

MARK SIMMONDS: I WANT TO BE THE BEST

Interview by Martin Jackson*

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Sydney tenor saxophonist Mark Simmonds is one of the strongest talents in the new generation of Australian jazz players. A virtuoso instrumentalist, a strong composer, and leader of The Freeboppers, his background contains many of the characteristics unique to his generation: work in the rock field; formal study at an institute; membership of a musicians' co-operative; and, study in the US as a recipient of a Music Board grant.

Although born in New Zealand, Mark was settled in Australia from an early age. He took up trumpet as part of a school music program, and later, after hearing jazz, also took up the soprano sax, and started sitting in with trad bands while still at school. Also while still at school, he attended the initial jazz course at NSW Conservatorium of Music in 1973, under American Howie Smith. While there, he also took up tenor sax, with Lester Young as his initial influence. He recently spoke with Martin Jackson in Melbourne:

Martin Jackson: Can you tell me what the Con course was like then?

Mark Simmonds: There were only about 20 people in the whole course — it was very intimate at that stage. It was just him (Howie Smith), and later in the year Don Burrows and George Golla joined. But early on it was just him, and class sizes were quite small.



American educator Howie Smith: Simmonds got the fundamentals of saxophone playing basically from him...

Do you feel you learnt much from Smith? He seems to have influenced your purist attitude.

Most of what I feel about the fundamentals of saxophone playing I basically got from him. I feel that I really improved a lot... I went from amateur to more professional through his coaching.

Who else was attending the course then?

Craig Benjamin had come down from Canberra with John Conley. Dave Glyde was in the same class too.



John Conley: in the same initial class at the Con with Mark Simmonds...

Do you feel that the course helped you younger players develop?

I think it did. . . Craig Benjamin became quite a voice for a few years with the group Out To Lunch. Yeah, I think it did because at that stage there was the personal contact, and it wasn't as rigid as it probably is now. The teachers, Howie and Don Burrows as well would actually take time after the class to show me a few things if they heard me try to play something. They had more time, and it was a lot more relaxed.

And where did you go after that? Was the David Martin group your first modern gig?

Yeah, that was the first one that I played modern jazz with. Mike Bukovsky was in that band, and I've played with him on and off since then. Also Steve Elphick, who I had gone to school with, was on bass in the original band.

Did you learn much from that band?

It was good in that Dave gave Steve, Mike and I a strong say in the direction of a lot of the pieces. That was great. It enabled us to develop our arranging and compositional skills. We also started to contribute original compositions.

How long were you with David Martin for?

Quite a few years. It was through him that I met Roger Frampton and Phil Treloar, and I played with the Jazz Co-Op for a few months. I was playing in a lot of bands at one stage — Dave Levy's, and Phil Treloar's quintet with Bernie McGann, whom I



Simmonds: with rock, you learn how to get the maximum value out of the minimum amount of notes...

learnt quite a lot from. A bit of a scene was happening at a place called the Pinball Wizard, just over the road from The Basement. There was a lot of sitting in going on, with The Last Straw on Thursdays, and Bernie's group on Sundays, with which I used to sit in quite a lot. Bernie eventually handed that gig over to me, and I continued with a trio of Phil Treloar and Ray Martin on bass. Also at this time, I was doing a lot of playing with rock bands. I toured and recorded with 01' 55, who were quite popular at that stage; Buffalo; Silver Studs; Jeff St. John; Doug Parkinson, and others. I was touring with a lot with rock bands, and not just for commercial reasons. I was also into a lot of the music. With rock, you learn how to get the maximum value out of the minimum amount of notes.

Was the Keys Music Association formed around this time?

No, earlier. All this time I had been playing with Keys, which was formed around 1973, but did not perform in public for quite some time, It was named after clarinettist Martin Keys, who was at both school and the Con course with me, and died in our last year of school. So we got this band together out of the trad band at school, but we had progressed to bebop, and had started listening to John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and that sort of thing. So the band at first was very much moulded on Pharoah Sanders, Archie Shepp, late 60s, and early 70s music. It just began as getting together regularly and blowing. Then we got into writing compositions. It was really a group of friends as the nucleus, which gave us a brotherhood kind of feeling.

When did Keys start their public activities?

We invaded a few trad jazz conventions, and then we put on a couple of concerts, on a very low budget, with Keys, and a few other younger musicians who had been hanging around us a bit — Dale Barlow, Chris Abrahams, Andy Gander, and Peter

Dehlon. They were quite successful, so we decided to co-operate with equipment, transport, and accommodation in going to Mileham Hayes's Easter Fest in Brisbane. We were quite successful and Keys got third prize of \$600 in the Modern band section of the awards. Which wasn't bad considering it was about our first major concert, we were playing original compositions, and first and second prizes went to Crossfire and McJad respectively.

So have you been with Keys fairly constantly?

When I have been in Sydney, but they have done plenty of performances without me.

And when did you come into contact with Serge Ermoll?

I met Serge around 1979 through John Conley and Barry Woods, whom I met through Craig Benjamin. Serge had the idea of getting a band together which would be slightly straighter than what he had been doing with Free Kata. We got together for a month of gigs at The Basement, and also "closed" the Pacific Jazz Cellar before touring Melbourne. The culmination of the band was the Dedication to Horst Liepolt record, with a string quartet, added horns, and Dale Barlow as the other tenor soloist.

How do you feel about the result of the album? Were you happy with your own playing?

Considering how hurried it was, the complexity of some of the music, and the limited number of takes, it wasn't a bad effort. Of my own playing, there is one track (Dedication 2) where both Dale and I take pretty good solos, and they are both quite different, but still both Coltrane-influenced.



An early shot of Dale Barlow: according to Simmonds he perhaps is influenced by people like Wayne Shorter...

What do you think is the main difference between your style and Dale's?

I think we have got some similar influences, like Coltrane, but I think some of my major influences are different to Dale's. I have been quite influenced by Sonny Rollins, earlier on Lester Young, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, and, more recently, David Murray. Dale perhaps is influenced by people like Wayne Shorter.

It seems to me that particularly rhythmically, you come more out of swing than bebop.

I have always played bop, but preferred to develop it more melodically, like Sonny Rollins rather than Charlie Parker. I did play with bop bands, but I always felt fake when I played that music. . . it never felt me I guess. I sort of can do the fiddle de bops, but it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

And you really dig some swing stylists, like Merv Acheson?

I think he is one of the greatest; and Paul Furniss is also one of my favourite players. And I collect 78's of Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Johnny Hodges, and Don Byas. I really love their tones.



The Sydney reeds multi-instrumentalist Paul Furniss: one of Mark Simmonds' favourite players...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Tell me how the Australian Art Ensemble got together.

Well, that came about when I was playing at Morgan's Feedwell in Sydney in 1979, where once again there was quite a bit of sitting in going on. I used to sit in with Bernie's band, which included Bob Gebert, and he used to come and sit in with my trio. So Phil Treloar, Bob, and myself decided to start working together regularly. We made some recordings, and then we applied for a grant to study in New York, which we got.

Did you do much public performance as the AAE?

We did a farewell concert at the Paradise, a KMA concert, and a couple of Arts College gigs.

So what was the aim of going over there as a group?

Well, we wanted to develop as a group with an open-ended approach, possibly adding other musicians to the trio nucleus. The idea was not to go there to study or play as a group, but to study and develop individually. This ultimately lead to us developing in different directions, I guess.

What did you do in your six months there?

I spent three weeks at the Creative Music Studio at Woodstock, which is like an alternative Berklee. They are involved in what they call “World Music” and they have people like Don Cherry, Jack DeJohnette, and Roscoe Mitchell teaching there, while Karl Berger runs the school.

Who was teaching during your time there?

There was Bakaida Carroll, the trumpet player; James Emery, who plays with Anthony Braxton; Karl Berger; Gary Vistad, who played with Steve Reich; and, Marion Brown, who was the resident jazz teacher. Vistad was involved with process music, and he was quite influential. Actually I have written a few pieces using techniques I have learnt from him. Carroll and Emery took the band classes, and both had different conducting techniques, from Sun Ra and people like that, to spontaneously conduct the band. It was quite interesting. I have not used it yet, but I have written a piece for the KMA Orchestra that is designed to have different conductor signals to spontaneously bring in certain sections.

Why did you leave Woodstock after three weeks? Did you feel it provided just one element of what you wanted?

I got a lot out of the Woodstock experience, and I would like to go back and stay longer, but what I really wanted was direct experience of the music in New York. So I went back and studied with saxophonist George Coleman. I am still working on the stuff he gave me. We did not really get into sax technique as he seemed satisfied with my sound, but just concentrated on techniques for getting around changes.



The US saxophonist George Coleman: he showed Simmonds a lot of different substitutions that Monk, Coltrane, and people like that had shown him...

Did he show you much which you think you could not have acquired here?

Certainly. He had a lot of emphasis on ear training — he often negated theory as being secondary to development of the ear. There was some academic stuff like certain patterns to get through changes, but they were different sort of patterns to the Jamey Aebersold-David Baker sort of thing. His idea was that you were learning them not to play them in your solos, but to get an idea of the sound of

running through certain types of changes. He also showed me a lot of different substitutions that Monk, Coltrane, and people like that had shown him. Nobody out here has shown me anything like them, and I have not seen them in books either.

Who were the people you heard that impressed you?

Basically George Coleman as a sax player . . . he had the sound, the virtuosity, the whole trip that I had been wanting to hear. There were other great players too, like Arthur Blythe.

Did you see Ronald Shannon Jackson and James Blood Ulmer, and were they an influence on you?

A few times, in different contexts. I was influenced not so much by the music itself but in not being ashamed of my rock background — the fact that I am from a rock ‘n’ roll generation, growing up in the 60s. It made me feel a bit more legitimate about what I was thinking of doing, to see that it was part of a world-wide movement. And a lot of the musicians — David Murray, for instance — are about my age. Joseph Bowie, Butch Morris, and others are all doing a similar sort of thing, yet all the music is quite different. The things that they have in common are that they have not only absorbed the contemporary jazz idiom, but also rock, soul and funk idioms of the 60s and 70s. It is more than just jazz-rock fusion — it is a real synthesis, and I hope my band is too. I would hate it to sound like a fusion band in the normal sense.

Has your concept of the Freeboppers been influenced by hearing this music?

Not really. My biggest inspiration along those lines had previously been Miles Davis, but it was good to hear all this other music. I was not aware of the large scale it was happening on until I was over there.

So what are you aiming to do with the Freeboppers?

Basically, we are playing all original music, and we are looking at a different audience. We found while playing at the Paradise last year that a lot of our audience were young people who did not really know a lot about jazz. But they were more open-minded to the music than a lot of the jazz buffs.

How do you want to develop your music in relation to the jazz idiom?

I want to retain the spontaneity, and the contemporary structures, such as polyrhythms and polytonality, which have come out of the jazz tradition via Ornette Coleman, Coltrane, Monk, Cecil Taylor, and Albert Ayler. All those elements I want to retain are, to me, the elements lost by people like Billy Cobham, Herbie Hancock, and Chick Corea in the 70s. They lost the spontaneity and flexibility when they added the rock and funk rhythms.

In summary, you seem to have very eclectic influences. Now that you have moved out of a Coltrane bag, what are you aiming for in your playing?

I am trying as unselfconsciously as possible to mould together my jazz, rock, and ethnic influences in a natural way. My compositions are developing along a different line, and that is helping change the shape of my playing as well. I am aiming for a lot of textural contrasts; excitement; variation; authenticity; my own sound; and, to find myself. I want to be the best.