

JOHN SANGSTER: AN IMPROMPTU RESPONSE TO HIS DEATH

by Bruce Johnson

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John Grant Sangster was born on November 17, 1928 in Melbourne and died of liver cancer on October 26, 1995 in Brisbane, aged 66.

On October 27, 1995 I tape recorded the monthly broadcast *Home Cooking*, to go to air the next day on 2MBS-FM. The series is devoted to special features on Australian jazz and this one was devoted to the part played by the music in the representation of national identity. The programme opened and closed with the work of Dave Dallwitz and John Sangster respectively. I described them as leading figures in the articulation of the Australian experience through jazz composition and performance.

I said: “We could not conclude this survey of jazz and the sense of Australianness without reference to John Sangster. With Dave Dallwitz he has probably been most prolific in the exploration of Australia with a musical map. Dallwitz is a more visually attuned composer. You feel that it is what he sees that feeds into what he writes. Sangster is pre-eminently attuned to sounds. His incidental music for Harry Butler’s television series *In The Wild* gave a powerful sense of the way sounds etch themselves on the massive silence of the Australian outback.”



John Sangster (left) with musicians in the recording studio (L-R) Don Burrows, Col Loughnan, Errol Buddle & Roy Ainsworth... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

I finished the programme with a section of Sangster's recording of *Conjur-Man**. I had to fade it out on the hour, but when I stopped the digital recorder, I put the stylus back to the beginning of the track (recorded on vinyl in 1960 - never reissued), and sat in the production studio to listen to the whole twelve and a half minutes. I reflected on just how extraordinary was Sangster's contribution to Australian music. I returned from the studio to my office, where a message on my answering machine from Eric Myers informed me that Sangster had died the night before.



Sangster, as a young man, on the drums...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

I believe that he leaves a body of work unrivalled in Australian jazz. In terms of tonal palette, originality, stylistic and emotional range, the creative attention he applied to the question of how to realise lived experience in musical terms, and the sheer quantity of work he produced is comparable to Duke Ellington. Like Ellington, he relished the sound of sound. Like Ellington, he grasped that without silence, sound means nothing. Like Ellington, he grounded his music in the specific character of his musicians, and the physical circumstances out of which music arises, the grain set up as the body encounters the instrument. The story is told of him leading a recording session during which, in a flugelhorn passage, there was a slight gurgling effect which is often caused by the build-up of condensed moisture. The recording engineer suggested that section should be recorded again. "My dear boy," said Sangster. "Leave it in. It is the sound of a human being playing an instrument."

** There has recently been some question raised as to who composed Conjur-Man, although it is attributed to Sangster on the recording. Without getting into that debate, we can certainly affirm that this 'arrangement' of the piece bears the clear imprint of Sangster's way of organising music and collaborating with musicians.*



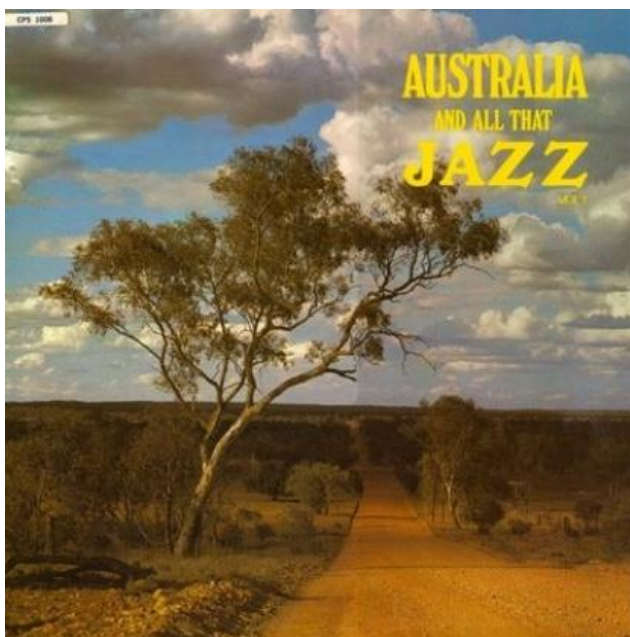
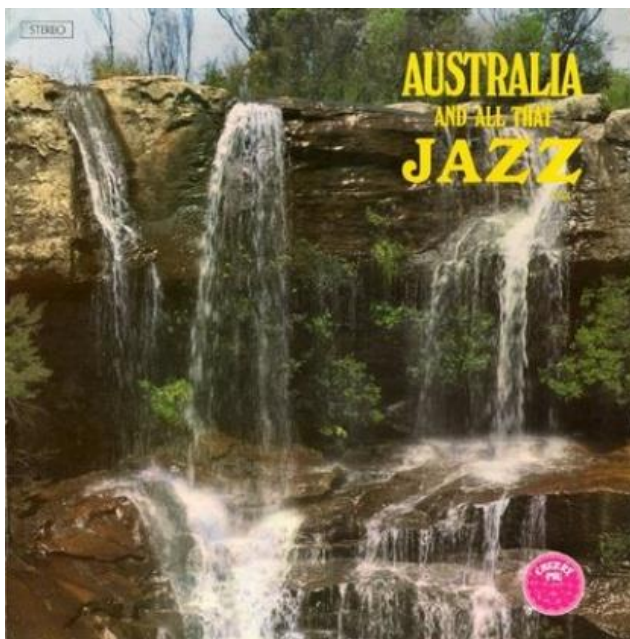
Sangster, in his early years once again, playing the vibes... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Sangster's respect for the physicality of music, the fact that it is before anything else, an acoustic phenomenon, a sensuous experience in the ear, gave him the most generous conception of its sources and resources. If music is sound, then all sound is potentially music.

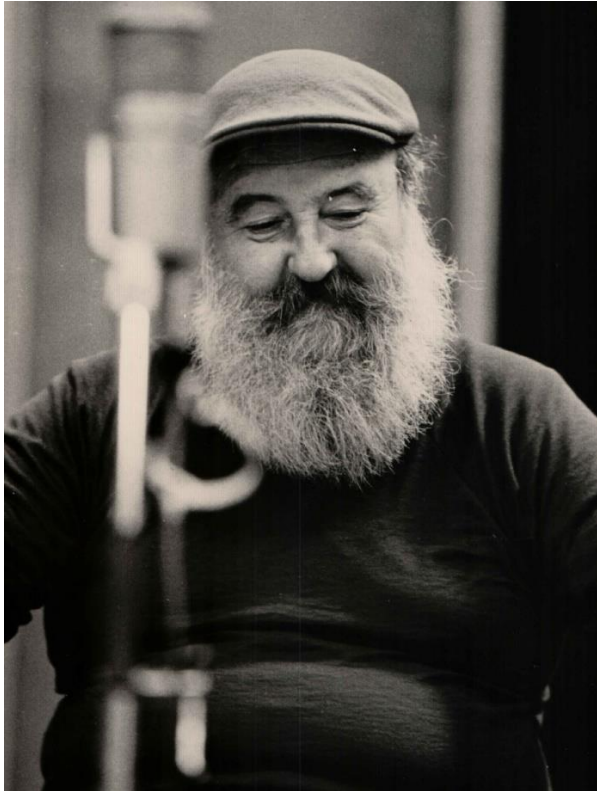


John Sangster conducting in performance: the bassist Chris Qua is just in the frame on the right... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

In his evocations of the Australian landscape on such recordings as *Australia And All That Jazz*, the boundary between formal musical organisation and the natural acoustic landscape is so fragile that it frequently vanishes. Much of his work is sound collage, instruments swirling around enigmatic tinklings, *sons trouvés* like animal noises, objects being scraped or struck, the resonances of nature, gradually precipitating into structures that would be conventionally regarded as music. Any attempt to form an appreciation of Sangster's power as a musician and composer by way of traditional musicological analysis would therefore be foredoomed. In a musical field so frequently regarded as trite and trivial, Sangster was an experimenter on a far more ambitious scale than almost any of our 'high art composers', and (though I suppose this is just a personal view), far more effective in expressive terms. Again, I believe this was because his approach was never cerebral, but rooted in a love of sound textures, of the feel of sounds before their meanings in some abstract musical logic.



Sangster's breadth also placed him at the centre of a wider range of jazz activities than any other musician. As a drummer with Graeme Bell's traditional groups, he was a significant participant in the movement out of which the 'Australian sound' most distinctively emerged. As a trumpeter he achieved what Max Collie once described to me as the most intense style he had ever heard from an Australian on that instrument. Surviving tapes and acetates do nothing to contradict this assessment. The shame is that he was so sparsely recorded on that instrument and it is hoped that a CD will be produced that enables greater recognition to be given to his work as a trumpeter.



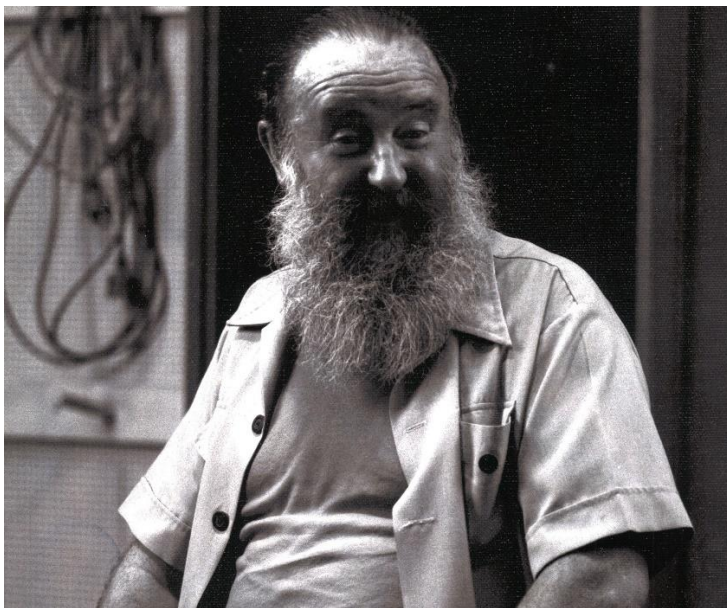
Sangster has left arguably the most monumental and distinctive achievement of any Australian composer and musician... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

As a percussionist and from his eyrie above the El Rocco, Sangster presided over some of the most fruitful and original experimentation in the history of Australian jazz. I don't know of any musician, anywhere in the world, who was so deeply convincing across such a wide range of styles, from the absolute rightness of his tributes to Bix Beiderbecke to the rolling thunder of the free form epics on the *Lord Of The Rings* suite. There seemed to be no musician he could not work with, and in performance he could give as much authority to fun as to the heroic gesture. I think this was because it was all equally important to John. The being-here, no matter what we are doing.

It all came together in that massive project based on *Lord Of The Rings*, a six album *oeuvre* which spilled over into other fragments like *The Hobbit Suite* and the *Middle Earth* albums. I doubt that this epic narrative has been matched by any other project in Australian music, and rarely if ever by any other jazz project in the world. The work is a summary of the whole man.



*From his eyrie above the El Rocco, Sangster presided over some of the most fruitful and original experimentation in the history of Australian jazz. He is pictured here, in the El Rocco (left) with pianist Judy Bailey (centre) and drummer Derek Fairbrass (right)...
PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY*



Sangster could not have produced the range of work he did if he had not been an ambiguity... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

John often projected himself as something of a Hobbit, and people picked up the endearing side of that image. But the Hobbits were part of a deeply ambiguous universe in which perversity, mischief, rage, were also part of the fabric of experience. Sangster could not have produced the range of work he did if he had not been an ambiguity, and it is important to remember that artists and saints are not the same. *Lord Of The Rings* is as much about the terror of life as anything else. Those close to Sangster know that the demonic spirit ran deeply, and often dangerously in him. If it had not, he would have left a legacy of muzak, not music. What he has left is arguably the most monumental and distinctive achievement of any Australian composer and musician.