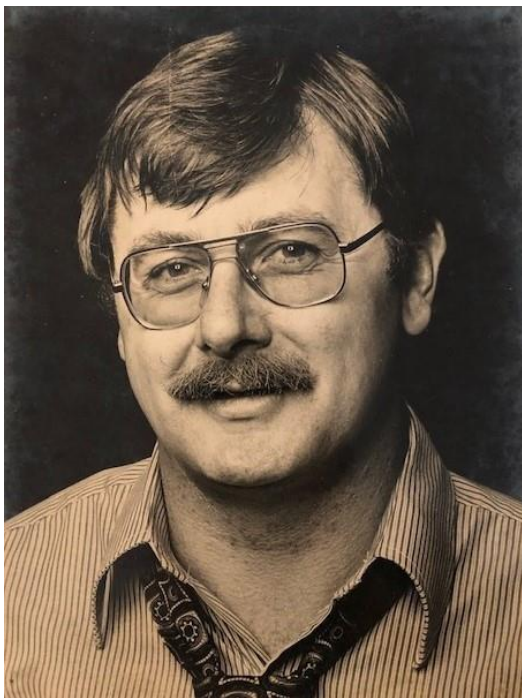


## ALL WHAT JAZZ? SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY?

by Bruce Johnson\*

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*[Editor's Note: Kevin Jones's recent piece 'All What Jazz?' (The Australian, 6/10 /95) presented a bleak and depressing picture of jazz in general, and jazz in Australia. Many of us working in jazz found it unrecognisable: the alleged decline of the jazz scene since Kevin's high period of 1958-1962; the disappearance of jazz from commercial radio; the failure of jazz CDs to sell; and the gloom of the Sydney scene, with out-of-work musicians and lack of venues. A number of Kevin's claims were demonstrably or apparently false: that Clarion Fracture Zone's CD "Zones On Parade" had sold about 25 copies in Australia and 50 overseas; that the Australian jazz audience numbered between 15,000 and 20,000 people; that only one jazz musician (Wynton Marsalis) plays to sell-out audiences; that there are only 55 jazz festivals in Australia; that sales of Bernie McGann's CD "McGann x McGann" are 'disappointing'; that crowds drawn by Tom Baker and Geoff Bull at the Strawberry Hills in Sydney amount to "one of the few bright lights in the city's gloomy jazz scene"; that contemporary jazz is supported by "a small coterie of journalists" who are "trying to make something out of something that's not"; etc. In the Oct/Nov, 1995 edition of JazzChord, responses by two committee members of the Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW, Bruce Johnson and Kieran Stafford, appeared.]*



*Jazz writer Kevin Jones: Many people working in jazz found his piece "All What Jazz?" in "The Australian" unrecognizable...*

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*\*In 1995 Bruce Johnson, an active jazz musician, was President of the Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW.*

The recent piece by Kevin Jones "All What Jazz?" elicited at least three published responses in *The Australian* itself (10/10/95 and 12/10/95), all of them critical. Eric Myers has asked me to make some comment on the issue, presumably on the basis of the fact that Lynden Barber's reply quoted figures which he sought from me. I think it is important to recognise shades of opinion, so let me begin by saying that aspects of Kevin Jones's article are pertinent to the scene. I leave aside his way of reading the history of Australian jazz over the last few decades - this will always be a matter of individual perspective, and readers will form their own judgements, based partly on the persuasiveness of the documentation provided.



*Journalist Lynden Barber: he feels Kevin Jones is being mischievous in detecting a bias towards contemporary groups in Australia Council funding...*

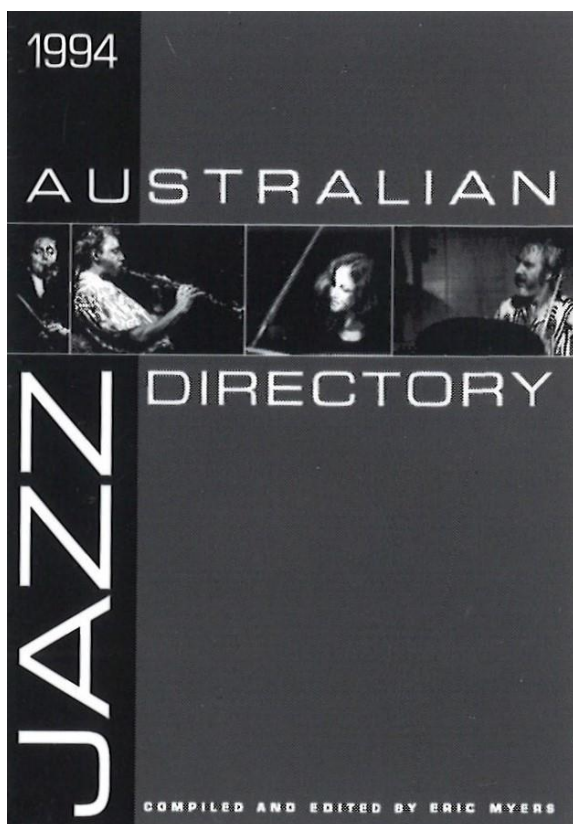
Kevin identifies areas of despondency at the shortage of gigs, and however unpalatable, it is a fact of certain sectors of the jazz scene. At the same time, those who have focussed on the negatives in his article should bear in mind that the picture he assembles is not uniformly bleak. Lynden Barber feels that Kevin is being mischievous in detecting a bias towards contemporary groups in Australia Council funding. The question of bias depends on how you assemble the statistics. It is a simple fact that the overwhelming majority of jazz funding coming through the Performing Arts Board (PAB) benefits what can be termed contemporary forms. I think there are many possible reasons for this, and they are taken up in an article shortly to appear in the journal *Context*.<sup>\*</sup> But speculation as to the reasons will be limited by the fact that the PAB gives no information on unsuccessful applications: for all we know, the funding disparity simply reflects a disparity in the proportion or quality of applications coming from the different sectors. Then again, it may be argued that an early history of bias against more traditional forms is itself the reason that that section no longer bothers to apply.

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*\*This refers to Bruce Johnson's article "Jazz & the Cultural Politics of Australian Music", Context Journal of Australian Music Research No 10, Summer 1995. It can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays2>*

I think the jazz community would agree that the music deserves a better deal than it gets. But the problem is not primarily a lack of a grass roots public following, as is implied in most of Kevin's article. The greater difficulty is convincing institutional support structures that, compared with other musical forms, jazz is a significant presence in Australia's musical life. Some of the inferences in Kevin's article tend to reinforce the perception that the level of jazz activity is relatively insignificant, and this is precisely one of the arguments used to justify its neglect in the media, in arts policy, in education, and by potential sponsors. It is not very useful that people who speak for jazz should gratuitously provide this ammunition, especially if it turns out to be blanks. I therefore draw attention to recent research in this area, which has been published and sourced in *JazzChord* (No 25, June/July 1995), and is based in turn on other documents some of which have been widely circulated in the jazz community.

Responding to a sample of comments in Kevin's article, I cite the following: "Is anyone really listening to jazz?" Annual audiences for jazz appear to number about 2.5 times the audiences for 'classical' music. That is, compared to classical music, the problem is not a lack of audiences, but the fact that support bodies seem unaware of the figures. In a group surveyed in 1991 regarding leisure patterns, only 2% (the smallest category) attended classical music concerts during the relevant period. Among various categories of 'cultural venues', the lowest national participation rate was for classical music concerts (8.2%).



*Jones gives a figure of 55 jazz festivals, whereas the 1994 "Australian Jazz Directory" (above) lists around 100 which are wholly or partly devoted to jazz - by far the highest proportion of music festivals...*

Kevin cites the Musicians Union figure of fewer than 1,000 fulltime jazz musicians in Australia. I don't know who gave him this figure; it does not accord with figures published by such sources as the Australian Bureau of Statistics. But if you include parttime musicians, it rises to around 2,650. Since most forms of music are primarily sustained by parttime musicians, this figure is not so negligible and should be taken in the context of other musics. For example, the most recent survey that differentiated jazz musicians (1983) found that 18% of musicians surveyed were mainly engaged in jazz, and 19% were orchestral (other categories included popular - 27%, and rock - 8%).

Jazz festivals in Australia: far more than his figure of 55. The *Australian Jazz Directory*, which I am sure Kevin has a copy of, lists around 100 which are wholly or partly devoted to jazz - by far the highest proportion of music festivals. Almost half of all music festivals held in Australia include jazz. There are 172 organisations devoted to symphony, chamber and choral music; there are around 160 organisations devoted to jazz (societies and festival organisations). In 1993 there were around 16,500 individual performance 'involvements' in classical or art music. The most recent published figures for jazz (1985) estimated that there were 17,800 jazz performances annually, most of them likely to be involving groups ranging from trio to seven piece.



*Clarion Fracture Zone, L-R, Lloyd Swanton, Alister Spence, Tony Gorman, Toby Hall, Sandy Evans: why would anyone book a band that can't sell more than 25 CDs?...*

The unsourced figure cited in Kevin's article, of 25 copies sold for the Clarion Fracture Zone CD, should be 600 according to Lynden Barber (who cites his source). If 25 is incorrect, it is especially pernicious. Clarion Fracture Zone is one of the most important bands in Australia. But consider the attitude of a promoter, a funding body, a potential sponsor, a local band booker, who has read the former figure (much



more conspicuously placed than Lynden Barber's some days later). 'Why should I book a band that can't sell more than 25 CDs?' The point I am making is that the figure of 25 could have a serious negative impact on the band's future. If it is incorrect, members of the band might be excused for considering redress.

I agree with Kevin that jazz is a disadvantaged music. But I suggest that the primary cause of this disadvantage is not a lack of grass roots support activity, so much as ignorance on the part of top-down support bodies - public, private, state, commonwealth - and the media themselves. The article in *The Australian* could contribute to the situation it deplors.

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## **THINK POSITIVE, KEVIN**

**by Kieran Stafford**

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*[The following is an edited version of the letter from Kieran Stafford which was published in The Australian on October 10, 1995. Kieran is the proprietor of Birdland jazz store, 3 Barrack St, Sydney, and a member of the management committee of the Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW.]*

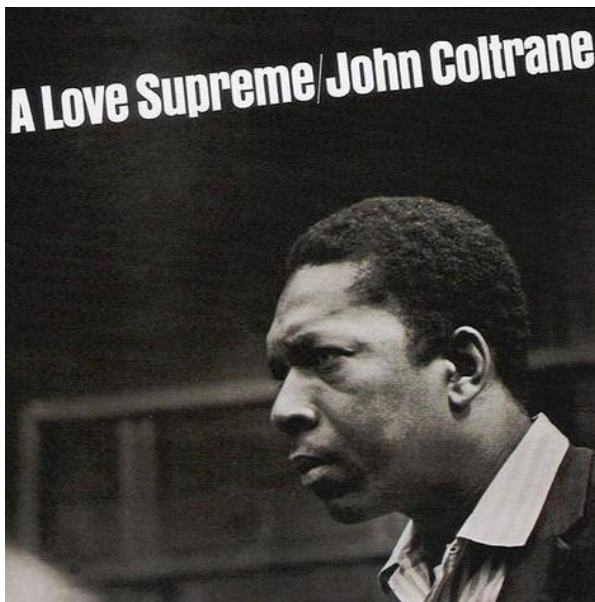


*Kieran Stafford, pictured in Birdland jazz store in Sydney... PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY*

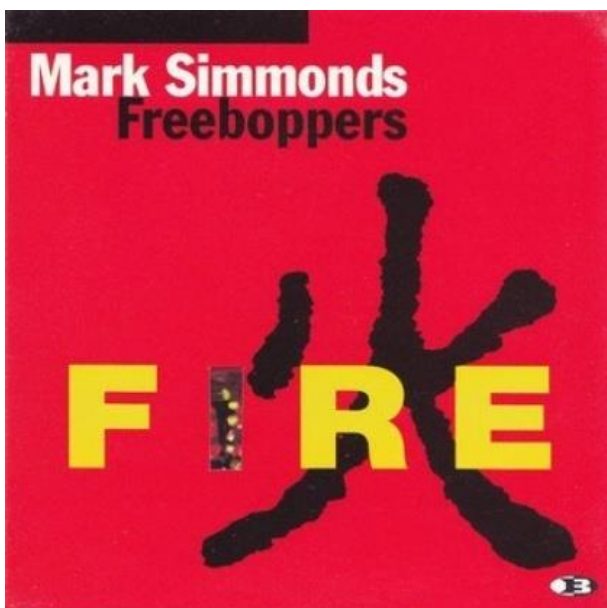
**W**hy must there be this perpetual whinge about jazz not selling? I own the leading jazz store in the country and I can tell you that it does sell. Lots. I've released two CDs so far, both to critical acclaim and damn good sales. If jazz didn't sell I'd be out of a job. Sure it's hard to sell lots of any particular title but that's true of any CD in any style of music. Most CDs in all areas of music fail to recoup their costs. 60% of all CDs released in America sell less than 1,000 copies.

Out of the 100,000 titles released in America over the last three years a mere 500 titles made up half of the total sales volume! On a per capita basis jazz sales are probably a lot healthier here than in the States. As for the Clarion Fracture Zone CD it sold a hell of a lot more than 25 in my shop alone. DIG sold 50,000 copies of their first album. Keith Jarrett's Koln Concert sold 2 million worldwide. We've had numerous titles that have sold 500 or more copies in our store alone...

Jones's position is that because things have changed in jazz since 1962 they can only be for the worse. Lots of classic jazz CDs were released after 1962 (how about *A Love Supreme*?). Good jazz CDs in all areas of the idiom continue to be released. Last week a CD that I produced shared the ARIA award for best jazz CD out of total nominations of about 30. That winning CD (*Fire* by Mark Simmonds Freeboppers) hasn't even been reviewed by *The Australian*. Why is it overlooked?... Sorry to point this out but 1962 was 33 years ago - lots of things have happened since then. Art does not stand still.



*How about "A Love Supreme" (left)? The ARIA award-winning CD Fire by Mark Simmonds Freeboppers (below), hasn't been reviewed by "The Australian". Why is it overlooked?...*



There have always been critics who would like things to remain as they were, as if there was only one true path, one correct way of doing things. That has never been the case in jazz and it never will. Jazz like all art forms is about expression: you may not like what's being expressed but that's your problem. Art is about honesty; not fitting into someone's preconceptions about what's good or bad art.

As for not enough mainstream jazz being recorded it's not true (at least one-third of the ARIA nominations could be considered mainstream)... Wynton Marsalis is not the only jazz musician to play to sell-out concerts. How about John McLaughlin, John Scofield, Pat Metheny, Jan Garbarek, Keith Jarrett and Herbie Hancock to name just a few?

The contention that modern jazz doesn't draw an audience is totally wrong. Mark Simmonds Freeboppers, The Catholics and Clarion Fracture Zone, amongst others, consistently draw large crowds whenever they play. Bands like the Freeboppers are attracting a very young audience who are attracted by the music's honesty and intensity. Lots of young people buy Coltrane records because Henry Rollins talks about him.



*The Freeboppers, L-R, Scott Tinkler, Steve Elphick, Mark Simmonds, Simon Barker: attracting a very young audience who are attracted by the music's honesty and intensity...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ & BLUES*

People constantly say to me "I'd like to buy some jazz but I don't know anything about it? Can you help?" And we do because I for one don't wish to see jazz as the preserve of a few. We constantly try to show people how wonderful jazz is: an article about how great jazz is would be a better idea than constant blithering about which style is the best.

It's no wonder that jazz is given less than its due when some people in it seem to be constantly squabbling about what's the politically correct style of jazz. Who cares? I don't and none of the musicians I know do. It's all music and there are only two types of music: good and bad. So how about it Kevin? Think positive and write something positive for a change.