

MELBOURNE'S BENNETTS LANE JAZZ CLUB CLOSES

by David James*

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A sense of place is an elusive quality, as impressive as it is hard to define. There is little doubt that Bennetts Lane Jazz Club possessed it. The American saxophonist Branford Marsalis described it as one of the jazz world's great hangs: a place to go to hear jazz and associate with other jazz musicians. The American drummer Eric Harland commented, after his stint during the 2015 Melbourne International Jazz Festival, that "even the bacteria" in the club is like the Village Vanguard in New York.

The venue will close its doors on June 15, 2015, after 23 years of operation, ending an important period of Australian jazz history.



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For owner Michael Tortoni, the creation of the club has been an expression of his desire for a life in music. The former managing director of Shaw Stockbroking, who worked two jobs to fund the venue, has always considered himself a musician first and anything else second, and it is to music that he will return. He has just finished writing a new album for the rock band Taste, which he formed when he was 17.

"I am going back to music which is where I always wanted to be anyway," he says. "That is how I see myself, whatever other things I am doing. As a kid it was the first thing I did, and I always wanted to go back to full-time music."

Tortoni's determination to put the music first has been the main reason Bennetts Lane has carved out such a distinct position in the Australian music scene. Before the club opened, the commercial imperative in most live venues in Melbourne was to sell alcohol; the music was there only to get the patrons in. But in the 1990s the environment changed. The liberalisation of alcohol licensing laws, tighter monitoring of drink-driving, and the heavy take-up of poker machines changed the business model. Many hotels stopped having live music and those that did could usually no longer afford to pay the musicians.

Meanwhile, large changes were occurring in the teaching of jazz. Jazz musicians in the past had learned on the bandstand, but increasingly young players learned their craft in jazz courses at universities, such as the Victorian College of the Arts and Monash University. This created a ready supply of highly trained musicians looking for work at a time when live venues were no longer looking for musicians.

Bennetts Lane was the exception. The venue was designed only for jazz. Patrons were asked to keep quiet during sets, something that would be unheard of in most pubs. It created a place where the art form could develop.



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"I have lost my workshop," says pianist Joe Chindamo. "It was a place to try things out. The audience became voyeurs of the process. It is not like playing a festival, when you have an hour to do a show. You could spend 25 minutes exploring just one idea. But all good things have to come to an end, I suppose."

The club may be closing, but the brand is not. Property developer David Marriner has bought the name and is establishing a new club in Flinders Lane. It will be called Bennetts Jazz Club and is expected to open in early 2016. Marriner is currently negotiating with the buyers of the Bennetts Lane property to keep some live music going at the venue in the interim.

Tortoni says he was approached by Marriner, who has long wanted to run a jazz club. It is a significant play for Melbourne's jazz community: Marriner has an impressive history saving iconic theatres in Melbourne, including the Regent Theatre and the Princes Theatre. His impact on the jazz scene is likely to be equally creative – he says, for example, that he wants the venue to be open during the day to secondary schools, which are increasingly including jazz in their music curriculum.



Megg Evans, manager of Bennetts Lane jazz club... PHOTO CREDIT MICHAEL CLAYTON-JONES

The Bennetts story is about two other central players: Megg Evans and Jeremy Jankie. Jankie, who in the last few years has been booking the bands, says he will continue in artist management. "I just want to keep being involved with the musicians," he says.

Evans, who provided much of the creative inspiration behind Bennetts Lane, will manage the new venue in Flinders Lane. She admits to being "numb" about the closure. The beginning was humble enough. She recalls that before the lane had lighting, patrons were often uncertain about what they were going into. "It was almost as if they thought they were going to get mugged. There was a sense of awe that at the end of this dark, dead-end alley in Melbourne – this was when laneways were not fashionable – that they had made this brave step into a musical oasis."



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She believes that if she has achieved anything, "it is an art of listening [to musicians] over time". That skill can be developed elsewhere, but she is acutely aware that when the venue closes, the history will finish with it, gone forever. "I can look at the paint chips off the wall and I know what bumped it. I know how many times I had to change the cistern myself. We have a clock here that is right only twice a day. All these little things.

"The wear and tear of a space somehow becomes a diary of its exploits to a certain degree. It will take me 23 years to get that in the new room. The stuff that sticks to the walls like the paint chips, the broken glasses – they are the traces where love has been deposited. They are the point where you recognise something happened here. "I think we can make a better jazz club and I am really grateful David Marriner is giving us the opportunity to do so. So in that sense I am hopeful and exhilarated and excited. But at the same time I am in deep despair."
