

## IT'S ALL JAZZ BUT PLAY YOUR BAG!

by Keith Hounslow\*

---

*[This article appeared in the Aug/Sep 2000 edition of Jazzchord.]*

**G**etting old is an inevitable state no one can escape and, unless unavoidably debilitated by disease or whatever, can be entered into with reasonable grace. For a creative improvising musician mental clarity is also required.

In this, my 72<sup>nd</sup> year, I have felt the need to put down my thoughts on the implications of ageing. I have played jazz trumpet for over 55 years. Let me say right now, it's not getting any easier: it is taking considerably longer to work my lip into shape every day, particularly as my performance playing is now only an occasional thing.



*Hounslow on pocket trumpet: it is taking considerably longer to work his lip into shape every day... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER*

I'm not addressing brass players, however, or the physicality of playing any instrument in particular, simply the creative aspect of jazz playing. Not trad or dixieland with its strictly formulaic tunes and arrangements I'm speaking of creative

---

*\*In 2000 when this piece was published in JazzChord, Keith Hounslow had just released a six compact disc album, My Jazz Life: 50 Years of Playing Jazz in Australia. It is reviewed by John Clare on this site at this link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/john-clare-3.>*



*Hounslow, pictured here circa 1949, with clarinetist John McCarthy... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

performance. Writings on the ageing process often speak of the diminution of thought processes, with possible loss of creative powers. Happily, most of us can recall many famous jazz players whose creativity remained evident right up to their death, Dizzy being perhaps the most outstanding example. No, the problem facing the ageing musician could well be confronting and overcoming the pressures, real or imagined, of the music of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whether to conform to what you know, or try to embrace the new just because it's new. Can you move with the times? Do you want to? I guess if you are already truly innovative it's your decision.



*Hounslow pictured at Melbourne's Jazz Centre 44 in the late 50s...*

Miles Davis, the all time great innovator right up to his demise, had the extraordinary ability to touch “the people out there” with his explorations in the world of electronic devices while keeping his melodic integrity. Miles’ harmonic muted trumpet kept his beautiful *melodic* lines going. He achieved commercial success and retained his artistry in spite of his widely criticised on-stage indifference to his audience. Some musicians today play with such arty self-indulgence they may well lose contact with their audiences.



*Miles Davis: he had the extraordinary ability to touch “the people out there”...*

99 percent of jazz musicians world-wide will never get rich. So “get real”. Be true to yourself and what you feel about how and what you play. The early history of jazz is peppered with individual jazz instrumentalists who played their “own bag”. I’ll cite the following: their instruments don’t matter, it’s what they played on them that made them really individual and creative exponents of jazz. Check out recordings of these jazz originals: Pee Wee Russell (clarinet), Roy Eldridge (trumpet), Ben Webster (tenor sax), Coleman Hawkins (also tenor), Rex Stewart and Buck Clayton (trumpets), Jack Teagarden (trombone), Lester Young (tenor sax), Bix Beiderbecke (cornet and piano).



*Hounslow on flugelhorn at Jazz Yatra in Mumbai, India, in 1982...*

Even in the early years of jazz playing they evolved their own expression through the influence of others and in their living of life. I'm not suggesting that their styles have anything to do with jazz today, simply that they were examples of individuality in their day. There were no colleges to learn to play jazz so they didn't develop the jazz cloning that is so prevalent in today's world. Many of today's players are great, really great technicians, but it is difficult to detect 'soul' or a depth of meaning and self-expression in their work.



*Hounslow (left) pictured here with James Morrison, in the early 80s... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

Sure, study the learning courses, study the inversions, all that technical stuff, but respect melody and get your own bag going. Bernie McGann is an original. Coltrane didn't play like anybody else but he sure as hell got all he could from what went before, then springboarded to his thing. Bird was melodic, so too was Clifford Brown, Stan Getz, Gerry Mulligan and many others.

Western world audiences have received gratification and enjoyment over hundreds of years from performances of great musical beauty. It is significant that the audience for the atonal and avant-garde has never come close to the same public acceptance and it is my belief that it never will!

What of the music of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in say 40 years from now, when perhaps many younger readers of this article will be in their 60s and 70s? No one knows how it will go and I'll be long gone. It's now all in your hands — so get out there and do your thing: but keep a healthy respect for melody!

I believe jazz will only survive on stylistic diversity, not on monotonous sameness. Today and in your old age.