BRUCE CALE: MORE THAN JUST A JAZZ MUSICIAN

by Adrian Jackson *

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I have always disliked the term Serious Music, at least when it is used as a synonym for European Classical Music; but the best way I could think of to describe Bruce Cale is to say that he is a Serious Musician. By which I mean that he is a man who has devoted his life to his music, constantly seeking to grow as a musician, and in the process becoming one of the most rewarding and important musicians in Australia today.

He is certainly one of our foremost jazz artists. His career stretches back to involvement with some of the most important jazz played here in the 1960s, and includes extensive experience overseas with a host of first-class jazz players. Since returning to Australia in 1977, Cale has shown, both on record and in live performances with a succession of bands, that he has a great deal to offer as a bassist, as a bandleader, and as a composer.

Bruce Cale, pictured in the US in 1976: a man who has devoted his life to his music…
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

** When this was written in 1984 Adrian Jackson was a freelance writer, and had been jazz critic with the Melbourne Age since 1978.*

Cale the bassist is a formidable technician who knows how to pilot a rhythm section, and how to contribute positively — both assertively and unselfishly — to an improvised performance. As a bandleader, he has shown a talent for assembling strong line-ups and bringing out the best in the players. And this probably comes back to his talent as a composer.

Cale writes virtually everything his bands play, and his themes are invariably more than just another excuse for the soloist to play whatever he might be able to think of next. He has had commendable success in his efforts to resolve the old dilemma of how to strike a balance between composition and improvisation. His compositions always seem to offer the players challenges that force them to play with a lot of thought; to some extent, the composition determines the course that the solo will take, without actually smothering the soloist. Cale's music is distinctively Cale's: the melodies are both unusual and attractive, the moods of the pieces carefully shaded; and while his music is certainly not devoid of feeling, including even a little subtle humour, it is best described as thoughtful. Or serious.

In a recent interview with Bruce Cale, he outlined his career as a jazz performer, as a jazz composer, and as a composer for classical ensembles.

"I got started as a double bass player in Sydney around 1958", said Cale. "I was mainly doing club work with people like Graeme Lyall. I got involved in the El Rocco scene, which led to me giving up the commercial scene to concentrate on jazz around '61. I was playing with people like Bob Bertles, Keith Stirling, Dave Levy and Mike Nock. We were all playing bebop very much after the style of Cannonball, what was happening at the time via records — we never heard anyone live out here.

A historic shot, taken in 1960. From left, Bob Bertles, Keith Stirling, Len Young, Bruce Cale, Dave Levy. This quintet played regularly at the El Rocco circa 1960-62.

“Bob Gillette was talking about free music, albeit chordal. Then Ornette Coleman became an influence, although I was still listening a lot to Miles and Coltrane. Then around ‘63, I started playing with Bryce Rohde. As I got into Bryce’s music, that led me to George Russell. Bryce has been a great influence on me; I think he’s a wonderful musician and the epitome of the improvising pianist.

The Bryce Rohde Quartet in 1962, L-R, Bruce Cale, Rohde, Mark Bowden, Sid Powell, Charlie Munro … PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN… The American George Russell (below) has been the biggest influence on Cale…PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE

“And George Russell has been the biggest influence on me. His melodies attracted me a great deal. Whereas Ornette’s music was intuitive, Russell’s was very intellectual and that fascinated me in the same way that avant-garde, geometric painting did. Another band I got a lot from at that time was Miles’s quintet with Wayne Shorter, which had a great looseness in its improvisations; Ron Carter and Herbie Hancock, to me, seemed to have as free an approach to harmony as Charlie Haden did with Ornette.

“The main thing I learned from working with Bryce was he showed me how you could get both structure and freedom via the modal approach. I’m very pleased that Horst Liepolt was able to get those records reissued *The Bryce Rohde Story Vols. 1 & 2*

on 44, [the latter featuring Cale, along with Charlie Munro] so people could hear what his music was all about. I went to England in 1965 with Syd Powell, and played with a lot of very good players like Joe Harriott, Tubby Hayes, Ian Carr and Don Rendell; I got involved with John Stevens' Spontaneous Music Ensemble, which included Kenny Wheeler, Trevor Watts and Paul Rutherford. I got a bit sidetracked by freeform music, which was heavily influenced by what Trane did on *Ascension*.

"I applied for a *Down Beat* scholarship and got a grant to study at Berklee, which I did for a year and a half. I worked around Boston with people like Junior Cook, Ernie Watts, Jack Walrath and Pat and Joe LaBarbera. I got gigs playing out of town with people like Zoot Sims and Toshiko Akiyoshi, and when I moved to San Francisco Mike Nock helped me get a job with John Handy's band, which also included Michael White on violin. That was an especially valuable experience for me, it really helped my growth and confidence as a player. That brought me to the end of the free period. I'd got that out of my system; I decided I could get more out of working with structures and good melodies.

In the group led by John Handy (above), which included violinist Michael White (below), Cale's free period was brought to an end…

“I came back to Sydney in 1969 for six months. In that time, I recorded on Charlie Munro’s *Count Down* LP with Graeme Lyall, I had my own band with Charlie, Dave McRae, Bernie McGann and Mark Bowden for Charlie’s jazz show on ABC Radio — *Now Jazz*. I also did some gigs with Serge Ermoll at the El Rocco.

“When I returned to LA, I was involved with a group called Contraband, which was an early part of the jazz/rock movement. Our LP came out around the same time as Weather Report’s first LP, and actually outsold it, but we were dropped by the label. Then I played with Ernie Watts, in a band called Encounter, and with John Klemmer. Also, I was part of the first rhythm section Phil Woods put together when he returned to the States from Europe. That was a big thrill for me.

American saxophonist Ernie Watts: Cale played with him in a band called Encounter… PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

“But after seven years in LA I felt like I wasn’t getting anywhere with my music. I was getting disillusioned, but it was in that period that I began to realise my potential as a composer. A friend who was in the Los Angeles Philharmonic asked me to write a piece of music for him. Several other members of that orchestra then asked me to write pieces for them. That response encouraged me greatly, and made me realise I had it in me to write for classical musicians; and also that there was a lot more that I could do as a composer for my own band.

“I moved to San Francisco and was reunited with Bryce; we recorded an album that I don’t suppose many people have seen here, *Turn Right At New South Wales*. But I felt the need to return to Australia, to come back home, and I did that in 1977. Since then, I’ve led a succession of bands, and done a lot of composing. The first was the quartet with Paul McNamara, Bob Bertles and Alan Turnbull that recorded the *At The Opera House* LP. That’s an LP I’m happy with, both the pieces and the playing. Bob’s a fine player, I think. Paul achieves a feeling that reminds me of Bryce, and Alan has that listening feel that so few drummers here have. Charlie Munro did some concerts with us, which was great: I believe so much in him as an all-round creative musician. I wish he were out playing more often.

“Another band had Dale Barlow, John Conley playing electric guitar, and Andrew Gander. Probably the most successful band I’ve led was with Dale, Roger Frampton and Phil Treloar then Alan Turnbull. It had the highest energy level and was the best improvising band I’ve had. That was a few years ago now.

“There was a period when I wasn’t doing a lot of playing, but over the last year or so, I’ve been reasonably busy. I’ve put together a nine-piece band, and we’ve had a fair amount of work. The line-up offers me a lot of scope as a writer, and there are some very good players in the band. The band can really cook and be very exciting. I have a

Bruce Cale Orchestra circa 1986. Standing L-R, Cale, Tony Buck, Mike Cleary, Warwick Alder, Graham Jesse, next person unidentified. Seated, Alison Campbell, then clockwise Kevin Hunt, Jim Kelly, Mike Haughton… PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

second bass player there, and concentrate on conducting, to keep the whole thing tight. I realise nine pieces isn't a strong proposition economically, but we have had warm reactions from audiences. We've done most of our gigs at Jenny's, but we also had a chance at The Basement in January. I hope I'll be able to bring the orchestra to Melbourne some time this year too. I was at Jenny's in February with a quintet, with Tony Buck and Kevin Hunt in the rhythm section, Sandra Evans on tenor, and a different player from the orchestra each week to make up the quintet. That was a chance to play in a different context. I enjoy playing in a variety of situations. I don't rely on a set personnel any more, I feel the music can stand up on its own with anyone playing it. In fact, a different personnel can offer a different approach to the music. Which is just as well, because it's very hard to keep a band together anyway these days.

A shot of a Bruce Cale Orchestra LP on Vista Records…

"Of course, the other side of music I've been concentrating on is composing classical music. I have already enjoyed some success as a composer of classical music. We are so lucky here to have the ABC doing so much to enable contemporary Australian classical composers to get their work recorded, which is so important. There are a lot of fantastic composers in America whose work simply never gets recorded.

"I've had *Land Of The Aborigine* and *Concertino for Double Bass and Orchestra* recorded by the Melbourne Symphony for the ABC. And I recently got the good news that Patrick Thomas approved *Violin Concerto (Opus 43)* that I'm writing for Leonard Dommett to be recorded by the ABC next year, again for the New Music Workshop. Another recent breakthrough for me came when Peter Walmsley chose a piece of mine for the Willoughby Brass Band to play to represent Australian music on their tour of New Zealand. There hasn't been much written for brass band by

Australian composers, so that's a major step for me, to get acceptance at that level, that could open up a lot of possibilities for me.

Bruce Cale (far right) pictured with classical composers, L-R, Peter Sculthorpe, Richard Meale & Barry Conyngham, at the showing of the Australian Music Centre film Notes On a Landscape...*

"Another important activity for me has been work as composer-in-residence at the Bondi Pavilion. I've written a lot of music for chamber groups. Also, I'm heavily involved in working with children, improving their general understanding of music. That's a really exciting program as far as I'm concerned."

Adrian Jackson: Do you have any difficulties reconciling your activities as a jazz musician, and as a classical musician?

"No, I've got to the point where the way I write is the same whether it's for jazz ensemble or classical orchestra, chamber group or brass band, " said Bruce. "I'm concerned with writing a piece of music for its own sake. I see it as a melodic

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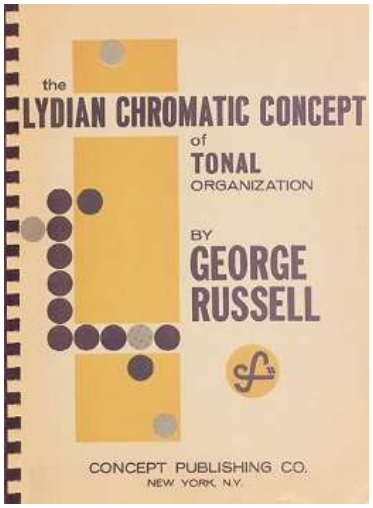
Editor's note: This 1980 film discusses the success of Australian classical compositions in the international arena in the early 1960s. It highlights the works of such composers as Richard Meale, Peter Sculthorpe, Don Banks, Colin Brumby and Keith Humble, then later Anne Boyd, Barry Conyngham, Graeme Koehne, Elena Katz and Bruce Cale. It describes the deep relationship they feel with the Australian landscape, with excerpts from their compositions, and each describes his/her philosophy regarding their music.

statement with a vertical form which is going somewhere. The difference is, with classical composition, I fully notate the music. It's like listening to a group improvise in your mind, and writing it all down, so the performance develops exactly the way you want it to. It's very demanding, but very rewarding. Performing with a jazz ensemble, the music goes wherever it wants to within the structure of the tune, as the group hears it. I like my pieces to have an overall shape, but it does rely on the art of the improviser, so in that sense it does lean on the jazz tradition. I use the Lydian concept from the point of view of weighing up colours and textures. I attended a ten-day seminar by George Russell in 1981, and that was a great learning experience for me.



Cale uses George Russell's Lydian from the point of view of weighing up colours and textures…

"The last album I did, *A Century Of Steps*, was the beginning of what I would like to do on my albums in future — I'm ready to do one with the orchestra this year — where the music crosses over into the classical idiom as well. I would like to offer the listener a wider range of my music.

"In any case, I think the borders between different kinds of music are becoming less defined, less obvious. You can see that with Europeans who are playing jazz, and incorporating a lot of classical elements into that. I think at least part of jazz is heading towards a natural combination of jazz and classical elements, rather than a novelty third stream. If the different elements are naturally gravitating towards each other, that's a very healthy sign as far as I can see. I'm writing more pieces with lyrics for voice. Towards 1988 or so, I'm thinking of writing an opera with a distinct jazz element in it.

"One point I would like to make: I am still very much a jazz musician. I don't have any hang-ups about being identified as a jazz musician; I'm proud to be associated with a great tradition. I still devote most of my time to jazz. It's just that more recently I've found the time and the opportunities to move into other areas as well, which are fulfilling in themselves, and can provide me inspiration for my jazz activities as well. What I would like to see is, if we can begin to break down the barriers between jazz and classical music, perhaps we can expand the audience for both types of musicians.

A historic shot taken at the Bird & Bottle, Paddington, in 1960, L-R, Keith Stirling, Bob Bertles, Bruce Cale…PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

Adrian Jackson: How healthy do you think the jazz scene is in Sydney?

"I generally put my head down and tail up, and don't take too much notice of the mainstream," says Cale, "but I don't think there's as much happening as there should be. It's very hard for creative musicians, but then again, the scene for jazz is never totally healthy anywhere, in LA, London or wherever. If you're dedicated to the music, you've just got to realise you won't get any money out of playing, you've just got to do it. I guess if you compare it to how it was 20 years ago, it's grown, but proportionally the audience is still quite small. I just go ahead and work when I can, and if there are people there to enjoy it, that's great. But it's a bonus.

"One thing that keeps nagging me is the stuff I hear a lot of people playing. They're racing around their instruments, and they're not saying a damn thing. I think this is the great danger with so-called jazz education, that people are going to go through a course which maybe should be called a musicianship course, and come out thinking they can play jazz when they know very little about it.

"You learn to play jazz from your own experience, you have to pay a lot of dues before you can play jazz. Learning the theory isn't what it's all about. The really great players never went to any schools, they came up through simply getting out there and playing.

"I don't think Berklee has produced as many jazz players as they think. I did get something out of going there, but only because I already had so much playing experience behind me, I was at the stage where I could use the theory.

"So what I'm concerned about is that we don't lose sight of the fact that jazz is not an academic music. Someone expressing something melodic, something that comes from the heart, is worth so much more than just playing a thousand notes per hour.