

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN... MR BERNIE McGANN. Photographs by Bruce Hart, Stills Gallery, 36 Gosbell St, Paddington, Sydney, from May 3-June 3, 2000.

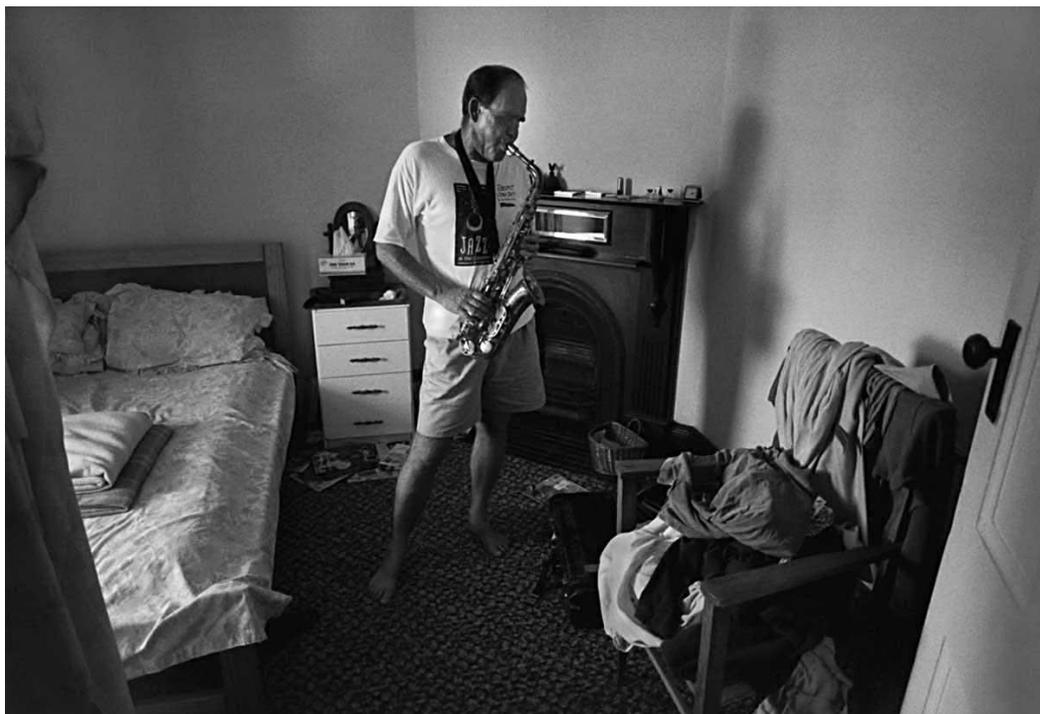
John Clare* reviews a photographic exhibition

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The title is rather Las Vegas (I have never heard Bernie introduced as Mr Bernie McGann), but it is the only mis-pitch (no pun intended of course) in this very important exhibition and record.

Above the entrance stairs are two large pictures which sound two of the exhibition's dominant tones.

The first is more compositional and introspective: a chiaroscuro inclined head, one hand and part of his alto saxophone stand out of darkness. The saxophone is reduced to a thread of light running down to the hand - with a few streaks in the darkness revealing the mechanism that moves the keys - then a lit fluid circle representing the bell. The thread could have been extruded from his mouth like a spider's web. The



In shooting McGann somewhat obsessively over ten years, Hart has created a very moving document for us all... PHOTO CREDIT BRUCE HART

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second picture does not invite comparisons to spider webs or anything else. It is McGann, representational as life, furrowed visage anointed with shining sweat, eyes screwed shut, mouth open at the instant of clamping back on the reed. The energy that comes off this photo is phenomenal. Damn nice suit too!



McGann: the theme that surrounds these high-energy images is art at work...
PHOTO CREDIT BRUCE HART

James Greening told me he started laughing in recognition as soon as he saw it. Some of us have been lucky enough to be sitting or standing so close to this great artist in his ecstasy of creation.

These two tones expand and are at times reversed throughout the exhibition. The artist is also the ordinary battler seen in the grainy realism of the high-energy shot described above. In three of the large pictures dominating the wall that faces you after leaving the stairs, the improviser in full cry is moved into an even greater abstraction. These are the most striking images. They show McGann in that characteristic pitch in that characteristic pitching, rocking motion that, when it

happens, signals a flood of ideas. In each of these the head is pretty much a flat black silhouette, like a solar eclipse. The place where it was an instant before is now an aureole made of thick rods of light. Light flies off another in angled parallel needles, all ending along an even line so that the silhouette is now given a third dimension again, as if it has been fret-sawed from a piece of wood. Light splinters also fly off the saxophone, which in one shot is distorted by motion into a single glittering curve, like an Eastern sword.



The beautiful old Selmer alto sits in close-up in its case, looking like some antique engine...PHOTO CREDIT BRUCE HART

I found these three such a technical and expressive tour de force that I bounced off them until later. The theme that surrounds these high-energy images is art at work. The beautiful old Selmer alto sits in close-up in its case, looking like some antique engine. It also seems to be encrusted, like something you might see on a sunken ship.

It was Shane Nichols who brought this particular quality to my attention. By the by Roger Frampton also left McGann his King alto, and at the beginning of the exhibition is a small picture of Roger entering the Side On Cafe. Never again. Here is McGann making tea in a tiny old globular tin pot. The electric jug has no lid. Nice picture on the kitchen wall but also a plate with a clock's hands.

Here McGann practices in a kind of acoustic tent he has made of some thick material. The light comes down the hall from a glass panel in the front door on one side, and it comes in through a window on the other, across a bed on which lies the reed protector. McGann is sitting in the gloom of his tent, in shorts, with instrument. Light seems to be leaking in there from somewhere else.



McGann: Don Burrows said you could hear the music when you looked at these pictures... PHOTO CREDIT BRUCE HART

In the back room at The Basement, McGann waits to go on in that moment when we all look like tired gladiators. But in the next shot, same place, there is that antic tilt to the McGann head as he sings a tune to himself out the corner of his mouth. All of these have been shot in available light, often very poor, even dingy. This has been done with a grainy stock, which enlivens everything. Finally, here is the McGann smile. American pianist Kirk Lightsey is pointing across the piano at him at Strawberry Hills, laughing ecstatically. He's the man! Then they shake hands. Lightsey had rung someone in Melbourne to say he had just heard a seriously bad alto player. Then they played together to a packed house. Barry Humphries managed to get up close to the action.

Hart has in fact shot McGann, somewhat obsessively, over ten years. McGann has just been himself, completely unmoved by the peering camera. In the film *Beyond El Rocco* we got him to act out a sequence. It was the best acting. It wasn't acting at all. Many musicians are also shown, playing and in repose. On one level it is a

celebration of a community from which McGann stands at a remove, like an Indian scout.

All of these faces and shapes - Sandy Evans, Jonathan Zwartz, Ken James, Pochée, Swanton, etc etc - are absolutely realistic and candid, but the fine textural and compositional values have put them somehow in a kind of mythical time. Much of it is pretty much right now. Many in the curious world of arts have no idea that this is happening, have no idea what sounds actually issue from these instruments. Can you believe this? Some jazz critics have come nowhere near it! Impossible, you say? One of several lines of text on the walls has a bash at certain well-heeled types who haggle over an eight dollar door charge. Surely not!

Keen photographer Don Burrows seemed near tears as he looked around on opening night. He said you could hear the music when you looked at these pictures. He graciously declared McGann a great musician. Formally, Hart has held together the candid and realistic and the abstract and compositional with impressive integrity. He has also created a very moving document for us all.