

JAZZ CO-ORDINATION HAS CHANGED AUSTRALIAN CULTURE

by Bruce Johnson*

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When I was invited to stand as President of the Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW in 1989, I thought of it as a compliment, but the acceptance of which would make little difference to anything. At that time I shared the widespread scepticism about the value to jazz of institutionalised infrastructures, invoking the facile bar-room cynicism in which 'street-cred' dictated that one stood back from engagement with cultural power blocs, and got on with the real business of just playing jazz. Ten years on I see things very differently. Not only is it clear that jazz should intervene to give itself a voice in the public arts consciousness, but that it can do so to outstanding effect.

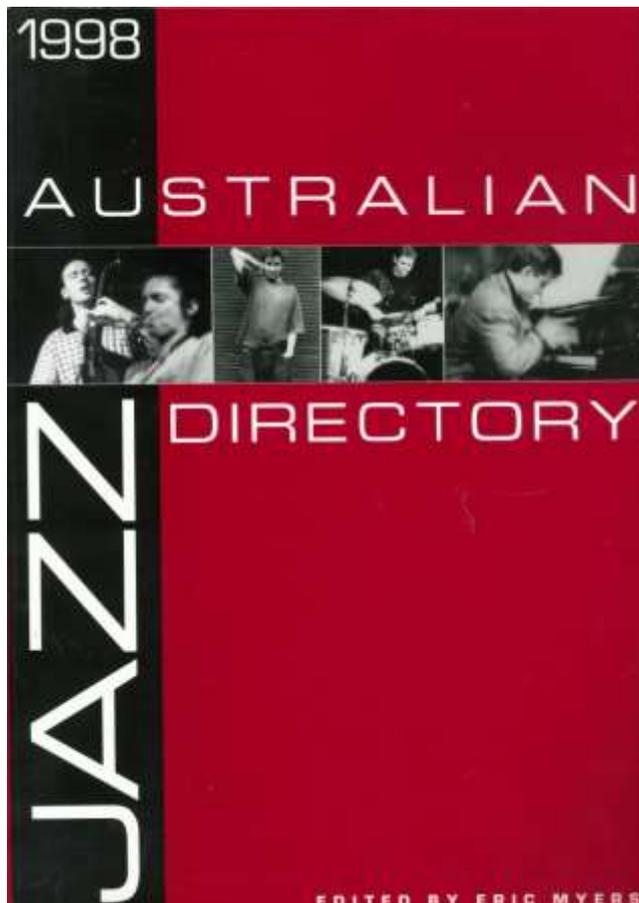
Why should jazz intervene? Simply: cultural empowerment. My increasing involvement in arts policy bodies at state and commonwealth level confirms that things we believe in don't survive just because we believe in them. They do so because people do something about it. The side that fights harder will win, right or wrong. In seeking a share of available arts funding, each music sector is understandably concerned with its own interests, and securing as much privilege as it may. Why are some music organisations so much more privileged than the jazz sector? It is not because they service more clientele, because they don't. It is not because they employ more musicians, because they don't. It is not because their music resonates most harmoniously with the condition of Australian life in the twentieth century, because it doesn't. It is not because it is 'better' music. 'Better' is not an absolute. The notion of what is 'good' music is constructed by those who have achieved cultural authority.

Other musics are privileged because they negotiate vigorously with public awareness and support bodies. Jazz will remain underprivileged while its community glories in its own exclusion. It will remain underprivileged until its members insist, with persuasive arguments and evidence, that jazz be given a place on its own terms in public debate and policy. This involves going beyond anecdotal consolations to self-critical, well-informed, historically and culturally founded arguments. Some years ago I had a discussion with a friend in the jazz community who complained that the National Jazz Co-ordinator had direct control over Australia Council funding for jazz, which was why certain sectors received nothing. I pointed out that the Jazz Co-ordinator had no such access, and there was no actual documented evidence of predispositions against one jazz sector on the part of either the Co-ordinator or the

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Australia Council. He responded by saying he didn't want to know that. This is just an extreme instance of a common victim mentality: jazz sectors suffer neglect because of a prejudice elsewhere, rather than because of its own disinclination to put some work into research and lobbying. And if there is a prejudice elsewhere, who is going to change it, if not ourselves?

And this takes me to the other premise at the beginning of this article: that we can intervene to make a difference. Having studied music and arts policies closely over the last ten years, I believe that the National Jazz Co-ordination Program has been the most decisive force in the national jazz community since the inauguration of the conservatorium education programs in the early seventies. Through *JazzChord*, the Jazz Co-ordination Association plays a significant role in researching, documenting, and publicising the significance of jazz in Australian cultural life and providing a national forum for Australian jazz. This has been enhanced by the publication of the two editions of the *Australian Jazz Directory*, incorporating comprehensive information on all aspects of Australian jazz - publications which have been applauded beyond the jazz community. The current health and vitality of the jazz



The 1998 Australian Jazz Directory: a publication which has been applauded beyond the jazz community...

community owes a great deal to the Association's continuing stimulation of muscular debate, and its encouragement of projects involving performance, audience development, education, research and promotion. Initiatives through the jazz co-ordination program, usually undertaken in co-operation with key enthusiasts in the

jazz community, have produced substantial achievements in infrastructures that are larger and more effective than individual initiatives. For example,

- * The creation of organisations such as the Sydney Improvised Music Association (SIMA), Music Now, Sydney Women In Music, the Canberra Jazz Initiative.

- * Assistance to the Jazz Co-ordination Associations in Vic, Qld and WA;

- * The inaugural Australasian Performing Right Association (APRA) award for Most Performed Australasian Jazz Work in 1985 (won by the Sydney pianist/composer/educator Judy Bailey).



*Pianist/composer/educator Judy Bailey: she won the inaugural Australasian Performing Right Association (APRA) award for Most Performed Australasian Jazz Work in 1985, after the Jazz Co-ordination Association lobbied for such an Award...
PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY*

- * Through initiatives by two of its executive committee members, the inauguration of the Midsummer Jazz in The Domain concert in 1985 in Sydney, and is now part of the annual Festival of Sydney.

- * Through initiatives by two of its executive committee members, laying the groundwork for the establishment in 1990 of the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues, now widely regarded as Australia's most important jazz festival, and the National Jazz Piano Competition (now the National Jazz Awards);

- * the formation of the lobbying body, the National Jazz Alliance, in 1993;

- * Through initiatives by two of its executive committee members, establishing in 1997 the Australian Jazz Archive within the National Film & Sound Archive, and the Australian Jazz Archive National Council;

- * Numerous initiatives in the international arena, including touring mechanisms which have established international profiles for dozens of individual musicians, and

have generally raised the overseas consciousness of the Australian contribution to the jazz tradition;

* The considerable influx of funds from the Australia Council into jazz projects throughout the 1980s (from well under \$100,000 per annum around 1980 to almost \$500,000 a decade later), which have mainly fed into performance-related projects;

* Vigorous lobbying which has increased jazz representation on policy and funding bodies, and gradually increased media coverage of the music.

There is not space in this article for an inventory of the specific outcomes of these initiatives. In terms of the overall culture of Australian jazz, however, what matters is not so much the trees as the forest. Above all, these initiatives represent the most significant institutional empowerment of jazz since its arrival in Australia 80 years ago. The Jazz Co-ordination Program has established jazz as a significant presence in Australian society and the arts. It has produced a voice which speaks with precision and measured authority on matters of policy. It has shown that jazz can develop imaginative policy programs and yet retain its integrity as a 'street' or grassroots music. It has shown that jazz can cross the 't's and dot the 'i's, keep careful books, maintain uniquely detailed databases, evolve effective business plans for performance, touring, festivals, sustain an internationally admired journal, set up the country's first genre-specific music archive, negotiate constructively with all levels of government... without compromising itself musically. It can set up organisational models which are admired and copied by other music sectors: the NSW Jazz Co-ordination Program is currently the acknowledged model for the organisation musicNSW, an infrastructure for the rock community currently being set up by the NSW Government's Ministry for the Arts.

It is not simply the way the jazz community is perceived from the outside, but also within itself. To lobby, to secure funding, to set up infrastructures, requires the articulation of strategic plans and philosophical positions. It is a tedious business, having to construct arguments for what we have always taken for granted. Through applications to the funding bodies, individual musicians are forced to define themselves and their aspirations. Through policy papers and mission statements, the Jazz Co-ordination Association has been forced to articulate the role of jazz in Australian society more comprehensively than at any time in its history. In policy meetings, I am constantly struck with how much more clearly our representatives understand our role in contemporary Australia than other music groups who have been able to coast on unexamined traditions. The developments sketched in the foregoing have stimulated intense reflection and debate within the community, requiring us to work out exactly why we do matter, revisiting, reinvigorating, reinventing ourselves as a community.

Because socio-economic and cultural contexts are constantly altering, I believe the National Jazz Co-ordination Program will continue to be essential in providing a site for the constant rejuvenation of jazz as a force in Australian music.
