

THE TUTELAGE OF MARK SIMMONDS

by Will Guthrie*

This article appeared in the May 2021 edition of The Wire, the British music magazine published out of London, which has been issued since 1982. Its heading was “Drummer Will Guthrie learns to turn rhythm inside out and back to front through the tutelage of Australian saxophonist Mark Simmonds”.

Growing up in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, fitting in wasn't always easy. Brief stints with BMX, hard rock and beer made way for punk, thrash and grunge thanks to skateboarding, while hip hop and bongs came thanks to my sister. My excellent high school drum teacher got me into fusion, and upon hearing Weather Report's *Birdland* in a Chinese restaurant I became obsessed with instrumental music, opening the door to jazz, improvisation, Japanese noise... and onwards and outwards.



*Saxophonist Mark Simmonds
pictured in the early 1990s with the
harpist Diane Peters...*

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

** Will Guthrie is an Australian drummer/percussionist living in France. He plays solo using different combinations of drums, percussion, amplification and electronics, and leads the contemporary percussion/gamelan group ENSEMBLE NIST-NAH.*

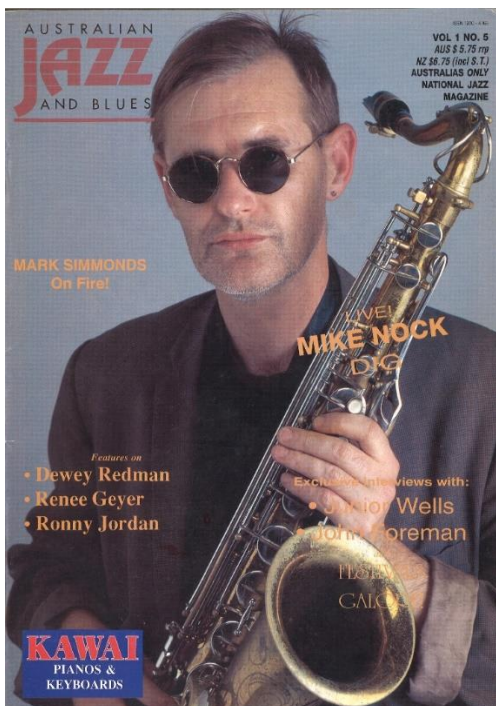
At 17 years old, I started a music degree, studying improvisation at the Victorian College of the Arts. Escaping the burbs and its bogan culture, I came into contact with likeminded souls and started playing around inner city cafes, pubs and bars, alternating between two worlds: music that paid and music that didn't. The paying gigs involved playing mainly standards, acid jazzy stuff, covers, a minimum three sets a night to mainly uninterested and indifferent audiences.

Except for the cruel and shameful lack of interaction with Australian Indigenous cultures, cultural diversity wasn't a PC hashtag, but simply a reality for many musicians at this time: I was playing in African pop bands, a Jewish wedding band, a flamenco dance company, and a Javanese gamelan ensemble.



Australian drummer Will Guthrie: alternating between two worlds: music that paid and music that didn't... PHOTO CREDIT DAWID LASKOWSKI

On the other side, I was playing in bands whose original music was heavily influenced by loud free jazz, minimalist and repetitive math rock, and polymetric funk very much influenced by Ornette Coleman's Prime Time, electronic music, and early albums by The Necks. In the jazz world, my colleagues were divided into two camps: those who wanted to play straight bebop/hard bop, and those who wanted to play their own original music. This was the mid-1990s, and Wynton Marsalis's authoritarian-like conservatism had seeped Down Under, where the idea of looking cool, talking like hip Americans, and wearing three-piece suits seemed even more ridiculous in Melbourne's 40 degree summers. And as a drummer I was looking for ways to phrase and interact with other musicians on deeper rhythmic levels than the flood of continuous eighth notes of most bop based players, or the lack of rhythmic possibilities in the more free settings.



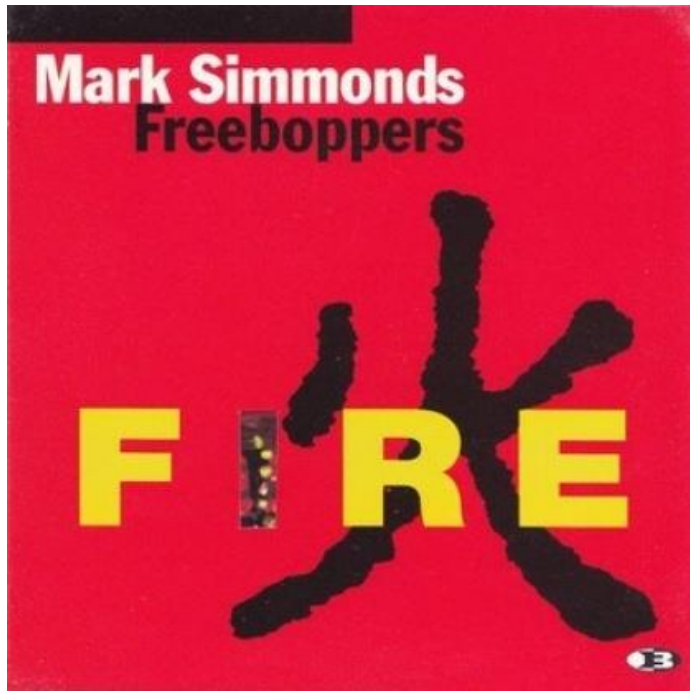
Mark Simmonds on the cover of the magazine Australian Jazz & Blues in 1994...

Enter Mark Simmonds, tenor saxophonist from Sydney. I started playing with Mark through our mutual friend, the harpist Diane Peters, when I was 19. Over a period of six months we practiced together, and only did a few gigs, in small cafes and bars around Fitzroy, but what I learnt from this short period led to years of study, and a quest to make sense of all the information I received in such a short period of time.



What Will Guthrie learnt from this short period with Mark Simmonds (above) led to years of study...

Prominent in the Australian jazz scene throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Simmonds had one foot in the post-free AACM/no wave/rock music of his generation, but through his interest in trad jazz and blues was also well respected by the jazz buffs. A post-Coltrane saxophonist with a huge sound, Simmonds led his own group The Freeboppers, which was host to many of Australia's most adventurous musicians such as Chris Abrahams, Greg Sheehan and Jamie Fielding.



Mark Simmonds' only commercial release "Fire" on Birdland Records, won a jazz Aria in 1996...

In 1996, after winning a jazz Aria for his only commercial release *Fire* on Birdland Records, Mark was in something of a messy period of his life, suffering from lack of recognition and work in a conservative jazz scene; unfortunately drug problems and self-destructive behaviour had also hindered his career for decades. Regardless of his occasional volatile outbursts, when it came to music, he was all business. He saw himself as a mentor to young musicians like myself, and was incredibly patient and generous in sharing the wealth of knowledge he had accumulated over numerous decades of honing his craft.

Mark was notoriously tough on drummers. One was expected to have the sensibility and dynamics of a jazz player, while providing a sense of drive and power like a rock drummer. His compositions were often simple yet multi-directional, offering numerous polymetric and polyrhythmic possibilities, constantly alluding to each other in push/pull fashion. Mark wanted fewer jazz cymbals, and more of a melodic, tom-heavy African chant style honed by the no wave free-funk drumming of Ronald Shannon Jackson.



Roland Shannon Jackson: Mark wanted fewer jazz cymbals, and more of a melodic, tom-heavy African chant style honed by Jackson's no wave free-funk drumming...

We worked our way through all the different combinations of rhythmic cycles. If we played a ten beat cycle,

we would divide it into two by five beats, after which we would practice the opposite, five by two. A ten beat cycle could also be grouped as three, three, four; or four, three, three; or three, four, three. Being aware of some basics in South Indian Carnatic music eased the headache (a tad), but I was learning that any given phrase could be played in a multitude of different combinations. We also worked on rhythmic displacement of simple phrases, something I later understood listening to Sonny Rollins. We played the same phrase starting on any beat, including the off beats, and played it forwards, backwards, starting in the middle, ending with the start, starting with the end. Working through combinations resulted in a multitude of possibilities as an improviser, and I was learning I could stay with the material for a much longer period of time before moving onto something else. It helped me rhythmically construct in a more logical and satisfying way, learning how to do more with less.

I never got to play with Mark again. He retired from playing in public but I dreamed of being able to do good by my teacher by showing him how much I had worked on his lessons. I did however get to thank him for all he gave me, in letters we exchanged over the years. Mark passed away in 2020. Peace out. □

Other articles on Mark Simmonds on this website include:

Martin Jackson, "Mark Simmonds: I Want to be the Best", an interview published in the September/October 1982 edition of Jazz Magazine at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-12>

Eric Myers, Mark Simmonds obituary, published in The Australian on September 20, 2020, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-44>

John Shand, Mark Simmonds obituary, published in the Sydney Morning Herald on September 21, 2020, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-46>