

IS THERE AN AUSTRALIAN JAZZ?

by Bruce Johnson*

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The debate on whether or not there is a distinctively Australian jazz rumbles like a perennially empty stomach, and with occasional bursts of flatulence. On both sides of the question there's an abundance of simple-minded vigour, desperately romantic affirmations opposed to humourless and impatient denials. It was probably first suggested that there is such a thing as an Australian jazz spirit by



The Bell band in 1945. L-R, Graeme Bell, Roger Bell (seated), Pixie Roberts, Russ Murphy, Cy Watts (seated), Bud Baker... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

**In 1981 Bruce Johnson was Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of NSW, and an active jazz musician who had worked and recorded with many bands (including that of Graeme Bell) in Australia, England and the USA. He presented a regular jazz programme on 2MBS-FM, where he was also the Jazz Co-ordinator. He was writing for the Sydney Morning Herald, the newsletter of the Jazz Action Society of NSW, and the Sydney Jazz Club's Quarterly Rag, of which he was editor.*

the English when they heard the Bell band in 1947. But since then there has been little or no attempt to argue the point with any sustained attention to the evidence of the music itself.



The Bell band in the UK in 1947, back row L-R, Ade Monsbourgh, Roger Bell, Lou Silbereisen, Russ Murphy. Front row L-R, Pixie Roberts, Jack Varney, Graeme Bell... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Perhaps because it was Graeme Bell's band that first attracted the observation, most subsequent intuitions on the subject have directed their attention to Melbourne in the 40s. If only for this reason, that still seems to be the suitable starting point for any discussion of the subject. If there is some justice in this, then the question must be why Melbourne? And why the 40s? To the first of these questions I have no answers of my own, but can refer readers to the chapter called "Jazz Dags" in Andrew Bisset's *Black Roots White Flowers* for some sympathetic and stimulating speculations.

The period in question is another matter, however. Communications technology had not yet reached the point where the world could be swamped almost instantaneously by the cultural products of any one country. The Australian sensibilities then were less flooded by any exotic data at all. More particularly, there was less American saturation. This country was still very much an outpost of England. Schoolchildren swore allegiance to the king and knew more about Anglo-Saxons than about Asia. Radio broadcasters assumed a twangy approximation of a BBC accent, and our dreams were of Albion. The US was full of crass, loud up starts, a nation of Nouveau Riche.

Consider the situation, then, of someone who, by whatever means, developed an attachment to jazz. Jazz was vulgar and American, peripheral to an Australian cultural consciousness still dominated by a European musical tradition. Whatever disadvantages in this for the jazz fan, they were likely to be balanced by the fact that jazz was therefore so far beneath the attentions of the 'respectable' arts that it was

never intimidated by academic notions of rectitude. The incorrigible delinquency of the music ensured that the legislators of aesthetics ignored it, leaving the artists themselves to respond to it directly, poetically, authentically. At the same time contact with the source of the music, the US, was less promiscuous than now.

In Mike Williams' *The Australian Jazz Explosion* Graeme Bell describes the difficulty of getting more than a handful of 78s at a time (p 2). The combination of these circumstances proved to be dramatic. There was less access to the American product, and what there was was less mediated by commentators, college courses, critics. The contact with the music was as fragile as a filament, and took place in a rarefied medium. The result was incandescence.



Norm Linehan (right) pictured here in 1953 with Warwick 'Wocka' Dyer: Norm bared his soul in a scholarly mea culpa in Quarterly Rag, July 1980... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

So much for a theory. Does the music bear it out? Again, before we get to it, we have to cut our way through some thick undergrowth of prejudice and myth. The one concerning instrumentation has proven to be particularly resilient. Even close observers of the Australian jazz scene have tended to remember those days as a paradise uncontaminated by the supreme symbol of modern jazz, the saxophone. Norman Linehan bared his soul in a scholarly *mea culpa* (*Quarterly Rag*, July 1980, No 16), and reminded himself simply by looking at the evidence that the musicians themselves never seemed to be afflicted by any prejudice against the instrument. To his documentation we can add the remark that from the time of Roger Bell's first commercial recording in 1943, scarcely a year passed up until the end of the 50s when Bell or a band led by someone associated with him did not make several

recordings using the sax, including at least one essay, *Ole Miss*, by Pixie Roberts on baritone in 1950.

We come up against other and equally entrenched misconceptions when we try to investigate what models might have inspired the Melbourne jazz musicians of the 40s. Graeme Bell has conceded the influence of Lu Watters, and on some of the former's records the matter is unmistakably confirmed. But it is an enormous and unacceptable jump from this to claim, as some do, that Bell is indistinguishable from Watters and that therefore there is no such thing as distinctively Australian jazz. Graeme himself had been listening to jazz for nine years, and playing it for seven, before Watters made his first records in 1941. Bisset, again, documents this priority (pp 114–6). By 1946 the Watters sound is present, but we must remember that it was superimposed upon a band whose members had already been working together for, in some instances, ten years. Once again, all we have to do is listen to the music — not one track, but the corpus. In fact, if you draw up a list of songs recorded by Bell during the 40s, the number which also shows up on issued Watters recordings is comparatively minute — a statistic hardly in accord with the charge of self-effacing imitation.



Graeme Bell has conceded the influence of the band led by the American trumpeter Lu Watters (above)...

A glance at some of the common properties equips us to be more discriminating. Both bands recorded *Muskrat Ramble*, Watters in 1941 and Bell in 1951. The first and uncritical impression is of similarity, largely because of the same tempo and key, and the use of two trumpets on both. But listen more closely. The routines are different. The Australian version significantly has more solo space, and a looser feel, breaking into a freer spontaneous collective improvisation towards the climax. In the Watters version the two trumpets remain more tightly locked together. This is part of a general pattern, emerging again in a comparison of Bell's 1947 *Canal Street* with a Watters 1946 airshot of the same song.

Other differences are more overtly matters of musical personalities. Pixie Roberts' clarinet work in *Muskrat* is much stronger than Ellis Horne's, who is barely audible

throughout. This muscular authority was always to be apparent, and Roberts' contribution to the sound of the band will be taken up again later. The feel of the rhythm section is also different. Lou Silbereisen is much lighter on the tuba than Dick Lammi in the Watters band, approaching more closely the sound of Adelaide tuba player Bob Wright. This more supple quality may be related to the fact that Silbereisen just as often played string bass, and even though he frequently tended towards two beat tuba figures (listen for example to *Panama*, 1952, and *Ballin' The Jack*, 1949), the stringed instrument generally imparted more bite and bounce, giving the band a more sprightly sound than the more lugubrious stateliness of the Watters group.



Lou Silbereisen: he played tuba, but just as often played string bass... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

The two versions of *Canal Street* summarize these differences, with the Bell band having more elasticity and energy. Roger Bell's trumpet lead is more assured than Lu's, sits more magisterially astride the beat. The ride-out has a tremendous jubilation generated largely by the front line playing more freely against each other, while Watters and Bob Scobie remain more severely parallel.

In all this, I'm not denying the often more prominent similarities, but they are not overwhelming enough to refute the suggestion that the Bell band has its own sound. If it were that easy, then where did they get all those combinations that Watters never used — guitar, string bass, two reeds, saxophones?

Good question, perhaps. Where did they? Not such a difficult question, since Graeme has never been coy about it. The band was much impressed by the Condon recordings for Commodore, and you can hear the free-wheeling gusto of those

sources on tracks like *At the Jazz Band Ball* (1945) and *Two Day Jag* (1944). Bisset records their enthusiasm for the Muggsy Spanier Ragtime releases of 1941, and Graeme's responsiveness as a pianist to Jess Stacy and Joe Sullivan (p 115). In conversation, Graeme listed Brad Gowans, Jelly Roll Morton, and Tommy Ladnier, as being among Ade Monsborough's favourites, and Max Kaminsky and Bix Beiderbecke for Roger. If we want to find a category of influence in all this, the closest one that comes to hand is the group of white musicians who have become known as the Chicagoans. The aural evidence confirms the suggestion on many occasions.



Graeme Bell in 1947: note his responsiveness as a pianist to Jess Stacy and Joe Sullivan...

The nervousness of the Roger Bell band on its first commercial recording, which also featured Max Kaminsky (1943) could be read in part as the trepidation of musicians in the company of an idol. The simple presence of a saxophone in the lineup is consistent with this. Kaminsky and arch-Chicagoan Bud Freeman had already recorded together; Pixie Roberts's tenor solo on *Ja Da* from that Roger Bell session is infused with a strong dose of Freeman. Roberts also displays the same kind of tone and (in a more primitive form) phrasing as Freeman on the later recording of *Two Day Jag*. The earlier Bell bands often conveyed the same ebullient carelessness of what might be termed academic taste as the sometimes mannered swagger of the Condon groups.



Graeme Bell at the piano in 1948, with Pixie Roberts (clarinet) and Roger Bell (trumpet)... note the importance of Pixie Roberts in shaping the sound of early Melbourne jazz...

But this still doesn't lock the Bell/Bell/Monsborough bands into one pigeon-hole. A common feature of their recordings was the use of two reeds, almost as much as their use of the saxophone. Splinter Reeves plays a tenor solo on that first track, and in just about every year from then up to the late 50s one or more of these musicians put together a number of sessions involving the use of more than one reed player. Graeme recalls that this was primarily initiated by Ade who had in mind the example of some of the Clarence Williams washboard bands. This takes us a very long way indeed from the Lu Watters and the Eddie Condon styles. Our categories are becoming so large as to be of little use. When that happens it's time to go back again to the music itself and to try to hear both the forest and the trees that make it up.

Jazz is music which is shaped by the individuals who play it, and it has often happened that a whole epoch in its history was defined by the domineering stature of one musician — Armstrong, Parker, Coltrane. If we try to attend more closely to the personal voice of particular players we stand a chance of hearing something essential about sources. I have already alluded to the importance of Pixie Roberts in shaping

the sound of early Melbourne jazz. Even a casual scrutiny of his individual contribution brings to mind a name which hasn't even been mentioned yet: Johnny Dodds. Graeme Bell's second commercial recording includes an original called *Unrealistic Blues* (1944). The ghost of Dodds is clearly audible, as it is again for example on the beautiful *Alma Street Requiem* (1945) and *Jenny's Ball* (1947). Once the name lodges in the mind, other things click into place. Well... up to a point.



The ghost of Johnny Dodds (pictured above) is clearly audible...

The first commercially released record that Graeme made under his own name was *Georgia Bo Bo* (1944). Johnny Dodds's *Georgia Bo Bo*? Well of course. Lil's Hot Shots, 1926 — Louis, Johnny Dodds, Kid Ory, Lil Armstrong, Johnny St Cyr. The inspiration is obvious. But I said up to a point. Yet again, a comparison of the two reveals an independence of mind in the Australian version. It was recorded in the living room of a boarding house or hotel belonging to bass player Ted Laing. The fact that it was made at 3 am may point to circumstances that helped to liberate the band from the confines of the original. That the Armstrong record was the model is suggested by the vocals on the two versions: Louis and Roger Bell both anchor themselves to the tonic, the key seems to be the same, and so is the tempo. But where did someone in that living room get the idea to introduce the song with the words "let her go"? The routine is different. The Bell band dispenses with the opening verse, substituting a briefer musical introduction. The instrumentation is different.

The Armstrong take is obviously the one the band had heard, but there is no attempt to recreate it pedantically. The band has bunged together what it had, memories of a song from 1926, and the casual clutter of several years of listening to whatever it could lay its ears on, arranged to form a construction which is its own. Armstrong hovers in the background and directs our thoughts to other, now obvious, possibilities. We go again to *Unrealistic Blues*, and hear the sound of Louis' mentor, King Oliver, in Roger's trumpet work. But that quirkish trombone solo by Harold Broadbent has no suggestion of Kid Ory or of Oliver's trombonist from his most celebrated sessions, Honore Dutrey.

Oliver is there again in the vibrato and attack of Roger's muted work on *Alma Street Requiem* — a masterpiece in the idiom, as full of conviction as the small black groups which, it now seems, inspired the band. *Just Gone* (1947) is a song from the Oliver/Armstrong repertoire. But, hang on, instead of two trumpets we've got two

reeds. The band is in top form here, a magnificently sustained exercise in collective improvisation, one of the best records ever made by an Australian traditional band. But having the cheek to double up the clarinets instead of the trumpets, which, with Monsborough's versatility, it could have done. Two reeds. Another possibility springs to mind. One of the most famous such combinations in the earlier days of jazz was that of Jimmy Noone and Joe Poston, clarinet and alto respectively. Play something like their 1928 version of *Tight Like That*, and the resemblance to much of the Bells/Monsborough material is inescapable. The vocal has the same insouciant and lightly erratic strut to it as you find in Roger's singing, as for example on the version of *I Want a Little Girl* he recorded (with two reed players, Ade and Tom Pickering) in 1949.



Ade Monsborough on alto sax: One of the trademarks of any record including him is the tone and phrasing of his alto playing... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Even more interesting is the alto style of Joe Poston. One of the trademarks of any record including Ade Monsborough is the tone and phrasing of his alto playing. No-one else at the time seemed to sound quite like that. Well . . . so it seemed, indeed. But play the sax solo on Graeme Bell's 1952 take of *Jenny's Ball* and follow it up with the Noone/Poston *Tight Like That*. The similarity of many elements of the two alto players is uncanny. Was there a clique of Joe Poston copyists in Australia in the 40s? It seems improbable given the state of availability of records. But on a recording under Graeme's name of *Ole Miss* in 1950, Bruce Gray and Ade swap fours on altos. Several things are interesting about this exchange. First, that if it were not for overlap, it would probably never be noticed that two different musicians were at work, their approaches being so similar. Second, that they are both irresistibly

reminiscent of Joe Poston. In 1950 the Bell band gave a farewell concert immediately preceding its second European tour. A private recording of this was made and on it we hear the sound of Ade Monsborough announcing *Who Stole The Lock*. The players are Monsborough (alto), Pixie (clarinet), Silbereisen (string bass), John Sangster (washboard), Graeme (piano), and Bud Baker (banjo). When Ade is not indulging in a rather ferocious vocal, he produces music that could have come straight out of the Apex Club in the 20s, the club with which Noone and Poston were closely associated.

Previously we were looking at some of the alleged, acknowledged, and aurally indicated influences which gave some of the jazz in Melbourne during the 40s its particular sound. How's the list going, in respect of the Bell/Bell/Monsborough group? Lu Watters, the Chicagoans, Johnny Dodds, Armstrong and Oliver, Jimmy Noone and Joe Poston. San Francisco, Chicago, New York (where the Commodore sessions took place in Milt Gabler's record shop), New Orleans. Black and white. It doesn't exactly tie the Australians down to some solemn, doctrinaire programme of imitation. We haven't even considered the possibility that there was inspiration closer to home.



William H Miller: In 1938 he returned from England with some 600 jazz 78s...
PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

In Mike Williams' *The Australian Jazz Explosion* Graeme speaks of the reverence he and his circle had for Australian musicians Frank Coughlan and Benny Featherstone, That opens up a bewildering number of further possibilities, since Frank Coughlan himself had been exposed to a wide range of American and English bands during the twenties (see Bisset, index). And there is also a man who signifies in this context not so much as a musician, though he played washboard, as an enthusiastic collector. In

1938 William H Miller returned from England with some 600 jazz 78s. In addition to guiding the Bells through his personal contact, he also presented a weekly radio programme featuring selections from his collection. In literary research one of the first projects one undertakes when casting about for influences and sources is to look for a catalogue of the contents of the subject's library. A catalogue of the Miller collection would be useful to Australian jazz historians for precisely the same reason. It is likely that these 600 or so records constituted the first significant jazz reference library in this country. When recordings were so difficult to get, that makes it a matter of some moment.



Graeme Bell speaks of the reverence he and his circle had for Australian musicians Frank Coughlan (pictured here) and Benny Featherstone...

In any attempt to evaluate the distinctiveness of Melbourne jazz in the period we are considering, it begins to seem that trying to locate an influence and tying the band to it is misconceived. One is forced finally to assume that they simply grabbed what they could and assimilated it into what was, increasingly, an authentically regional style. This tends to be confirmed when we look for evidence of the reverse process: that is, the influence the Bell band exercised on others. The band's 1947 tour of Europe is a fortunately timed accident of history in this connection. Here was a working jazz band, reasonably mature and stable in terms of personnel, taking its music to countries whose own jazz tradition was not evidently fully enough developed to intimidate the Australian musicians. If a student of culture had wanted to set up an experimental situation, he could scarcely have done better. Graeme's comments on this tour, as well as his scrapbook which includes press accounts of the band's reception in various countries, are an invaluable source of information regarding this country's own contribution to what has come to be called culture shock.



The 1947 Bell band at the Uptown Club in Melbourne. L-R, Cy Watts (trombone), Pixie Roberts (clarinet), Sid Kellalea (drums), Ade Monsbourgh (trumpet), Lou Silbereisen (bass), Roger Bell (trumpet), Graeme Bell (piano).

For present purposes several points have particular significance. I asked Graeme if the tour led to any modification of the band sound or of its members' musical attitudes. The answer was a firm negative, as though it was not the first time he had thought about it. Now here come the really interesting things. English writers have long conceded the transforming effect of the Bell band on jazz over there: suddenly it was music to be danced to, suddenly the traditional scene bloomed into revival. In



Humphrey Lyttelton: When he presented altoist Bruce Turner in his group, he was vilified as a modernist...

addition, however, it's Graeme's view that it was the two tours of his band which were responsible for the recruitment of the saxophone into traditionally oriented English groups. I sniff a fine irony here somewhere. When Humphrey Lyttelton presented altoist Bruce Turner in his group, he was vilified as a modernist, a "dirty bopper". I wonder how many of his critics had also cheered themselves hoarse at concerts given by Graeme Bell, the man who very likely prompted the offence. Graeme's alto player was, chiefly, Ade Monsborough. And it remains a fact that his impact in particular was so great that he influenced the style of many of the English alto players (I would include John R T Davies on a list), and that among English collectors, some of the most sought after records are still those of the Monsborough groups. Now this is an extraordinary circumstance. It seems clear that the English, who had so much more exposure to jazz than Australians of the time, and before whom we so obsequiously abased ourselves as a country, immediately recognised and in many ways tried to emulate something which they thought of as Australian jazz.

A related phenomenon occurs to me before I've even begun to research the topic: In the introduction to the Picador edition of his short novel *The Bass Saxophone*, Czech writer Skvorecky records the profound and enduring effect which Graeme Bell's visit to his country had on himself and his contemporaries. Compare this situation with that of most of our artistic globe-trotters of the day — a heavily populated category, by the way. Most left this country full of a combination of resentment and embarrassment at Australia's philistinism. They arrived in England with a passive and diffident talent, *tabulae rasae*, little to give and much to absorb. They returned, if at all, anglicised and supercilious. The Bell band took with them some home grown jazz. They sowed seeds of it all over Europe, and returned unspoiled by the experience and altered only in the discovery that what they had been doing was in some obscure way Australian. Few if any of our cultural historians seem to have cottoned on to the enormous significance of this fact yet. Jazz is still beneath their attention. Not so in the 20th century Northern Hemisphere. I've said it elsewhere, and I say it again here: jazz is one of the most virile and, in its locally transmuted forms, authentic components of the Australian culture. It's not a simpering recreation of a 19th century European tradition, nor, in the manifestations I'm talking about here, a gutless gesture in imitation of an American tradition. Melbourne jazz in the 40s dramatized the point when it visited Europe.

So if we want to deny that there is a specifically Australian jazz we are up against several difficulties. As far as the early Bell band is concerned, we can't be any more specific about influences than the 20s and 30s jazz tradition in general. That still leaves as much room to manoeuvre for a distinctive style as any jazz musician ever had. Furthermore, what is it that so many overseas listeners hear when they talk about and avidly collect Australian jazz, if not "Australian jazz"? These, as I said, are obstacles in the path of the commentator who refuses to admit its existence. They don't on the other hand bring us very close to what the specific characteristics of Australian jazz might be.

An adequate examination of that would require a book, and would need to go beyond Melbourne in the 40s. But reviewing the evidence that has emerged in the foregoing, I believe we can see some interesting features beginning to shape themselves, both specifically musical and generally cultural. There are, after all, some broad observations that can be made about the music and its musicians that might form the

basis of a fuller analysis. One is the importance of the individual in shaping the collective. I suggested earlier that to a large extent a single musician, Ade Monsborough, did much to affect the sound of English traditional jazz. The phrase “Melbourne jazz in the 40s” tends to suggest a relatively large and faceless movement, but in fact, during the earliest days it comes down to not much more than a handful of sharply defined individuals. I stress those epithets, and quote Andrew Bisset: “ it took some independence of mind to play jazz” (p 118). It wasn’t the inexorable spread of a mindless vogue. Jazz was people like Graeme Bell, Pixie Roberts, Roger Bell, Monsborough, faces that its fans knew and talked to, a music having direct and living contact with its audiences. It’s pertinent to notice in this connection how often family units have had an impact on Australian jazz: the Bell brothers, Bob and Len Barnard, Ian and Ced Pearce, Pat Qua and sons Chris and Willie... because, I think, jazz is at its most vital when transmitted through palpable flesh and blood. In a family group it is contagious.



To a large extent a single musician, Ade Monsborough (far right on alto sax) did much to affect the sound of English traditional jazz... Others in this shot, taken in Sydney in 1952, include L-R, Pixie Roberts (clarinet), Roger Bell (washboard) and Lou Silbereisen (bass)... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

Those Australian jazz musicians exhibit a number of recurring characteristics which are cognate with a well-developed individual presence. An artistic susceptibility that goes beyond music is one example. Graeme Bell and Adelaide’s Dave Dallwitz have both been, or are still, painters. Tasmania’s Tom Pickering has demonstrated a literary talent. The point remains frequently true today. Roger Janes and Barry Wratten, now living in Sydney but both from Melbourne, have a well-developed sense of pictorial beauty, and Pat Qua’s house is almost wall-to-wall, floor to ceiling, with her own paintings. There are others. I believe that there is a connection between this responsiveness to aesthetic experience and the irreverent, even subversive sense of humour possessed by nearly all jazz musicians I have played with. Certainly you

find it in Graeme, and anyone who can write a tune called *Honi Soit Qui Mallee Root* during an Anglophiliac stage of this country's history, as Roger Bell did, ought to be kept under surveillance. It has something of the ratbag spirit in it. And in saying that I think I'm beginning to hear the sound of the music itself. Graeme Bell's 1951 version of *When The Saints* includes a rabble-rousing vocal and assorted yahoo noises from other members of the band. It's the Ocker spirit, but transmuted into something culturally affirmative.

Perhaps the word "unself-conscious" is appropriate. This is not always so, of course. There are interesting recorded examples of tenseness or nervousness which are probably perfectly explicable under the circumstances. What might be an instance shows up on the first Graeme Bell recording, *Georgia Bo Bo*. It's in either F or E flat (multiple transcriptions have left it in E according to my piano: most unlikely). In the course of Roger's solo he hits a slightly screwy flattened 9th over a dominant 7th chord. Not proto-Bop, but more likely overblowing while looking for the dominant 7th itself - whether you're in F or E flat, they are successive harmonics on the same fingering. Perhaps this was caused by tension: the Graeme Bell band's first record for commercial release. Then again, of course, one doubts that they had been drinking coffee until three in the morning, when they put down the song.



The much admired American trumpeter Max Kaminsky was present at the Roger Bell band's first recording session, creating some tension...

A more unequivocal instance of intimidated nervousness is heard on *Oh That Sign*, and I don't think we need to look far for the reason. I mentioned in the last instalment the presence of the much admired American, Max Kaminsky, on this the Roger Bell band's first recording session. The double source of tension manifests

itself on Pixie's solo when he plays himself out of key a couple of times — a singular lapse from this normally steadfast player. You can almost hear the sigh of relief as he finishes his contribution.

At another point the piano player Don Banks or the banjo player Norm Baker (the low-fi makes it hard to be sure) makes the bar 9 change on the blues a bar late, producing a sudden disorienting blue-grass effect. Clinkers are comparatively rare, however, especially for jazz of that free-blowing, pre-overdubbing period. More often the Bells and Monsbrough band seem to be blithely unembarrassed and unashamed at being what they are and where they are. The music is therefore free of tension, in its negative sense. No-one is trying to mask himself behind the music, there is no timidity about exhibiting self in whatever form.



Roger Bell: note the proliferation of original compositions by various band members on his inaugural album... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Hence, the proliferation of original compositions by various band members, and a lack of apology about their geographical situation. It comes out in song titles like *Nullabor*, *Goanna March*, *Bull Ant Blues*, *Big Walkabout*, and more subtly and interestingly in lyrics and titles drawn from the Australian vernacular: *Don't Monkey With It*, *Got The Shakes*, *Sorry To Be Leavin'*. Some of these titles have a peculiar poignancy generated by the casually concealed emotional pressure: *Tell The Boys You Saw Me*, *What's That They're Saying*. There are moving situations hinted at behind those unassuming throwaway lines, and the effect of laconic understatement has a very Australian tang.

The lack of self-consciousness is related to an ability to transcend categories. The reproachful word for this is “in-decorousness”, but an obedience to received conventions of decorum can often stifle creative opportunities. The Bell band appropriated anything that lay around when they thought out and executed their musical ideas. There's very much the jaunty air of “What the hell, give it a burl”. It shows up in the multi-instrumentalism of Ade. We may be thankful that he was undismayed by the fact that the recorder was not considered a jazz instrument; his willingness to give it a burl produced one of the most interesting records to come out

of Australia. Australian jazz has also transcended class categories. It's true that during the 40s it was often associated with an intelligentsia; it was Ade who founded the Melbourne University Rhythm Club in 1937. Notwithstanding this occasional alliance however, the people who play jazz in this country are socio-economically heterogeneous. The music and, most notably, the lyrics, have never been shaped by class interests, but by the more general situation of the country as a whole.

Australian jazz.

It's difficult to say if there is still a definable and distinct jazz idiom or spirit peculiar to this country, but that might be simply because, as in all cultural studies, we are too close to be able to see it. It has been argued that institutions like college jazz courses tend to erode that very quality which is the essence of the living music: the personality of the performer, a personality which must be strong enough to use and not be used by the abstract assumptions regarding what is "right". Perhaps that approximates the flavour of Australian jazz — an innocence of decorum, a creative shamelessness in the face of conventions.



Two trumpeters: the author of this article Bruce Johnson (left) snapped with Roger Bell in Sydney in 1978... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

This brief review of the Bell/Bell/Monsborough circle has made it clear that they were bound by minimal assumptions regarding acceptable instrumentation. As record collecting jazz musicians in the 30s and 40s, they had very little to draw on. Their minds seem not to have become confined by purist categories. They were necessarily catholic, learning from everything they heard. Subsequent jazz musicians in this country have not always been so hospitable to new ideas — modernists who disdainfully ignore earlier stages of the music; tight-lipped New Orleans purists who refuse to play any song not already done by George Lewis, Bunk Johnson et al. They fail to realize that, like the Bells and Monsborough, those New Orleans players picked up whatever was in the air. The men who produced jazz in the 40s in Melbourne (and not only there and then), enriched their music by refusing to discriminate against any jazz possibility, and likewise seemed unashamed of their own musical impulses.

“Shall I sing this one?”

“Yeah. Give it a burl.”

When musicians lose that, they lose touch with the sound of their own voices, impoverish their work at the point which is the essence of creativity. In a way the isolation of Australia in the 30s and 40s was a blessing. The musicians had to make do with what was lying around. If there is an Australian characteristic it might be that quality which happens to be central also to jazz — the ability to improvise, the untroubled conviction that we can bodgery something up. Although this is possibly the most highly urbanised population in the world, Australian jazz does, then, share something with the outback: the same refusal to be defeated by the unlikelihood of circumstances, that builds a windmill out of scrap iron, or works out a way of repairing a cracked cylinder head in the middle of nowhere.

How do you write all that down in musical terms? It's as inaccessible to notation as the quality of a wine is to chemical analysis. But just as real. Thomas Gradgrind in Dickens' *Hard Times* asked a little girl in his class to define a horse. Although her father was a horse breaker, she was unable to articulate an answer.

“‘Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!’ said Mr Gradgrind... ‘Girl possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals’.”

To point to the evasiveness of a definition of Australian jazz as proof that it doesn't exist is equally undiscerning. Much needs to be done on the subject. Australia has probably the most complete existing documentation of its history as a white settlement of any country in the world. It's absurd, then, that what I suggest is one of its most virile cultural manifestations is recorded primarily in memory and hearsay, especially when those responsible for its origins are still alive, active, and articulate. We need directed interviews with these men and women. Nearly every speculation that I've made about sources could have been resolved with a fraction more time and money. We need the publication of Jack Mitchell's updated *Australian Jazz Discography*. We need a systematic reissue programme of the 78s, some now approaching 40 years old and deteriorating. We need so much in terms of volume, but so little in terms of its accessibility.

Some people are doing or have done something about it, and they include the following, without whose assistance even this relatively casual review could not have been written: Norman Linehan, Bill Haesler, Jack Mitchell, and the second edition of *Australian Discography*, in which you can find the full details of the commercially released Australian records mentioned. Thanks to Graeme Bell, for interrupting his tour of Victoria to answer questions via telephone calls. And finally I must acknowledge the usefulness of Andrew Bisset's *Black Roots White Flowers* (1979) and Mike Williams' *The Australian Jazz Explosion* (1981).

NOTE: Bruce Johnson presented two programs, on Monday February 1 and 8, 1982, at 3 pm on Sydney's 2MBS-FM, specifically designed to supplement these articles. He illustrated the arguments advanced by playing many of the records cited, many of them either never issued, or never re-issued since their first appearance as 78s.