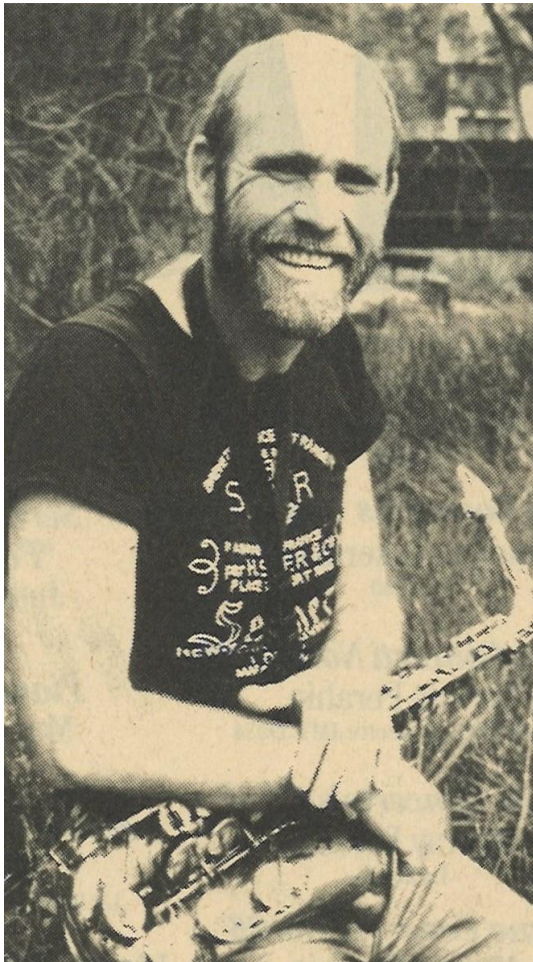


BERNIE McGANN

by Bruce Johnson*

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Bernie McGann was born in Sydney on June 22, 1937. His father, a drummer, used to have musicians over on Sundays to listen to jazz records, including those of Ellington, Goodman, Garner, Teddy Wilson and Waller. The young McGann became hooked and started playing drums, deputising occasionally for his father. Perhaps it was this early experience which has made him so surefooted throughout the most perilous cross-rhythms.



Bernie McGann: at the age of 18 he became a budding alto player...

** In 1985 Bruce Johnson was a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of New South Wales, and an active jazz musician who had worked with a number of bands here, in England and the USA. He then presented a weekly jazz programme on 2MBS-FM, where he was Jazz Co-ordinator, and wrote for a number of jazz publications, including Quarterly Rag of which he was editor.*

Before he bought his own drum kit, however, he heard some saxophone on record that particularly appealed to him, and at the age of 18 he became a budding alto player. For a period he took lessons on the instrument and also in harmonic theory, and by the late 50's was sitting in at the Mocambo in Newtown with John Pochée and Dave Levy.



Drummer John Pochée and pianist Dave Levy performing together at The Basement circa 1975: by the late 50's McGann was sitting in at the Mocambo in Newtown with these two musicians... PHOTO COURTESY DAVE LEVY

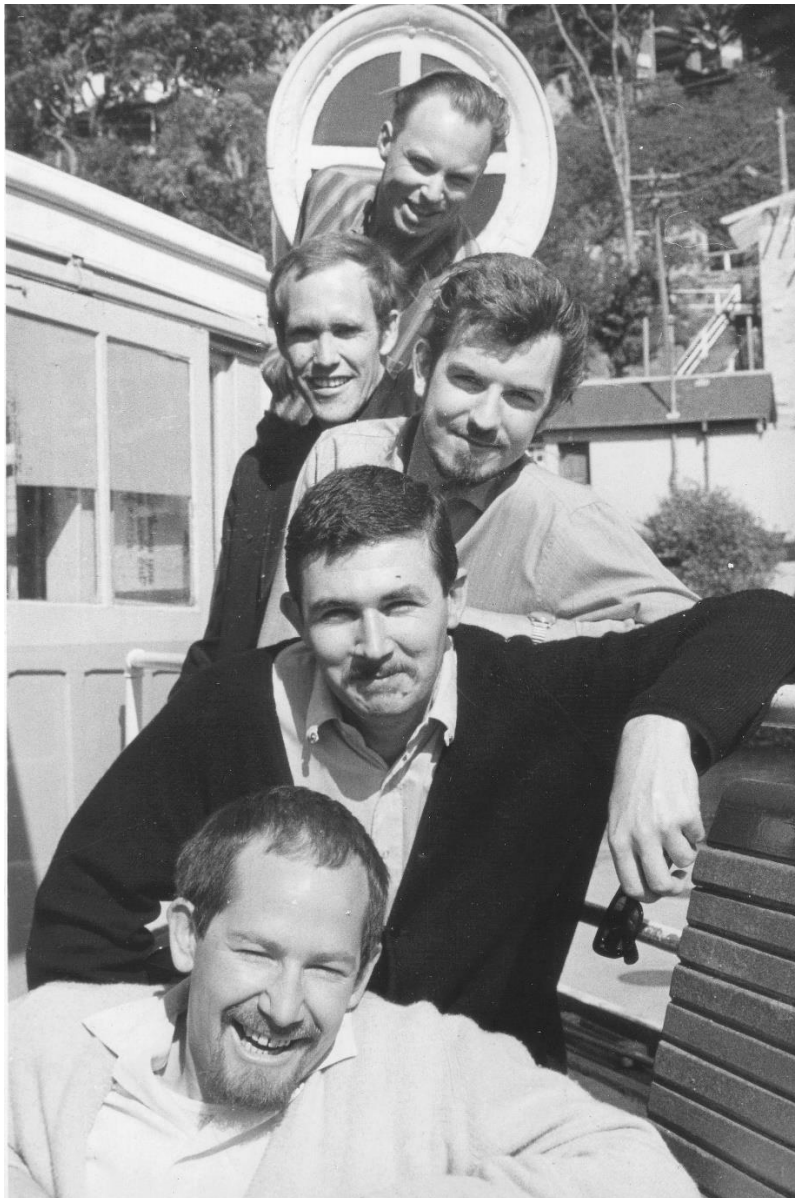
Although Paul Desmond was a conscious model, something else was trying to emerge, and even then, audiences noticed the distinctiveness of his sound. The personal stamp gained increasing authority as McGann became aware of the more aggressive work of Parker, Coltrane and Ornette Coleman.

In the 60's he spent some time in Melbourne including a six-month residency at The Fat Black Pussycat with a band called The Heads, which he remembers as Dave MacRae (though in another interview he named Chuck Yates), John Pochée and Andy Brown. This gave him the rare pleasure of working in an increasingly cohesive group, as well as allowing him to spread his wings as a composer.

McGann's distinctive sound has not always helped his career in a country which has some apprehension in the presence of true originality. Through the 70's work was so sparse that for a period he worked as a postman around Bundeena where he and his wife were living at that time.



McGann (left, in background) with drummer John Pochée, at the Fat Black Pussycat in Melbourne in 1964. Below is a shot of The Heads in 1966. From top to bottom, Dave MacRae, McGann, Pochée, Bob Bertles, Andy Brown...



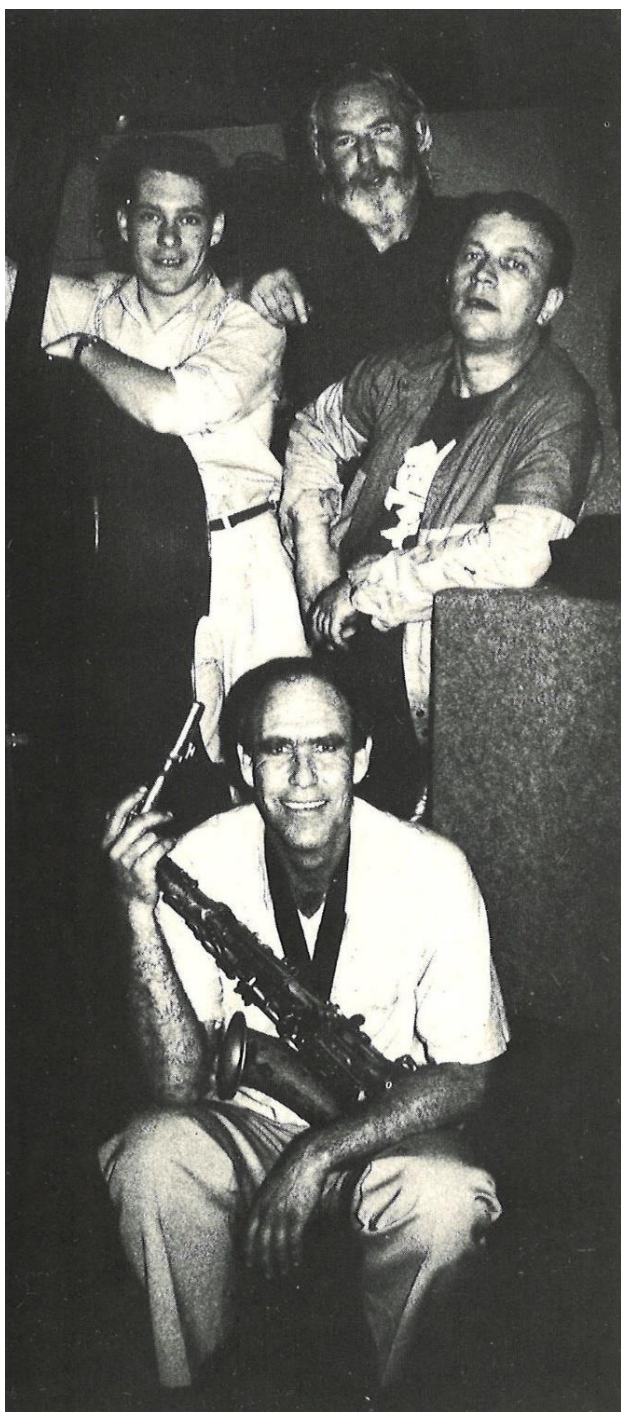
Nonetheless, the 70's also gave him some of his most memorable gigs. It brought the band The Last Straw, which grew out of a blow with Dave Levy and Ken James, and which left a deep impression both on its members as well as on the modern jazz scene in Sydney.



The Last Straw, L-R, John Pochée, Tony Esterman, McGann, Ken James, Jack Thorncraft...

Another group, Kindred Spirits, with McGann, Chuck Yates, Phil Treloar, Ron Philpott and Ned Sutherland, worked briefly around town, and McGann also worked the Pinball Wizz, opposite The Basement, with Wendy Saddington in the late 70's.

The most durable engagement was in some ways the most unexpected. He was invited to put a band into Morgan's Feedwell, a restaurant in Glebe, for several nights a week, and this lasted more than a year, again providing the opportunity to develop a group sound. Since then, apart from backing visiting packages, there has been little regular work except for a period at Jenny's Wine Bar (later Paco's), a venue which has since folded.



A version of Kindred Spirits which recorded in 1987; top, L-R, Jonathan Zwartz, Pochée, Bob Gebert, with McGann seated in front...

McGann's public visibility has therefore been intermittent, and he has never enjoyed the advantages of a sustained promotional programme. Incredibly, only two tracks of his work have ever been issued commercially.

"Perhaps it's something to do with my attitude. . . I don't hustle." It is a tribute to his dedication that he should continue at such a level of excellence in the face of general public indifference, and I found it personally distressing that, in conversation, he told me that he was forced to the suspicion, "I guess people don't like the way I play."



McGann & quartet at Morgans Feedwell. Others, L-R, are Bob Gebert (piano), Phil Treloar (drums), Ray Martin (bass): McGann's most durable engagement... PHOTO COURTESY RAY MARTIN

McGann is an inspiration in a scene dominated by querulous copyists, and while his celebrity is not extensive, his reputation is secure among a discriminating audience: "... one of the most important jazz artists Australia has produced." (Adrian Jackson). "Everything he does sounds fresh and alive, as there are no cliches in his playing." (Anthony Stanton). "McGann's solos ... were classics of inventiveness, power and beauty." (Anthony Stanton).

Perhaps the most persuasive tribute to a jazz community nervously in awe of the US, came from Lee Jeske in New York: "He's a sight better than 85% of the altoists roaming these streets, of that I am positive."

This month, the month of his birthday, hear an hour of McGann's work in several settings, including a recent Jazz Action Society concert. The programme is at 2pm on June 16. I wish to acknowledge the usefulness of Adrian Jackson's interview with McGann, published in JAZZ July/Aug 1983, in supplementing my own interviews and documentation.
