

## AUSTRALIAN JAZZ CONVENTIONS 1946-1976

by Dick Hughes\*

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*The Australian Jazz Convention is unique for several reasons: The musicians have to pay to play; it moves venue each year; and, most remarkable of all, it was the first national jazz festival or convention in the world. DICK HUGHES looks back on the conventions since 1946 and previews Brisbane, 1976-77. This article appeared in a one-off undated magazine entitled "Jazz Australia" published probably in 1976, as it was an Australian Jazz Convention "special", and the Convention was held in Balmain, Sydney at the end of 1975.*



*Dick Hughes on piano, performing at the 1958 Convention at the Railway Institute, Sydney... PHOTO COURTESY DADDY'S PRACTISING AGAIN*

The first year of America's Newport Jazz Festival (1954) was also the year in which the ninth Australian Jazz Convention was held. Write to the Guinness Book of Records now and tell them that Australia was the first country in the world to have an annual jazz festival . . . or convention. "Little people though we are, etc..."

30 years ago in Melbourne they were in the final stages preparing for the first convention. Today, in Brisbane they're tying up the odds and ends for the 31st the first, incidentally, to be held in Brisbane.

The Australian Jazz Convention is unique, unprecedented and unparalleled. Certainly I know of no other jazz festival in which the musicians not only are not paid, but in which they have to pay to play. All musicians playing at Australian jazz conventions have to pay a delegate fee. Which is one reason — apart from a big public attendance — why last year's outgoing Sydney committee was able to pay the Brisbane committee \$1,000 in the first week of January.

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*\* When this piece was written in 1975, Dick Hughes was a professional journalist and jazz pianist. He was to publish his autobiography Daddy's Practising Again in 1977.*

Over the years, the conventions have made enough money for overseas musicians to be paid to attend four of them. Ken Colyer from England in 1962 (Sydney); Alton Purnell from America in 1965 (Sydney); Clark Terry from America in 1974 (Melbourne); American citizen of the world Bud Freeman from Britain in 1975 (Sydney). This year, the Brisbane committee is bringing out Dick Cary, the pianist, trumpeter and alto horn man who was here in 1964 with Eddie Condon.



*International guests included UK musician Ken Colyer (above) in 1962 (Sydney) and American Clark Terry (below) in 1974 (Melbourne)... PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN*



After the first jazz convention, several people were saying it would be nice to bring out New Orleans musicians like George Lewis or Jim Robertson ... not dreaming that it was ever likely that any convention would ever be able to pay the fees and fares of an overseas musician. They must have wondered why, 16 years later, it was thought necessary to bring out a British musician...

And there are dogged diehards who insist that the convention should be exclusively Australian. After all, they say, it is an Australian jazz convention, and if there's any extra money kicking around, let's spend it on some of those musicians who played for nothing at the early conventions, who helped get the whole thing off the ground. And there are others who say it should have stayed in Melbourne instead of being shifted from city to city year after year. Because it was in Melbourne that it kicked off ... way back in 1946. Why, it seems only yesterday that I read in that excellent Australian jazz publication that there were plans for a convention to be held in Melbourne after Christmas, 1946.

Harry Stein, who was running the Eureka Hot Jazz Society, suggested the convention to Graeme Bell, who was leading the band at the Eureka Youth League's North Melbourne premises on Saturday nights. Graeme Bell's Dixieland Band began playing at the Uptown Club in June, 1946, and got themselves some tolerable publicity the following weekend by presenting the first history-of-jazz concert in Australia. They had intermission piano and vocals from Willie "The Lion" McIntyre ("he's the biggest show on earth," said William H Miller, dean of Australian jazz critics) and in the band they had Graeme Bell, piano; Roger Bell, cornet; Ade Monsborough, trombone; Pixie Roberts, clarinet; Jack Varney, banjo and guitar; Lou Silbereisen, bass; and Russ Murphy or Sid Kellalea on drums.



*The Graeme Bell band at the Uptown Club in North Melbourne, 1947, L-R, Cy Watts (trombone), Pixie Roberts (clarinet), Sid Kellalea (drums), Ade Monsborough (trumpet), Lou Silbereisen (bass), Roger Bell (trumpet), Bell (piano)... PHOTO COURTESY GRAEME BELL: AUSTRALIAN JAZZMAN*

There were other good jazz musicians in Melbourne at the time. Tony Newstead, trumpet; Geoff Kitchen, clarinet; Frank Johnson, trumpet; Charlie Blott, drums; Bud Baker, guitar and banjo; Don Reid, drums; George Tack, clarinet; Keith Atkins, clarinet and tenor sax; Geoff Bland, piano; Kelly Smith, clarinet; Cy Watts, trombone; Jim Buchan, tuba and bass...



*Other good musicians in Melbourne at the time included members of Tony Newstead's Southside Gang, here pictured circa 1950, L-R, David Ward (trombone), Newstead (trumpet), Don Reid (drums), Ray Simpson (guitar), Willie McIntyre (piano), George Tack (clarinet), Keith Cox (bass)... PHOTO COURTESY MIKE SUTCLIFFE & OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ*

There were enough fans and musicians in Melbourne to make a jazz convention feasible. And in Sydney there was the Port Jackson Jazz Band and an Adelaide the Southern Jazz Group. And in Hobart there was the Barrelhouse Four.

Australian jazz had come of age. Nearly all the musicians were amateurs, but some of them, under the leadership of Roger Bell (Graeme was away in Brisbane) had recorded with the great American trumpeter, Max Kaminsky, in 1943 when Kaminsky was in Melbourne with Artie Shaw's US Navy Band. And the local boys were not completely overshadowed by the American on *Oh That Sign* and *Jada*, which were released on Bill Miller's Ampersand label.

Yes, Melbourne was ripe for a jazz convention. Jazz — not swing, not bebop. How ridiculous those pigeonholes were and are. But that's the way it had to be then. Lots of people objected to the presence of Rex Stewart at the fourth convention (Melbourne, 1949). Stewart was here on a four-month tour (most of it with Graeme Bell) and appeared at three or four concerts at the convention. The mouldy fygges disapproved strongly. Stewart, they said, was a run-of-the-mill swing player (maybe even a dirty bebopper) and had played with Duke Ellington who, they said, was only

the leader of "just another swing band". It wasn't long before they were saying that Graeme Bell didn't play jazz anyway.

In 1946 Graeme Bell was running a record program on 3UZ on Wednesday nights called "Come In On The Beat". The contents of his record programs, and of the special record session he presented at the first convention, are as good an indication as any of the type of music people wanted to hear at the first convention. His convention session included *Gatemouth* by the New Orleans Wanderers (Johnny Dodds, George Mitchell, Kid Ory), Jelly Roll Morton's solo piano/vocal *Don't You Leave Me Here*, Wooden Joe Nicholas' *Eh La Bas* and a few items from the strict New Orleans repertoire.

Bell himself wasn't a mouldy fygge and probably would have liked to play some Duke Ellington or Lester Young at his conventional record program. But some people would not have wanted to listen. And at later conventions they were even more bigoted and intolerant. At least the average Australian jazz fan then still appreciated the Chicagoans (Eddie Condon, Bud Freeman, Pee Wee Russell, etc) and Bix Beiderbecke, but after Rudi Blesh's *Shining Trumpets* came out (just after the first convention, coincidentally) even previously sane and tolerant record collectors began selling their Beiderbeckes and Condons and Billie Holidays and Ellingtons. They must have stirred uneasily when they heard Graeme say over the radio that he and Max Kaminsky in Brisbane spent hours listening to Art Tatum's *Lullaby of the Leaves*.



*This group, assembled by Eddie Condon in 1939 for an all-star session for Life magazine, includes some of the musicians mentioned by Dick Hughes: Bud Freeman (far left), Condon (fourth from left) and trumpeter Max Kaminsky (here playing drums)... Singer Billie Holiday is seated in the centre of the shot... PHOTO COURTESY KEN BURNS JAZZ*

Record sessions and debates and meetings were fine, but it was the live music that counted. Can we, any of us, forget that magic moment when we first heard and saw real jazz being improvised? I had first heard Will McIntyre gleefully tear a piano to shreds back in 1941, but it wasn't until Monday, December 30, 1946, that I first thrilled to the sound of collective improvisation in the flesh, as they say. There they were on the stage of the Eureka Youth League hall during a lunch break — Tony Newstead (still one of our best trumpeters and the only musician who has recorded with both Willie "The Lion" McIntyre and Willie "The Lion" Smith), Dave Dallwitz (then trombone-playing leader of the Southern Jazz Group, now a composer and arranger, a whole album of whose compositions has been recorded by Earl Hines), Geoff Kitchen (who became one of our most brilliant clarinetists and is now musical big-wig at a Melbourne television station), and Will McIntyre, still one of our top pianists and then, possibly, the very best, equalled only by Graeme Bell, Rex Green and Geoff Bland.



*Willie McIntyre, still one of our top pianists, gleefully tearing a piano to shreds...*  
PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ AUSTRALIA

They played a blues and I remember seeming to be on the verge of tears. I certainly had the pins and needles in the face. Unfortunately, that was virtually the only live jazz I heard at the first convention. I was still at school and living with strict grandparents who hated jazz and everything to do with it.

But I heard enough later and read enough in *Jazz Notes* and *Tempo* and listened to Ellis Blain's convention records made for the ABC to still have a very vivid impression of the sort of music played. There were records of the Bell Band with two trumpets (Monsborough joining Roger) and Dave Dallwitz joining them on trombone. I remember in particular a spirited *Darktown Strutters Ball*, which at that time was

about the most popular number in the repertoires of all Australian jazz bands. And there was a lovely trio session by Kelly Smith on clarinet, Ade Monsborough on piano and Joe Tippett, from the Southern Jazz Group, on washboard.

It was at those early jazz conventions that I first saw youths who were to become some of Australia's jazzmen, who were to become known throughout the world. The second convention was to have been held in Adelaide, largely because the Southern Jazz Group had made such an impression at the first. But in spite of the fact that the Bell Band had gone to Europe, there were still more jazz musicians in Melbourne, and between Christmas and New Year, the second Australian jazz convention was held at the New Theatre, Flinders Street, with the final concert at the Collingwood Town Hall. I got back early after one of the lunch breaks at this convention and there, picking out a blues at the upright piano in the pit, was an intense-looking youth. That was the only time I can remember seeing him at the 1947 convention. The most impressive newcomer that year was a young Western Australian, Keith Hounslow.



*Keith Hounslow was the most impressive newcomer at the second Convention in 1947. In this historic shot taken during a street parade, he is seated in the front row on cornet. To the left of him is a young Dick Hughes; to the right is Bruce Gray on clarinet. On the far left, with his hand on hip, is a young John Sangster. Bob Wright is on sousaphone and, standing in the centre, is Dave Dallwitz on trombone...PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION*

Hounslow so impressed William H Miller, dean of Australian jazz critics, that within a year he had voted him best trumpeter in Australia, above veterans like Roger Bell, Bill Munro and Ade Monsborough. And I can still hear Frank Johnson saying: "God, this Keith Hounslow sounds like Beiderbecke, especially bringing in final ensembles. Not that I'd ever dream of telling him ..." Hounslow later leaned more heavily on

Louis, went through an understandable Rex Stewart phase when Stewart was out here in 1949, and later established himself as one of our most authoritative and best-grounded modern stylists.



*William H Miller, dean of Australian jazz critics, here on washboard: within a year he had voted Keith Hounslow best trumpeter in Australia... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION*



*I can still hear Frank Johnson (above) saying "God, this Keith Hounslow sounds like Beiderbecke"... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION*

Hounslow was undoubtedly the new star at the second convention. The new star at the third convention (Melbourne again, this year, 1948, the Prahran Town Hall) was that intense-looking youth I had seen, all alone with the blues, at the 1947 convention. In memory's eye, I see him now at one of the afternoon sessions at Prahran Town Hall. He's playing cornet now and trumpeter Ken Owen, who Dave



Dallwitz the year before had rashly predicted would become the best trumpeter in Melbourne, is knocking himself out listening to the intense-looking youth. To some of us, he sounds a bit like Mutt Carey, but what is most impressive is his confident, buoyant, inspiring drive. Graeme Bell and his Band, only six months back from their triumphant tour, are most impressed. The Bell Band decided the lad needed special encouragement and all clubbed in to give him some money.



*The young cornetist John Sangster, pictured here with Graeme Bell: an intense-looking youth, what is most impressive is his confident, buoyant, inspiring drive. ...*  
PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION

At the final concert of the third convention, Graeme called on stage the intense-looking youth, who this night is looking even more intense as Graeme presents him with a cheque. "I'm sure he's got a great a future as one of Australia's greatest jazz musicians," says Graeme — or words to that effect. Exeunt, pursued by echoes of applause, Graeme Bell and the youth who has been one of our greats ever since — John G Sangster.

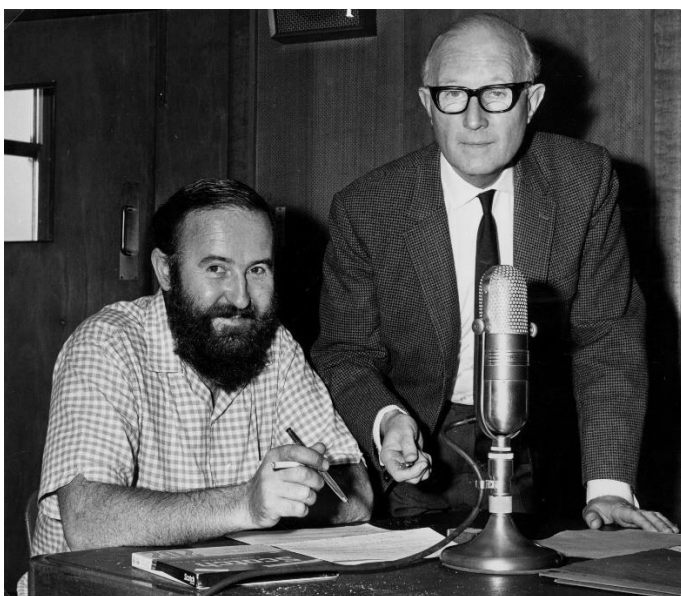
I used to see Sangster around the traps in 1949, like that coffee lounge in St Kilda (Katharina?) and the Maison de Luxe on Sunday afternoons, but I have no clear recollection of hearing him play again until the 1949 convention. Melbourne again. Prahran Town Hall again. Backroom session. Graeme Bell's guitarist-banjoist, Jack Varney, had just played piano with a pick-up group before I had to take over and foul up what could have been an acceptable rendition of *How Long*. I was eased out of the piano chair (more politely than I am now) and the late Ian Burns, down from Sydney for his second Melbourne convention, got a real session going. And in came Sangster, with a big black stick in one hand and a non-matching stick in the other.

Seating himself on one chair and using another as the object of his percussion, he proceeded to belt merde (pardon my French!) out of the second chair, and bedazzled us with Baby Dodds rhythms and Zutty Singleton punctuations. Next year, he was off to Europe with Graeme Bell, as drummer and occasional cornetist and trumpeter ... Sangster, ever moving outwards, onwards and upwards. The complete Australian jazz musician. One of the most complete musicians who never finished.



*Sangster, seating himself on one chair and using another as the object of his percussion, proceeded to belt merde out of the second chair, and bedazzled us with Baby Dodds rhythms and Zutty Singleton punctuations.... PHOTO COURTESY MIKE SUTCLIFFE & OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ*

You may have heard those interviews Eric Child did with Sangster on his Friday night ABC program. On the first one, inter other fascinating alia, Sangster mentioned Kelly Smith; in the second he mentioned Johnny McCarthy. Kelly was one of the best of the clarinetists at the early conventions. George Tack, Kelly Smith, Don Roberts, Tom Pickering... they were my favorite clarinetists at the early conventions, but now I find it hard to hear past Johnny McCarthy, now playing with Bob Barnard for marmalade and leading the Paddington-Woollahra RSL Club band for bread and butter.



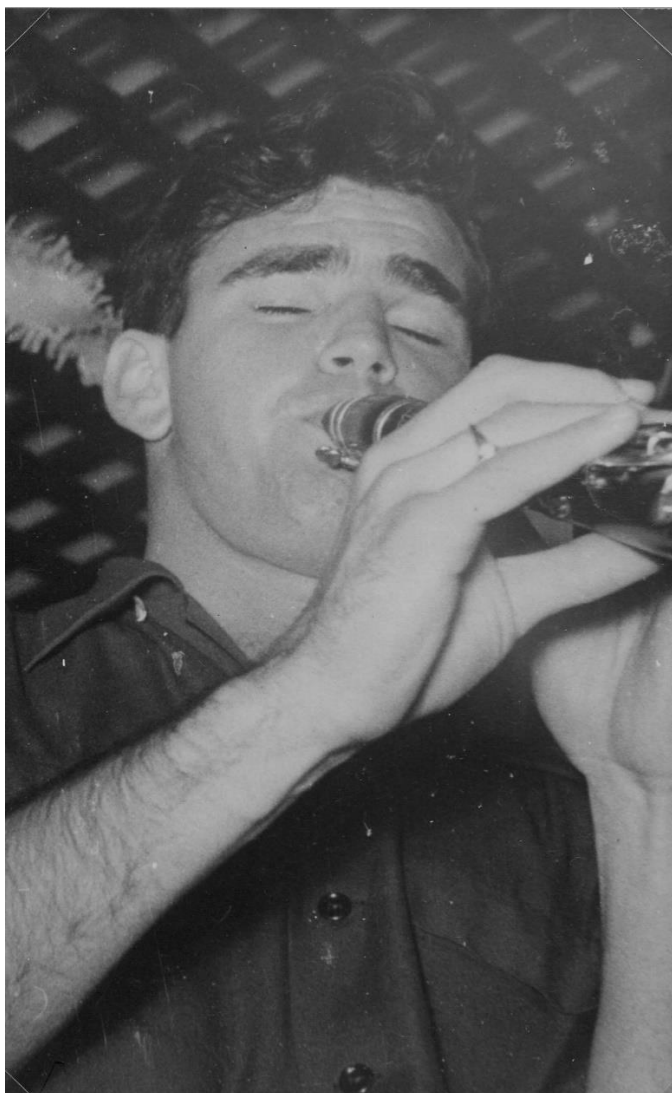
*Eric Child (right) interviewed Sangster (left) on his Friday night ABC program...*

Dame Memory is a fickle jade and I must confess I have no clear recollection of Johnny McCarthy at the 1949 convention. But he certainly stirred them up at the first Sydney convention in 1950.



*Maybe young McCarthy didn't carve Geoff Kitchen (pictured above) that night, but I'm prepared to concede that he did.... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION*

The band on stage at the Ashfield Town Hall was Frank Johnson ... the Melbourne Frank Johnson of Fabulous Dixielanders' fame. They were ripping it off with maximum energy and effect, and then someone got the bright idea of calling on Sydney's own John McCarthy. Johnson's clarinetist was Geoff Kitchen, considered by many the best clarinetist in that style at the time in Australia. It seemed a bit rough and tough — though it was certainly not intended that way — to put the relatively raw McCarthy against the seasoned veteran.



*Johnny McCarthy: he would not give in — he was in there every time with that tough, biting clarinet that has been one of the hallmarks of his style ever since...*  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Maybe young McCarthy didn't carve Geoff Kitchen that night, but I'm prepared to concede that he did ... and so, I am sure, would most people who were there. The band rocked off *Just A Closer Walk With Thee* and then those two clarinetists stepped out in front and, b'gosh, b'golly, b'gee, what a go they gave it! He may not have topped every chorus Kitchen played (when it came to chasing choruses), but McCarthy would not give in — he was in there every time with that tough, biting clarinet that has been one of the hallmarks of his style ever since. And what he played that night is peanuts compared with what he's playing today.

Oddly enough — naturally enough, on second thoughts — I have few memories of Bob Barnard at the early conventions. I remember seeing this not-so-intense-looking youth outside Prahran Town Hall at the 1949 convention and he had a trumpet or cornet case on which was written Gate. But I remember hearing him play only at one of the evening concerts — *Ory's Creole Trombone*, with his brother's band: Len on piano, Doc Willis on trombone and Tich Bray on clarinet. Within a year, they had a

spot on Friday nights on a Melbourne radio station. Short and short-lived, but it was a start.

Bob Barnard didn't make the 1950 (Sydney) convention or the 1951 (Adelaide) and I was in England in 1952-54. I didn't hear him in quantity until those merry nights down at Mentone Life Saving Club, 25 km out of Melbourne, in 1951 and then I heard all the quantity — and more — people had been raving about. This year, Bob Barnard has been booked as a special attraction for the Brisbane convention, making it one of the few occasions when an Australian musician has been paid to play at a convention. The only previous exception I can think of was the hiring of as many as possible of Graeme Bell's original band for the 1970 convention in Dubbo.



*Bob Barnard: booked as a special attraction for the Brisbane convention... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION*

That 1970 convention saw another dubious innovation — the selling of liquor in the convention hall. For many people, jazz and grog go hand in hand. I'm no moralist about these matters —in fact I should be the last to cast a stone — but anybody who thinks that drink improves his or her playing of, or appreciation of, jazz is mistaken.

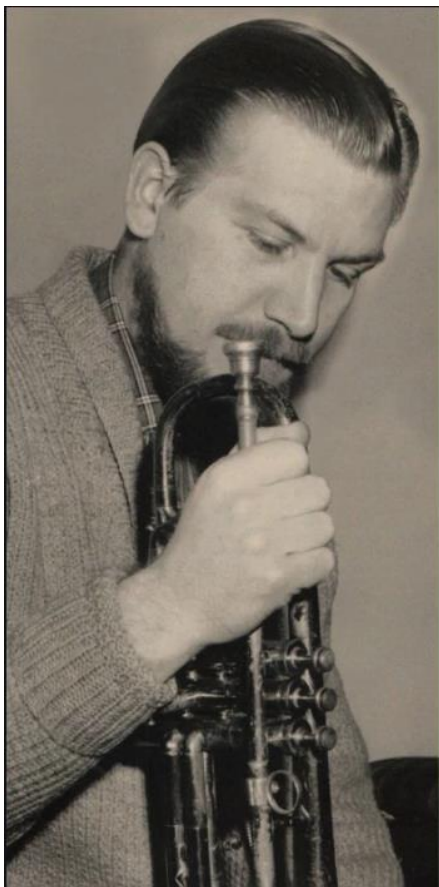
At the last Sydney convention, held in Balmain in the last week of last year, the selling and consumption of drink in the main auditorium of Balmain Town Hall

certainly detracted from appreciation of the music. Beyond the back seats, there were often 100 or so people boozing and chatting constantly and utterly oblivious to the great music played on stage at times. One drunk had to be ejected while the American guest, Bud Freeman, was playing with a fine group which included Lockie Thompson, Alex Frame, and Neville Stribling. It was a long way from the final night of the 1948 convention when you could have heard a pin drop while Willie McIntyre played *Don't You Leave Me Here*.

Admittedly, familiarity breeds contempt as much as it does respect in Australian jazz circles. There is now so much live jazz available (in Sydney and Melbourne, anyway — and especially in Sydney) that people treat it as a commodity rather than the precious luxury it was in the old days.

The anomaly is that people were listening more intently at earlier conventions even to lesser Australian talent than they were at the 1975 convention to one of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. The demon grog...

The first overseas guest at a convention was Ken Colyer, the English revivalist trumpeter who had hopped ship in New Orleans in 1952 to meet and play with people like George Lewis, Jim Robinson and Alton Purnell. Colyer came to the 1962 Sydney convention. The invitation was at least a welcome breakdown of an ugly anti-Pom prejudice which had lurked in certain Australian jazz circles. Y'know the attitude: "No Pom can play jazz like an Aussie."



*English revivalist trumpeter Ken Colyer, who attended the 1962 convention...*

But as George Tack, the Quick Wicked Wit of Melbourne jazz said, getting Colyer out here, where we already had fine trumpeters like Barnard, Newstead, Ken Flannery (all of whom were at the convention), Roger Bell and Bill Munro, seemed like carrying coals to Newcastle — in a collier, of course.



*George Tack, the Quick Wicked Wit of Melbourne jazz: getting Colyer out here seemed like carrying coals to Newcastle — in a collier, of course... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION*

oNot all the best Australian bands were at this '62 convention, and Colyer returned to England seemingly more impressed with the spirit than the flesh, let us say, of the convention. "It reminded me a lot of the early days in London," he said, a remark which must have had the anti-Pom camp up in arms. It wasn't until 1965 (when the convention was again held in Sydney) that an overseas artist came out. This time it was a genuine black New Orleans musician, the pianist Alton Purnell, who had played with George Lewis and with the band Bunk Johnson brought up from New Orleans in 1945. Purnell was a great hit and made several memorable solo appearances as well as with the Geoff Bull Band. Bull, one of the most dedicated and one of the best New Orleans-style trumpeters in the country, has been to the Crescent City so many times he is virtually an honorary citizen and it was he who was largely instrumental in getting Purnell out here.



*New Orleans pianist Alton Purnell: he was a great hit and made several memorable solo appearances as well as with the Geoff Bull Band...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

But to many people, the importing of Colyer and Purnell seemed irresponsible. Better choices, they argued, would have been Muggsy Spanier, Max Kaminsky, Art Hodes, Willie "The Lion" Smith ... or blues men like Roosevelt Sykes, Sleepy John Estes, Memphis Slim.

The overseas artist chosen for the 1974 Melbourne convention would have been unthinkable in the early years. His choice was one of the best things that has ever happened to the Australian Jazz Convention. He was Clark Terry, a trumpeter who had played with both Duke Ellington and Count Basie, whose names were anathema to the mouldy fygges of the dark ages. Terry was a great personal and musical success, sitting in with everybody, washboard bands, tubas and all. His choice is a perpetual credit to the wisdom of the convention committee responsible for bringing him out.



*Clark Terry: full of praise for the organisation of the convention and for the meticulous timing of presentation of bands... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

And Terry was full of praise for the organisation of the convention and for the meticulous timing of presentation of bands. "A change from those American festivals," he said, "where you can still be hanging around five hours after you were scheduled to go on."

The Australian Jazz Convention is a constant part of the Australian jazz scene. But, because it still favours the older styles, it cannot be said to be representative in any way of the entire Australian scene. New ground was broken in Balmain last year when modern and avant-garde jazz musicians were invited to participate. The Judy



Bailey Quartet were among the first musicians to register, but few other modernists bothered. And some were understandably deterred when they found they had to pay to register — that is, they had to pay to get in to play for nothing.

And, as I wrote before, that's one thing that makes the Australian Jazz Convention unique and is one reason why the Brisbane committee for this year's convention had \$1,000 in its kick in the first week in January. There seems to be somebody always working on the jazz convention, like they always seem to be painting the Sydney Harbour Bridge (or is the Firth of Forth?)



*Judy Bailey Quartet, L-R, John Pochée, Ron Philpott, Ken James, Bailey: among the first musicians to register, but few other modernists bothered... PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY*

But, to bring in more variety, I do wish — quite selfishly — that the modern stylists would make their presence felt. A vain wish, doubtless. Even if we get the horses to the water, we can't make them drink. And yet the fact remains that, for me, one of the most impressive solos played at the last convention (the first at which modernists were encouraged to register) was by John Pochée on drums with Judy Bailey — a group which many would consider not only modern but outrageously avant-garde.

Still, things have come a long, long way since that 1957 Adelaide convention when a group of musicians were playing in a mildly adventurous mainstream style which could not have been confused with bop, cool, avant-garde, or call-it-what-you-did then. They were stopped in the middle of a number and ordered off for playing modern. Which reminds me of the story when the Humphrey Lyttelton band was on tour in England just after Bruce Turner had been added on alto sax. If anything, Turner, a fine mid-period mainstream player, is anti-bop. But up went the sign at one hall where Turner played with Lyttelton: go home dirty bopper!