

## REVIEW OF THE 1948 MEMORIAL JAZZ CONCERT

by Dick Hughes\*

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*[This review of the concert which took place at the Sydney Town Hall on November 12, 1990, appeared in the December, 1990 edition of "The Sydney Review" under the heading "Reinterpreting"]*

I'm far from being an inveterate concertgoer at the Sydney Town Hall and wouldn't be surprised if I had given more performances there (the first on Christmas Eve, 1955) than I have attended as observer and listener (the earliest I can remember was as a representative of the *Daily Telegraph* on 25 April, 1955).

As a concert venue, the Town Hall is going dark for some time, and I believe it will be November 1992 before I can go again to such a concert as I attended there last month. Presented by John Buchanan and compered by Graeme Bell, it was called the 1948 Memorial Jazz Concert and was a tribute to the San Francisco revivalist musicians Lu Watters and Turk Murphy.

Like Graeme Bell in Australia, Humphrey Lyttleton and George Webb in England, Claude Luter in France and the Dutch Swing College Band, they were — 42 years ago — trying to play a style of New Orleans jazz best played by the King Oliver Creole Jazz Band, Jelly Roll Morton's Red Hot Peppers and Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven.



*Bob Barnard: he opened the concert with a bracket of pieces which Armstrong recorded with the Hot Five and Hot Seven in the mid-'20s... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK*

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\* When this piece was written in 1990, Dick Hughes was a professional journalist and jazz pianist. He published his autobiography "Daddy's Practising Again" in 1977.

Bob Barnard, who was playing his first jazz notes on cornet in Melbourne in 1948, opened the concert with a bracket of pieces which Armstrong recorded with the Hot Five and Hot Seven in the mid-'20s. Barnard demonstrated again that he is — in my opinion — Australia's greatest jazz musician, and I do dare make this public declaration that his last eight bars on the Armstrong-Morton composition *Wild Man Blues* might have excelled Armstrong's finish to the 1927 record (note my safety-net use of 'might').

Then came Tom Baker's Original San Francisco Jazz Band, whom I first heard at the 30th Australian Jazz Convention at Balmain Town Hall, immediately after I had played a bracket with the then 69-year-old American tenor saxophonist Bud Freeman. Freeman snorted derisively at the audience for preferring what he called their 'old stuff' to the mainstream music we had played. Baker, himself an occasional and excellent tenor sax player, rocks it to the rafters when he plays trumpet with his San Francisco band or with his Bay City Stompers.



*Tom Baker's original San Francisco Jazz Band, which debuted at the 20th Australian Jazz Convention in December 1975. Standing, L-R, Len Barnard, Eric Holroyd, Baker. Seated, L-R, John Bates, Hans Karssemeyer, Paul Furniss, Chris Qua, Dave Robison... PHOTO COURTESY ROGER BEILBY*

I loved it at Balmain, I loved it at the Sydney Town Hall. It's rocking, socking, revivalist jazz at its best. It was backstage at the Town Hall, at last month's final scheduled jazz concert for at least another year, that I first set eyes on one of the most extraordinary young musicians I have ever heard. He's 20-year-old Stephen Grant.

I don't know of any other musician of that age playing such at once mature and fresh versions of the compositions of Jelly Roll Morton and the classic ragtime men such as Joplin, Chauvin and Lamb. He finished his Jelly Roll bracket with *Wolverine Blues*, in a way that I

have no doubt Morton could have imagined it being played, but in such a way that I've certainly never heard Morton play it on record. He built on rhythms and inner rhythms. He deliberately changed tempos. It became a concert piece.



*Steve Grant on piano: his touch is sure and confident, his rhythm impeccable, his technique staggering... PHOTO CREDIT BOB SCURRY*

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that Stephen Grant is better than Jelly Roll Morton or that his *Wolverine Blues* was better than the versions Morton recorded. What I am saying is that he explored the tune more than Morton. He also played a sublime version of *Fickle Fay Creep*, which the Murphy band used to play.

Born in Banbury, Oxfordshire in February 1960, Stephen Grant now lives in Parkville, Melbourne, where he often accompanies Kate Ceberano. His touch is sure and confident, his rhythm impeccable, his technique staggering. I'm sure he'll soon be in the class of the Americans Bob Greene and Dick Hyman as an interpreter of the music of the earliest jazz composer, Jelly Roll Morton.