

A RESPONSE TO PETER RECHNIEWSKI

by Bruce Johnson

[The following is a Letter to the Editor, published in the Spring 1983 edition of Jazz Magazine, responding to criticisms that were aired by Peter Rechniewski in his piece "The Crisis in Modern Jazz in Australia", which was published in the May/June, 1983 edition of Jazz Magazine.]

Peter Rechniewski sought me out in the Soup Plus and said he wished for me to respond to his article "The Crisis in Modern Jazz in Australia" (JAZZ, May/June 1983).

As I read it, it seemed to me that he and I could not be in closer agreement regarding the unfortunate situation of modern jazz in our culture. I noted that traditional jazz has wider appeal to Australian audiences (JAZZ, December 1982), while he spoke of middle-of-the-road jazz as having greater "popularity", more "drawing power"; the implications for modern jazz are the same in both instances. I was therefore surprised to find that Peter should speak of my own speculations in such virulent and confrontational terms as "absurd", "highly questionable" and, indeed, "false". His grievance sprang from my suggestion that, as he paraphrases me, "... trad jazz ... communicates better than modern jazz ... in Australian society". But noting the lesser popularity of modern jazz with Australian audiences, he is saying the same thing. So I have to wonder, what is his real complaint? This is unclear, partly because he misreads my own article in a number of ways. He ascribes to my anecdote involving Marty Mooney the putative status of a "proof". No. It was presented as a "demonstration", and Marty's comment as an "observation". There is a recognised and important difference and the anecdote was simply a well focussed convergence of theory and praxis. Peter also asserts that this anecdote was virtually my only evidence. Rather, it seems



The drummer Stewie Speer: he would be surprised to know that traditional jazz was the only jazz played in Australia in the Forties...

to be the only “evidence” which he chose to see, and if he chose not to see the rest the first time around, it is unlikely that he would choose to see it if I repeated it here.



Don Banks (left) here pictured with Don Burrows. Another musician who would be surprised to know that the only jazz played here in the Forties was traditional jazz...

More serious is Peter’s misreading of verifiable facts. Whatever his argument is, he makes it clear that its cornerstone, “the single most important factor”, is that “traditional jazz was the only jazz played here for close on ten years”. Which ten years was that? The Forties, which was the period in connection with which he made that comment? It will come as a shock to scores of dedicated musicians, like Wally Norman, Charlie Munro, Billy Weston, Ron Falson, Charlie Blott, Stewie Speer, Splinter Reeves, Don Banks, Eddie Oxley, Bruce Clarke, the Ralph Mallen Big Band in Sydney, the 18 piece Freddy Thomas Big Band in Melbourne. In fact, the number of musicians playing traditional jazz in the Forties in Australia was a tiny minority of the music population. Read the basic literature on the subject and talk to those who were on the scene. This assertion, which Peter himself presents as his most important one, apart from being disrespectful to a generation of musicians, has no foundation at all. So where does that leave his argument?

I am afraid it leaves it *ad hominem*. The real issue for him seems to be a personal one. He speaks darkly of me being “involved directly with traditional jazz” as though this disqualifies me from liking or understanding modern jazz. In principle the *ad hominem* tactic is logically dubious. But if you want to play on those terms you must know your man. The picture of me as a mouldy fygge gleefully sticking pins into an effigy of modern jazz is contested at every possible level. In my article itself I said, “Anyone who thinks the basic thesis from which I begin is a way of scoring points for traditional jazz at the expense of modern, is simply reading his own prejudices into the matter.” Apart from that article, what does Peter know of me to support the image? Most of my reviews for JAZZ Magazine have been of modern jazz,



Charlie Munro: another musician who would be shocked that the only jazz played here in the Forties was traditional jazz...

including what I called “the record of the year” (May/June 1983). Most bewildering to me is the fact that the only contact Peter had with me up until the appearance of his article arose from his request for help in organising the recording of some modern jazz performances he was helping to arrange, a request with which I immediately and enthusiastically complied. As with my article, he has chosen to misread me. On radio, in print, and according to my slender talents as a musician, my involvement is quite visibly with a wide range of the music. The other necessary precaution before taking on the person rather than the issue, is, look to your own credentials. There are established procedures in Cultural Studies, of which Peter seems ignorant. To speak of a speculation as “false”, for example, is glibly to confuse scientific criteria with those appropriate to the Humanities. If we wish to have discussion of jazz, like the music itself, taken more seriously than pub philosophy, we should try to become acquainted with the disciplines of, for example, Aesthetics.

Overall, I ask myself why he really wishes to achieve with what he himself concedes in conversation as his acerbity. Looking at the spirit of both articles, I feel what must be remembered is that when it comes to modern jazz, Peter and I agree. No good will be done for jazz if that is allowed to count for less than any grievance he may harbour.