: original scores which, even when written for unusual instrumentations, are well written and so musical....*

**Your feelings towards supporting Gary Burton during his concert appearances throughout Australia later this month?**

Gary is an enormous player and I am naturally a bit apprehensive about what sort of things we are going to have to play behind him. Musically we can back him up but a lot of his later records are more contemporary than the things we normally play and if our group will suit him—as far as the material he will want to play—I don't really know. The first concert is in Sydney, Tuesday, March 14, then on to Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra. I, personally, think that if Gary is going to be accepted by the majority of the audiences that will attend this concert series, then he is going to have to play something within a more melodic structure. Take *Something's Coming!*; now in that album there are some beautiful things, and if he decides to play some of those tunes, I will suit him in their context. But, don't get me wrong on this—whatever he may decide to play will, to me, be a very stimulating experience.



Gary Burton (above) and (below) the cover of his album *Something's Coming!*...



**Speaking of stimulating experiences, you return to Tauranga (NZ) this Easter for the 10th Annual Tauranga Jazz Festival.**

Tauranga, in the North Island of New Zealand, is quite an incredible scene. I still cannot believe that it exists. Nobody appears to make any money out of it but it is one of those things that you like to be a part of because it is such a personal experience. In our first appearance there last year, we would have heard over 100 musicians performing in groups from the Auckland Neophonic Orchestra to a trio comprising two bassists and a drummer! It is a very pleasant atmosphere for playing and enjoying yourself. People like trumpeter-organiser Dave Proud, Marshall Brown who owns one of the local newspapers, Peter Le Masurier and the Jazz Festival Society's secretary, Sheila Mansell, created such a personal atmosphere. Then Don found himself being taken trout fishing by Alex MacLean—Alex is a Raetihi farmer-musician who records each festival for commercial release throughout New Zealand.



*L-R, Ed Gaston, Don Burrows & George Golla at Tauranga's 9<sup>th</sup> National Jazz Festival in April, 1971...NEWSPAPER CLIPPING COURTESY LAURIE BENNETT*

**The Don Burrows Quartet has been offered an appearance at this year's Newport Jazz Festival.**

We feel it is a privilege being the first Australian group to be offered the opportunity to appear at Newport. Thus this offer presents a very good chance not only for us, but for other Australian groups, to appear at future Newport concerts. The time factor is our main problem. The new concessional air fares announced this month require a minimum of 45 days out of Australia, and as our individual and collective commitments make it impossible for us to see our way clear to be overseas for more than a week, we would be required to pay normal fares. There is considerable finance

involved in flying four musicians and instrumental freight Sydney-New York-Sydney, and so although we are not certain, at this stage, if this finance will be forthcoming from either the Arts Council or private sponsorship, if we can be at Newport the first week of July—we intend to be there.



*Gaston: the Stateside music scene is pretty shaky... PHOTO COURTESY VICTORIA GASTON*

**Ed, finally, your observations of the Stateside music scene as you saw it in January?**

The whole music scene is pretty shaky. It is like this country at the moment—only on a larger scale. The TV work is folding up, just as it is here and the top guys in LA who are used to making up to \$2,000 a week and living in \$80,000 homes, and suddenly finding their earnings dropping to nil, are really shaken up. Union scales are increasing while many TV and film companies are looking overseas for soundtracks. The recording fee has just risen to \$90 per 3-hour session, \$44 per hour for commercials, and film scales even more. Also in LA the earthquake atmosphere has to be experienced to believe it — it is on their minds the whole time and they just seem to be waiting for another earthquake to happen.