THE EL ROCCO: AN ERA IN SYDNEY JAZZ

by Bruce Johnson*

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At the top of William Street the last block on your left as you enter the Cross is an apartment building which, in the fifties, also had a room below street level, functioning somewhat listlessly as a plumber's workshop and boiler room. When the owners decided to turn it into a more profitable space, the combination of its situation (on the edge of Sydney's bohemian quarter), and the times (known retrospectively as the Beat Generation), made their decision relatively easy. Fashionable intellectual rebellion in the late fifties found its social forum in the Coffee Lounge. Cappuccino, hinting at a weathered, cosmopolitan refinement, was *de rigueur*, frothing the moustaches of the duffel-coated non-conformists declaiming against the spiritless materialism of the… and so on. And no coffee lounge worth its expresso was above ground level.

The El Rocco: cappuccino, hinting at a weathered, cosmopolitan refinement, was de rigueur…

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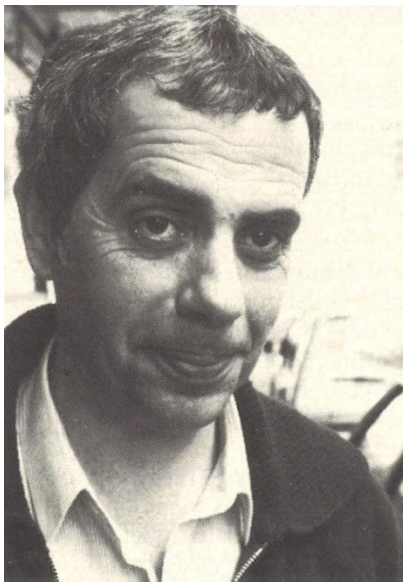
Thus, inevitably, was the space visualised. It needed to be enlarged, which entailed quarrying out several tons of sandstone, a back-breaking business which impressed itself so strongly upon those involved that it occupied their thoughts when the matter of a name came up. It seemed appropriate to call the new establishment The Rock. But, consciously or not, a sense of humour must have intervened, subverting the bohemian fondness for the exotic by caricaturing it. Instead of The Rock, the new coffee lounge became El Rocco. It opened in 1955, its entrance in Brougham Street, and maintained an unremarkable existence for a couple of years. It served food and coffee to the art students, writers, musicians and flaneurs who lived in or hung about the area. Perhaps occasionally guitars were strummed, as they were wont to be at such times and in such places. Or bongoes struck. There was always somebody with a set of bongoes at parties in those days. But nothing remarkable.

Ironically, it was what later became a pre-eminent token of despised materialism that turned the El Rocco into an authentic incubator of creativity: a television set. TV was then, however, a novelty, and not a national opiate. The manager of the coffee lounge was Arthur James, a young student and son of the owner of the premises. He installed a TV at a time when very few households could afford this entertainment innovation, and custom swelled. But in those early days of the medium there was a dearth of material. At an hour which was disgustingly early for a bohemian set, the stations closed down. There, suddenly, at about 10 pm, was a mute and static test pattern. And nothing to do. At least one person spotted an opportunity in this. Drummer Ralph Stock had just returned from working in Noumea. He had no particular musical commitments and used to drop into the El Rocco. It was he who suggested to Arthur James that a jazz group might be suitable on Sunday nights after the TV closed down. At that time there was nothing like the amount of live jazz available in Sydney as there is now: a few pubs, the Ironworkers, perhaps the occasional club or restaurant. Most of the music was in the traditional idiom. But there was no lack of musicians, as the El Rocco itself would demonstrate over the next twelve years.



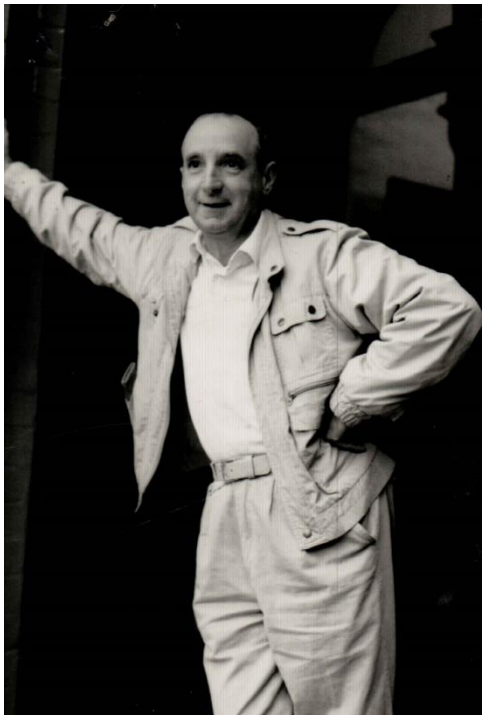
El Rocco manager Arthur James in 1982: a young student and son of the owner of the premises…PHOTO CREDIT BRUCE JOHNSON

With the agreement of James, Ralph Stock recruited musicians from a group working at the Arabian Coffee Lounge in the Cross, not far from the Taboo. Its leader was Ken Morrow, today a pianist, but in those days playing mainly accordion. He recalls the rest of the band as being Wally Ledwidge on guitar, Jack Craber (bass), and Joe Lane (drums). With Stock replacing Lane they began on Sunday nights at the El Rocco in October 1957 as the Ken Morrow Quartet. They were writing the first page of one of the most important chapters in

the history of Australian jazz. After the first few weeks the crowds began to pick up, and in time the turning off of the TV gradually came to be perceived by an increasing number of patrons as the beginning and not the end of the evening's entertainment. Musicians began to drop by for a sit in, Don Burrows among the earliest, as well as two visiting American trumpet players who were touring with a music/comedy routine. Although Ken remembers those first few months as a succession of "happy nights", when the Arabian made a new offer after about four months he took it, feeling that the kind of work his group was doing was more suited to its original venue. Ralph Stock remained for some time, surrounded by a changing personnel that included at various times Don Burrows, pianist Nigel Rolphe and perhaps bassist George Thompson, who in any case certainly played there in the sixties with John Sangster.

Don Burrows was among the earliest to drop by the El Rocco for a sit in…

The success of the Sunday night sessions encouraged Arthur James to present jazz on other nights. An early, if not the first, band to come in on Saturdays was the Warren Leroy Trio. Basically self taught, Leroy had started out at Sydney High School with Dave Levy and Albert Lander, later a classical musician. They played boogie woogie piano trio numbers to entertain classmates. Leroy became addicted to Errol Garner and developed into the closest thing to Garner that his bass player, Tony Buckley, remembers hearing up to that time. Buckley and Leroy expanded their sphere of operations from the Mocambo to include the El Rocco on Saturday nights. They used a drummer whose name may have been Laurie Watkins, but in any case, as was to become the pattern, personnel changes were common. Leroy liked to keep the band down to a trio in order to be free of the musical and visual distractions of a front line. He subsequently became an architect and moved to England where, by the account of Dave Levy who spoke to him there, he gave up playing. His popularity in the earliest days of the El Rocco, however, gave further impetus to the jazz policy which, at about the same time, was also extended to Friday nights.



Dave Levy: when he first began frequenting the El Rocco it was still just one night a week of jazz …

When Dave Levy first began frequenting the El Rocco it was still just one night a week of jazz — Ralph Stock on Sundays. Levy was at that time part of a younger up-and-coming generation of musicians that included men like Bernie McGann, Ray Warleigh and John Pochée. He had been hearing Dixieland in the occasional pubs and at the Ironworkers Hall, and was himself basically a boogie pianist. At about the same time he and his friends began jamming at the Mocambo in Newtown, they heard about the jazz night at the El Rocco. At this time Stock was using a variety of pianists, including Nigel Rolphe, Beetles Young and David May. The young musicians went along, to be staggered by Burrows who was often playing baritone in the wake of the famous Gerry Mulligan records, and by the legendary Frank Smith. "I've never heard anybody play better than him," recalls Levy. Smith was one of the 'older' generation — "We were nineteen, and they were all of twenty-six or twenty-eight", and slight though the gap might appear to be from a distance, it was palpable then in that particular musical climate. In fact the difference between the two generations of jazz musicians was to play a significant part in defining the musical history of the El Rocco, and of modern jazz in Sydney generally.

The first time Dave Levy played in the El Rocco constituted a leap across that small generation gap, and the traumatic circumstances prefigured certain aspects of his later association with the place. One night the pianist Nigel Rolphe became ill on the bandstand and disappeared upstairs to recover. A call went out for a piano player but no- one was game to join the gods on stage. In the meantime Rolphe had told whomever was ministering to him that there was a young bloke downstairs, David Levy, who could play the piano and could sub for him. Manhandled to the piano stool, Levy then spent a couple of agonising hours trying to cope with a situation for which he was scarcely prepared. His grounding was in the basic blues structures of boogie:

And I'd learned about half of Tea for Two, without really knowing how the chords moved or what they did. I had a couple of sounds… I'd been in National Service at that time and I met up with Bobby Madden… And Bob showed me some modern chords, like he showed me my first major seventh. And he went: C major seventh, D minor seventh, E minor seventh,

and then E Flat minor seventh. And I nearly shit myself. At last I was on the road. I mean, I'd heard George Shearing play that! I had no idea ... I could do that in about three keys. And everything else I did was what I thought Dave Brubeck was doing. It was pretty raw.

The humour that colours Dave's recollections of that first night tends to blunt the shock, which must have been considerable and complex. Whatever Rolphe was suffering upstairs, it couldn't have been much more painful than Levy's baptism with the Big Boys on the stand.

I spent the most frightening and miserable couple of hours ... There I had Don Burrows and whoever else was there shouting out chords at me all the way through tunes. And I didn't know what a chord was. You know. . . (singing) 'It's very clear.. . G SEVENTH!' And I'd think, er, what's that?

But the ordeal was also a stimulant, a moment to come back to and overcome. He, John Pochée, Bernie McGann and bass player Dick Barnes worked at the music, jamming at the Mocambo and taking the occasional old time dance. In early or mid 1958 this quartet kicked off the Friday night sessions.

During the next few years Levy led or played with various groups on different nights at the El Rocco. His relationship with Arthur James was not always harmonious, although he remembers that as being as much the result of a youthful aggressive tactlessness on his own part as anything else. Always alert to new possibilities in jazz, he appreciated and participated in some of the more avant-garde experiments in the music. His trio was one of the first to present poetry coloured by jazz accompaniment — pieces like *The Last Bomb* and *Requiem For A Lost World*. He was responsive to the early work in the free jazz idiom of people like Bob Gillett, a name that will reappear, and worked in that style with the Lyn Christie Trio in the early sixties.

The bassist Lyn Christie: a key figure throughout the history of the El Rocco...
PHOTOCOURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Generally the history of the El Rocco is, except for the music, relatively tranquil. But whenever trouble did strike, Levy seemed to be the lightning conductor. Apart from his first night substituting for Nigel Rolphe, his time there was punctuated with incidents. It was his

group playing the night that some unimaginative practical joker lobbed a smoke bomb down the steps. The smoke seemed to confuse not only the patrons but also the air conditioning system which, unable to cope, recirculated it into the small coffee lounge. The musicians played on while the stampede of customers made its way up the stairs, and then made their own hasty departure. As Dave recalls it, it had always been a narrow stairway, but never quite so narrow as it appeared to be that night.

Perhaps more psychologically damaging, Levy was to become the most prominent victim of the only drug raid connected with the El Rocco. All his recollections were told with enormous and generally self-deprecating humour, no traces of self pity or self importance. But it doesn't need much imagination to understand that this must at that time have been a particularly painful experience. Marijuana today has gone through the chic stage, to become almost passe. It is necessary to remember that in the neurotically WASP mentality of 1962 it was perceived as anarchistic, subversive, an ultimate in bohemian depravity. Of course, for many, including some musicians, it has long been regarded as an occasional and less debilitating alternative to the legal drugs, tobacco and alcohol, and is indulged in without any consciousness of seditiousness or evil. This innocence of spirit makes the retributive humourlessness of the Law that much more difficult to cope with.

Dave had been having a taste during a rehearsal (not in the El Rocco, but on private premises), when the police had walked in and booked him. For this antisocial behaviour he was thrown into Long Bay and had his name on the front page of the Herald under the sinister character of "Drug Addict and Musician". That was not the end of it. Presumably to ensure that this dangerous criminal had been rehabilitated, the police decided to follow up a little later, and where better than in a hotbed of bohemianism like the El Rocco:

We were playing a set, and I was just about to reach over the microphone to say thanks for the applause, because the room was dead silent, and to announce the next tune. And there was this tap on my shoulder. It was Detective Sgt Abbott, as he was then... and he said, "Now, you'll take a short break now David", and we looked around, and right round the entire walls of the El Rocco was like something out of one of those Bond movies — these D's lined up every three feet. And they got us in the back room and we virtually had to strip down. Nothing found of course.

The fact was that, essentially, the El Rocco was straight. It didn't even have a license, and this prohibition was generally observed with the inevitable exception of the bottle in the instrument case. In any event, if you wanted a drink, the nearest pub was so close that, in John Edgecombe's words, you could spit into the saloon bar from the door of the El Rocco. It simply wasn't a place to which people went to get drunk or high. It was a place to hear music. The police raid was misplaced. Although Dave didn't use it, the word 'victimisation' seems appropriate. In any event, it was one of the incidents which helped to trigger his departure from the El Rocco, and something like a breakdown. But time and a larger perspective have ameliorated the memory. Levy now recalls the years in the El Rocco as one of the most important periods in his life. As far as he is concerned, it is where he learned to play jazz.

The three nights a week jazz policy at the El Rocco, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, remained stable for a couple of years. But within that general format there was flux. The tendency was towards an increasingly modern idiom. The development of the Sunday night sessions makes the point. Following the return of Ken Morrow and his colleagues to the Arabian, various musicians joined Ralph Stock. Don Burrows came in early; Terry Wilkinson and Freddy Logan are two others whom Arthur James remembers from the Sunday nights of that period. Ralph Stock, to whom belongs the credit for introducing jazz to the El Rocco, moved on. He was replaced ultimately if not directly by Ron Webber. In turn, this band modulated into another. Burrows became involved with the Sky Lounge which ran on Sunday nights, and on

At the Sky Lounge: L-R, Don Burrows (clarinet), Dave Rutledge (tenor sax), Freddie Logan (bass), Terry Wilkinson (piano). Obscured is probably Ron Weber (drums). The music there was for dancing… *PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE*

occasions, afternoons, for eight years. The music in the Sky Lounge was for dancing, and while this did not mean that the band was required to play anything less than jazz, it did create a demand for an insistent continuity and stability of rhythm that the more advanced forms would perhaps only wish to imply, if not dispense with altogether. At some point following Burrows' departure the Ron Falson Quartet took over. Arthur James's recollection of the personnel is: Falson, trumpet; David May, piano; Frank Smith, alto; and Cyril Bevan, drums.

Bevan, an Englishman, had arrived in Australia with Winifred Atwell, and immediately established for himself a reputation as a highly developed and subtle technician. Frank Smith remains in memory as one of the first Titans of Australian modern jazz. A musician of exacting standards, highly aware of the directions in which jazz was moving, yet generous with advice to young players whose commitment was evidently sincere; he is remembered as possibly the most advanced of what in the context of the El Rocco was the 'older' generation. He remained receptive to the kinds of innovation that alienated many of his contemporaries. Smith deserves a chapter, if not a book, in the history of Australian jazz. Readers are referred to Andrew Bisset's *Black Roots White Flowers* for a fuller treatment of his contribution to the music.

Such was his spirit and his influence that it is probably no accident that his association with the El Rocco seems to have more or less coincided with a period of bold musical experimentation. While it is absurd to suggest that Smith was directly responsible for the arrival of musicians like Mike Nock, it is probably true that his generous and open-minded musical attitude, together with the respect in which he was held, helped to create an atmosphere hospitable to the more advanced thinking of the younger musicians of the period. It also helped that Bryce Rohde had returned to Australia from the States in 1958. He brought with him the freshest kind of experience, wedded to a sharp and inquisitive musical intelligence. He was one of the pioneers in this country of the Lydian concept of

The legendary Frank Smith (left), pictured here with the trumpeter Ron Falson. Smith was a musician of exacting standards, highly aware of the directions in which jazz was moving … PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

improvisation made famous by George Russell's book, though George Golla remembers that Rohde's experimentation with the method preceded the appearance in Australia of Russell's work. In 1959 Rohde formed a quartet under his own name and began a highly successful association with the El Rocco, which developed a five-nights-a-week jazz policy to accommodate the group.

The pianist Bryce Rohde (in foreground) in 1962, with Bruce Cale on bass, and (possibly) Mark Bowden on drums: Rohde returned to Australia from the States in 1958 …

As far as the musical sociometric of the El Rocco was concerned however, an even more transforming influence was imminent. From New Zealand would shortly arrive a musician through whom the slightly uncomfortable, sometimes abrasive, relationship between the Old Guard and the Young Turks would enter a new phase that would in turn help to define the character and influence of the El Rocco as a jazz venue.

By 1959, what had started four years earlier as just another coffee lounge, had become a unique fixture. The El Rocco was now the non-pareil venue for the country's most advanced jazz, conceptually and technically. And yet it was, overall, massively popular without compromising the music, a circumstance which has scarcely been repeated in respect of avant-garde jazz on the same scale. It was operating five nights a week. This meant that the lean times could be carried by the fat. Although there were occasions when there were more people on the bandstand than at the glass topped wooden tables, these could be carried by the other nights when, not only would the place be full, but a queue stretched up the stairs, down Brougham Street, into William, and up into Darlinghurst Road. The clientele was as heterogeneous as white middle class Sydney could produce. At the core were the jazz enthusiasts, including of course musicians, intelligent and knowledgeable, and just about as quick to spot bullshit and compromise as the people on the bandstand. The music had to be honest in its intentions. There would be Cross people, but also outlanders from 'straight' society: professionals and academics, TV and film people with an interest in music as an element of visual theatre. The El Rocco and its musicians had become, in their way, trendsetters, attracting celebrities and people simply wishing to be seen there. At least one apprentice socialite worked there as a waitress because it made her visible.

Within the somewhat nebulous category 'Modern Jazz', the same diversity was apparent among the musicians and their styles. Ralph Stock had come from a Dixieland background, though he played in a more mainstream idiom at the El Rocco. Bop in all its manifestations from East Coast to West Coast could be heard, along with, at various times, the most avant-garde experiments in free form and modal jazz. Some of the permutations of personnel were never repeated elsewhere. It was the only place that Dave Levy and Don Burrows played on the same stand, or Dave Levy with Tony Buckley, or ... The mobility of personnel makes it extraordinarily difficult to reconstruct the twelve year history of the place, but it was also this characteristic which helped to ensure the continuing vitality of the music. No particular combination of musicians ever really had the chance to become stale. Pluralism can have a price (but it is an acceptable one): factionalism. Inevitably from time to time a form of tribal rivalry would surface — Brubeck versus Garner, bop versus free form. It seems never to have threatened the fundamental energy of the El Rocco and its music however; indeed, it is likely that loyalty to this or that jazz cause brought with it a latent competitiveness that gave sinew to the music.

The most fundamental line of demarcation seems to have been drawn between two generations of modern musicians of the period. Only a matter of ten years or so separated them, but in terms of the rate of stylistic development of jazz, that's a long time. At first the younger men simply came to listen to and idolize the senior players. As the former developed, however, their youthful resilience and flexibility sometimes enabled them to assimilate increasingly advanced musical ideas, and of course they became impatient to try their wings, for better, or worse. Dave Levy, John Pochée, and Bernie McGann put the first young feet in the door on the Friday nights.

Although the two generations were both represented on various nights as the El Rocco took off, many people remember that, at least for the first few years, there wasn't a lot of interchange across the gap. The older musicians tended to book one another, to mingle among themselves. It's not necessarily a question of hostility: when you put a band together, the first thing you think of is the people you already know you can work with. But that manifestation of habit was probably underlined by other considerations as well. In time,

every professional group becomes a little distrustful of the unfamiliar notions and techniques handled with such insolent facility by the next generation. And in a period when there wasn't all that much work about, a man held on to his position a little more jealously in the face of innovation. At the same time, without losing respect for the seasoned veterans of the music, the younger men soon want to stretch out for themselves.

Even so, there were those among the older musicians who possessed the flexibility of mind which enabled them to see the possibilities in the later developments of the music, and who understood that these possibilities were most frequently being realized by young men and women who had fewer established musical habits to obstruct their vision of the new. Frank Smith and Dutch bassist Freddie Logan were such. But for all that there remained for some years a gap across which the two 'waves' of musicians eyed each other more or less amicably, if warily. Gradually, however, scouting patrols were made across this no-man's-land. Cyril Bevan was followed on the Sunday nights by Colin Bailey, a drummer who was so universally respected that he became a common denominator of taste. Bryce Rohde's return also narrowed the distance: here was a man who was simultaneously advanced enough to excite the unqualified admiration of many of the young experimenters, and whose credentials were sound and longstanding enough to offset any suspicion of immature ratbaggery.

Two of the 'older' men who certainly had ears big enough to hear the future were English tenor player Keith Barr and American altoist Bob Gillett. In fact it was through the work of Gillett that the El Rocco became the first place in Sydney to feature free jazz, and jazz as a complement to poetry. Gillett was a pioneer in a number of ways. He was familiar with modal theory before Bryce Rohde returned to Australia, and as a technician, was as impressive in his own way as Frank Smith was in his. Dave Levy believed that Smith and Gillett were secretly overawed by each other's prowess, and listed these two, with the late Rolph Pommer, as the giants of early modern saxophone in Australia. Although some of his contemporaries scorned his experiments, Gillett's forward thinking inevitably attracted the

The bassist Bruce Cale in 1968 : part of a trio with Dave Levy and John Pochée, playing free jazz…

younger musicians — 'The single most advanced played in Australia', was Levy's assessment — and his influence on their thinking was considerable. Unfortunately it could also be inhibiting. He was a domineering character, assuming the intellectual posture of a dictatorial guru. The vehemence of his opinions tended to offset his potential value as a teacher.

Nonetheless, history should record that it was Gillett who introduced free form jazz into Sydney, and that he did so at the El Rocco.

The 3-Out Trio in 1960, L-R, Mike Nock, Freddie Logan, Chris Karan…

At about the same time Dave Levy was making the same sort of experiments. He had been listening to John Cage, Indian music, and to Gillett himself, and was playing free jazz with a trio made up of himself, John Pochée and Bruce Cale, then a little later with Lyn Christie's group. Like Gillett, these younger musicians were habituated to the newer sounds; so much so that, when the first Ornette Coleman records began to show up in Sydney, they found them quite unmystifying and accessible.

Gillett left Australia for New Zealand, but before he did so he was indirectly responsible for initiating another significant phase in the history of the El Rocco. He put together a quintet which included Chris Karan and Freddie Logan, and which introduced to Australia a young pianist who had just arrived from New Zealand, Mike Nock. It was the arrival of Mike Nock that probably did most to make the lines of demarcation visible and, by so doing, prompt people to cross them. As long as a division continues to be more or less latent we can pretend that it doesn't exist and therefore do nothing to heal it.

In retrospect Arthur James perceives Nock's advent as the beginning of a new period in the history of the El Rocco. He made an enormous impact — 'sensational' was Dave Levy's word — playing a type of jazz that took the music beyond its former limits. He began with a quintet of the younger men, playing two or three nights at the El Rocco. His drawing power was immense, and a lot of the hitherto rather aloof older musicians began to sit up and take notice. Arthur James persuaded Don Burrows to let Nock sit in with his band, and while this caused a certain amount of resentment among some musicians, it was seen by others as a gesture of considerable symbolic importance. Freddie Logan was one of the first of the senior men to recognize and acknowledge Nock's potential, and in fact was so convinced by what he heard that he gave up all other music to concentrate on working with the young New

Zealander. He formed a trio with himself, Nock and Colin Bailey. Because of heavy commitments however Bailey had to drop out, and was replaced by Chris Karan. This became the 3-Out Trio, one of the most successful and significant musical ventures to come

The 3-Out Trio: one of the most successful and significant musical ventures to come out of the El Rocco. This photo appeared on the cover of their Move LP…

out of the El Rocco. They performed to great acclaim at the 1960 Jazz Festival and, to give them an unheard of four shows a week at the El Rocco, Arthur James extended the jazz to six nights. Even today there is no venue in Sydney which can boast a policy like that, involving such a proportionately large dose of one band playing jazz at or close to the limits of the music's development. This was an extremely bold venture.

The 3-Out Trio finally became so popular that it caught the eye of promoter Lee Gordon. He lured them away with more money than the El Rocco could match, and had them working in a strip club between the acts. What with the inattentive drunks, the starring attractions or distractions, and the yelling, the price was not after all high enough. Nock was playing jazz, not strip music. The Trio returned to the El Rocco where, at however low the financial reward, they could enjoy the more substantial gratification of playing what they wanted to an attuned audience. They made two records with guests including, significantly, musicians from both sides of the now diminishing generation gap. They continued at the El Rocco until departing for Europe.

Mike Nock left behind an influence which persists to this day. Bob Gebert and Dave Levy were just two of the pianists who were profoundly affected by his work, but apart from his specific instrumental significance, he also did a great deal to open the way for more advanced jazz concepts. The younger men had been attempting to define a more advanced approach to the music. Nock gave focus to that attempt. But he also gave it the kind of authority that was necessary before many of the established generation would take it seriously. Not that it was all beer and skittles from then on.

When Mike Nock vacated his four nights a week, he was replaced by a trio of kindred spirits, Dave Levy, Rick Laird and Barry Woods. It lasted one week, before being replaced itself by a group with a more accessible style. Clearly, for the moment anyway, if it wasn't visibly Mike

Nock doing it, then it wasn't audible. But that's not the first or last time that people haven't been able to hear past the name of the musician.

Mike Nock (piano) with Freddie Logan (bass) and Chris Karan (drums), performing at Lee Gordon's club Le Primitivo. Arthur James perceives Nock's advent as the beginning of a new period in the history of the El Rocco….

By the early sixties the El Rocco had already presented such a consistently high standard of modern jazz, involving virtually every major name in Sydney, as to make it the most famous jazz venue in Australia. From time to time it featured in the local press (and not in an invidious way), in such establishment journals as *Women's Weekly* and *Woman's Day*, and was the subject of an article in *Music Maker* for September 1963. It was in demand for fashion parades and was used as an audition studio by outside interests — Frank Ifield was one of many singers to be 'discovered' in this way. Manager Arthur James became the subject of a television special (of which more later), and the Jazz Cellar, as it was also known, inspired at least one imitation, The Cellar in Adelaide.

Many of the country's leading entertainers in the non-jazz field were to be seen at various times in its audience — Diana Trask, Barry Crocker, Peter Allen, Helen Reddy — and sometimes performing with the band. The fame of the El Rocco extended beyond Australia, largely by virtue of that international grapevine that makes jazz musicians part of a global community. Many of the most eminent 'graduates' of the El Rocco took up residence in other countries and spread the word. Bryce Rohde, Ray Warleigh, bass players Barry Dillon and Rick Laird, are just a few of the musicians who have settled or visited elsewhere, and whose reputations have made their recollections of the El Rocco worth heeding.

As a consequence, overseas jazz people knew to head for Brougham Street if they wanted to hear the best modern jazz Australia had to offer, or if they simply wanted to locate a musician they'd heard about. A list of such visitors, many of whom were pleased to sit in with whatever band happened to be playing, includes people at the top of the profession. Col

The bassist Rick Laird was one eminent 'graduate' of the El Rocco who took up residence in other countries and spread the word. Here he is (left) pictured on the roof of El Rocco, circa 1961, with Judy Bailey and the drummer Jim Shaw…PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

Nolan recalls Nancy Wilson singing duets with Lou Rawls. There is a newspaper photograph of Dizzy Gillespie playing in the El Rocco. Others who have visited, and in many cases, sat in, include Percy Heath, Milt Jackson, Gene McDaniels, Dave Brubeck (the whole quartet), Arnold Ross, members of the George Shearing Quartet, Carmen McRae, and Al Hibbler. McDaniels was so impressed with the place that he wanted to buy it. The reasons probably included the same feature that struck Arnold Ross, who wrote up the El Rocco on the first page of *Downbeat*, August, 1962. The spirit of the place was unique. There was no other club or jazz joint where the best in jazz was listened to in an intimate setting without the distractions of drunks, loud conversation, or diluted by commercial compromise.

The appearance of celebrated international identities in the El Rocco had other less immediately visible but probably more significant consequences. Above all they affected the general perception and estimate of Australian jazz, both here and abroad. Visiting musicians were surprised and impressed not only by the standard of musicianship but also by the contemporaneity of local jazz thinking (though it must be remembered that the kind of performer who had risen to such public eminence and acceptance as to be invited to visit this country in the sixties, was likely to be trailing a little way behind the most radical developments in the States).

Perhaps even more important, however, was the way in which the enthusiastic response of visiting artists affected the local musicians' perception of their own work. Up to that time Australian musicians lived, consciously or unconsciously, in the shadow of the great American names. Probably without even being aware of the fact, they took it for granted that there was a point beyond which, as creative artists, they could not go until the Americans

showed the way. In short, their playing, however well developed and advanced, was still marked by a tentativeness, a subliminal fear of putting a foot wrong. It is still the case, in fact, that one of the main impressions made by the greatest of the visiting American players is of their bursting, aggressive lack of inhibition, an enormous power and audible energy that pushes everything aside, seeming to stand in awe of nothing. But since the days of the El Rocco we cringe less.

At the El Rocco in the early 60s: L-R, Judy Bailey, Graeme Lyall, George Thompson, John Sangster, Derek Fairbrass ...PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

As the visitors waxed enthusiastic about what they heard during the sixties, the Australian musicians developed a greater self-confidence. And it grew even further when they heard some of their idols in the flesh, actually next to them on the same bandstand. These gods were great, but not untouchable, supreme, but not unapproachable. They made mistakes, they played music which was perfectly comprehensible, they talked and they smiled. The El Rocco provided an environment in which Australian modern jazz of the period was able to come of age. Possibly more important, in terms of creative energy for the future, its celebrity indirectly raised the collective self esteem of the local musicians.

For the first few years of its existence it might be said that the musicians established the reputation of the El Rocco. After a certain indeterminate point in its history the reverse also came to be true: the El Rocco also established the reputations of musicians. The venue took a while to find itself. As the first meeting ground for disparate generations of Sydney's modern jazz musicians, it wasn't really certain as to how it should shape itself. Even though it was packed with patrons within a few weeks of its first presenting jazz back in 1957, there was nonetheless a period of infancy during which it was spontaneously developing its character. The residencies of musicians like Mike Nock and Bryce Rohde in the early sixties tended to confirm that character, which had been built up slowly by the dedication of all the other musicians who had worked there up to that time: the El Rocco was simply the most vigorous and advanced centre of modern jazz in Sydney, if not in Australia. From this point onward, the El Rocco did not merely exist, it represented something. And to play there was not simply to perform, but to signify visibly as a musician. The significance was manifold.

Everyone to whom I spoke agreed, instantly and emphatically, that the El Rocco saw the beginning of the concerted modern jazz movement in Sydney, bringing to a focus the more or

Drummer John Pochée performing at the El Rocco in 1968, with John Helman on electric bass…

less unco-ordinated efforts of the musicians playing in the idiom. As such, it presented in the course of its history pretty well every name of any importance in post-traditional jazz. The list would be an honour roll of Sydney's main-streamers, modernists, avant gardists. I have mentioned over three dozen already in the course of this series of articles. Even without beginning to scratch our heads, we could add names like Stewie Speer, Judy Bailey, Alan Geddes, Bob Gebert, Peter Piercy, George Golla, Ed Gaston, Bob Bertles, Charlie Munro, Errol Buddle, Warren Daly, Keith Stirling . . .

At the El Rocco, 1968, L-R, Bob Gebert, John Pochée, Keith Barr, John Helman…
PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POCHÉE

The Rocco wasn't the only modern jazz venue during its years of operation, but it always had something that distinguished it from others. It was partly a matter of timing — the Mocambo closed relatively early during that period and places like the Biltmore at Bondi didn't open until later. There was the Sky Lounge overlapping, but that was never as fiercely uncompromising, as intent on pushing the music forward. I'll consider some of the reasons behind the El Rocco's special quality later, but for the moment I'm concerned with what it represented and achieved.

On the roof of the El Rocco, L-R, Errol Buddle, Judy Bailey, John Sangster, Mike Ross...PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

In many ways it opened up ground that might otherwise have remained undeveloped or unexplored. For example, it presented newcomers to the scene with a chance to exercise themselves, where a more conventional venue would stick with the established names, the reliable crowd-pullers. A great many of Sydney's biggest names in the seventies and eighties began by coming through the door of the El Rocco. Judy Bailey, Col Nolan, Serge Ermoll, Warren Daly, are well known examples (even Errol Buddle began to build his current reputation with the jazz public through working there — although he had established himself in the most exalted company in the States, he was comparatively little known to the general public here, and apart from his appearances at the El Rocco he was often hidden away in television orchestras). For the less experienced newcomers, Arthur James provided a place to be heard and an opportunity to gain experience and confidence, even if it sometimes meant persisting in the face of poor attendances. As a footnote, the room nurtured burgeoning talent in another way as well: for a period of time Colin Bailey gave drum lessons there during the day, and I've mentioned previously the use of the premises to conduct auditions.

It opened up new ground in other senses. It was the place to go to hear the latest developments and experiments in the music, to begin to accustom your ears and mind to the most advanced concepts in jazz. Gradually these sounds would percolate to a wider public, if in a slightly diluted form; but still, it resulted in modern jazz gaining greater acceptance. Two specific instances illustrate this point.

At the El Rocco, L-R, John Sangster, Judy Bailey, Derek Fairbrass… *PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY*

The first occurred during that time when jazz was definitely music from the wrong side of the tracks, the poor and vulgar relative. One night some of the woodwind players from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra parked their cars up in the Cross while they gave a performance in the ABC Building. Walking back later, they passed the El Rocco and heard the music of the Don Burrows Quartet, at that time a drumless group playing a kind of 'chamber' jazz. They came in and sat down, five symphonic musicians in tails perched incongruously on the wooden chairs of a small coffee lounge. After the band had finished, one of the symphony men, Don Westlake, who happened to know Burrows, talked to him about the music. He confessed to being intrigued by a similarity between what he had just heard and the contemporary French compositions he and his colleagues had been playing earlier in the evening for the ABC. He asked Don and the rest of the band along to a rehearsal in a couple of days. The jazz musicians went, and were also struck by the same point. The piece being worked on had seven movements, and it occurred to some of them to invite the Burrows group along to the next rehearsal and respond to what they heard with their own improvisations.

This led to a public performance called *The Best Of Both Worlds* at the Cell Block in Darlinghurst, in the course of which the chamber group presented the seven movements of the composition they had been working on, and between each movement, the Burrows quartet, on the same stage, improvised over what they had heard, thus making it a fourteen movement work. The audience response was mightily enthusiastic and the performance was repeated on several occasions to full houses. Ultimately, this experiment, springing from a chance encounter in the El Rocco, helped to break down some of the academic and Establishment prejudice against jazz. It opened up the ABC and Musica Viva to jazz, leading to officially sponsored concerts and tours in areas which had hitherto been the exclusive domain of symphonic and chamber music (I avoid the misleading word 'classical', though I'm not sure what to substitute for it).

It was a similar encounter that helped to bring jazz before the kind of audience one would hardly expect to find in a crowded coffee lounge on the edge of King's Cross. One evening a would be clarinet player walking past the El Rocco was drawn in by the sound of Don

Burrows' playing. He turned out to be the general manager of the Wentworth Hotel, and he invited Don to look at the place next day. When the latter arrived for lunch he was shown over the Supper Club room and was asked, 'Do you think you could create that kind of atmosphere with jazz music, in this plush setting?' The affirmative answer led to six years at the Wentworth, with all the connections leading from that, and with an enormously larger audience for jazz. Perhaps it wasn't the raw, balancing-on-the-edge, frontier jazz of people like Gillett, but it nonetheless showed a new cross-section of the community that jazz had a kind of validity and appeal that was not limited to a bohemian demi-monde. In a way, it helped to create an ethos in which the victimisation suffered by Dave Levy would be less likely to take place.

Col Nolan Trio playing in the El Rocco in the early 60s. From left, Nolan, Ron Carson (bass) and Warren Daly (drums)...

At the same time, then, as the El Rocco was helping to push the music forward into the experimental unknown, it was, through its popularity, helping to propagate jazz as a legitimate outlet for creative energy. And it is arguable that there was more creative energy expended in the El Rocco during its twelve years in existence than in any other single small space in Australia. Above all, the energy generated a spirit which gave the El Rocco an aura. It became, finally, the place where you had to play, as a mark of having made it. If it was the nursery of modern jazz, it was also the finishing school for its musicians. Perhaps the money was poor, but once you'd played there, you had your diploma, credentials to take you anywhere.

What made the El Rocco so special? There have been other jazz venues since that presented as much jazz. There are some in Sydney now that have jazz five and six nights a week, and that have been going for about as long. They have established reputations for themselves, but have never assumed the same quality of magic as the El Rocco, have never become as irreplaceably vital to the development of the music. The answer to what made the place unique is, tautologously, a unique set of circumstances. It developed out of an unrepeatable and unforeseeable combination of chance and design.

Chance? Well, the location, for a start: being on the edge of the Cross placed it within easy distance of the kind of audience that is likely to possess more adventurous tastes and open minds, night people, the kind of patrons who begin to support an innovation long before it trickles down the habit-clogged sensibilities of a middle of the road fashionable set. It is hard to imagine a place like the El Rocco ever having got off the ground in almost any other place in the metropolitan area.

Judy Bailey, performing at the El Rocco… PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

In addition to this, however, the proximity of the ABC Building played its part in the success of the coffee lounge. Musicians finishing work just down the road didn't have far to walk if they felt like an after hours blow, or unwinding by listening to some first-rate jazz. It also led to the room's being used for rehearsals by ABC musicians, as well as for auditions. And as we have seen, it was this chance proximity which created the likelihood that those SSO musicians would begin to cross the border dividing two kinds of music. Related to the building's situation was the fact of its ownership — it belonged to Arthur James's father.

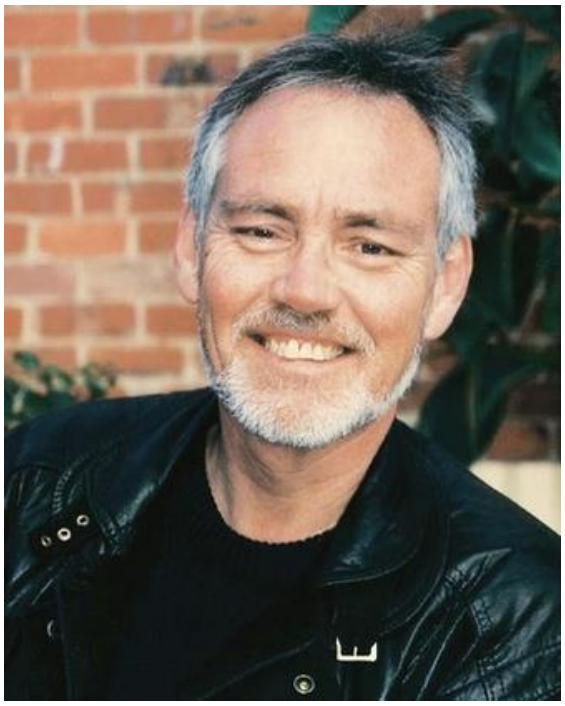
While, as we shall see, the young manager absorbed a certain amount of loss, it is doubtful if he could have continued to do so without the comparatively low overheads that this connection with the premises permitted. The accident of timing also played its part in the success of the El Rocco. After the Mocambo closed, fairly early in this period, it was the only uncompromising avant-garde venue in Sydney. It was a time when modern jazz was in a particularly fluid state, requiring constant monitoring by those interested in the latest developments. At the other end of its life, the place closed, as it happened, at a good time — there was something of a jazz slump in the late sixties (though of course it may be that the one was partly the cause of the other).

Perhaps the most unlikely yet fertile 'accident' concerned the question of a license. The relationship between booze and jazz has been debated somewhat of late, in a way that often generates more heat than light. Without entering into the general principles of the affair, we can say that, in the instance of the El Rocco, the absence of easily available grog turned out to be one of the keys to its musical success. Arthur James applied for a license on a number of occasions but, for whatever reasons, the applications were denied until the last year or so of the coffee lounge's existence. By then however, it was too late. Besides which, James had

learned something. Arnold Ross had noted in *Downbeat* that the El Rocco was unique, and James intuited one of the reasons that this was so:

You couldn't get this to happen anywhere else. Once you get liquor in a place, it's gone. That atmosphere 's gone. Once people begin to drink, the main drawcard will be the drink. When you have that, they'll start to get more rowdy, and they'll listen to the music in a different way altogether. People go down there to have a drink. That'll be first, and then the music … This is what made the whole place … You sat in a room, all squashed up together — and they were in there like sardines — and you could hear a pin drop.

This is an acute observation, defining clearly the source of the room's ambience. The music. The music was the draw. It's possible that today you couldn't even get an audience together week after week, that was united simply by its undivided attention to the music.



Graeme Lyall (above) he and Chris Karan (below) used to drive up from Melbourne just to jam on Sunday nights at the El Rocco…

At the same time of course you need musicians whose dedication and gifts can survive that kind of unremitting scrutiny from an audience. Any musician will tell you that you don't have to work so hard or so honestly to get a drinking audience to respond as you do a sober one (given that they are listening in the first place). A band that they appear to be ignoring soberly at 8 o'clock isn't allowed to leave the stand at midnight. And this takes us to perhaps the most powerful influence on the success of the El Rocco: a single-minded dedication to the music, to an extent that probably no other venue has witnessed since. Not to the company, not to grog, not to conversation, but to music. The music was central, crystalline, the lodestone around which all the lines of force arranged themselves. The patrons, especially in the early days, had to be dedicated to the music — there was nothing else to come for. But the musicians, even more, showed their dedication in all kinds of ways. Graeme Lyall and Chris Karan used to drive up from Melbourne just to jam on Sunday nights, sometimes to only a couple of interested patrons. Lyn Christie made jazz his life, giving up his medical practice to play five nights a week in the El Rocco. It helped of course that there was little other work which required or enabled musicians to play to the limits of their jazz knowledge. As Don Burrows said, you'd do studio work for bread and butter, "and then a night at the Rocco to keep sane".

The bassist Lyn Christie, pictured here in October, 1971, made jazz his life, giving up his medical practice to play five nights a week in the El Rocco…

There certainly wasn't a lot of money to be made playing in the coffee lounge, and sometimes Arthur James had trouble keeping the musicians. From time to time the big promoters, sniffing a profitable vogue, poached the players with big money. But, like Mick Nock, most of them were soon back, happy to take less for playing exactly as they pleased.

Which leads us to the dedication of another character, Arthur James. It was he more than any other single individual who created the possibility of the El Rocco and all it signified. He provided the venue, dedicated it to modern jazz, and generally let it have its head, win or lose. He accepted the fact of financial risk and from time to time financial loss, as the price to

pay for giving young and unknown musicians a place to test themselves and gain experience. By not insisting that every night show a profit, he carried the less commercially successful against the more popular performers. He kept prices down — apart from a modest cover charge no-one was required to spend any money once they got inside. It was generally (though not unanimously) agreed that he left the musicians to their own devices, making no attempt to steer them towards some supposedly popular and profitable formula. As manager, of course, he could not completely keep his own preferences out of the picture. After all, a manager expresses some sort of preference in the band he hires on any given night. But his spirit, the principles of his selection, seem to have been as generous as it is possible to be.

Dave Levy recalls that Arthur found some of his experiments difficult to accommodate, and one or two musicians recall an occasional falling out. But against that must be set the fact that it was sometimes in the face of the formidable resistance of older and more established musicians that Arthur James insisted on exposure for the young radicals. And also, we are dealing with human beings here, not blank tablets. Anyone as dedicated to the music as Arthur James, and the musicians who worked in the El Rocco, must necessarily have formed some preferences which from time to time will come into conflict.

While the music always must come first in any assessment of this kind of subject, the fact remains that Arthur James was essential in making the El Rocco what it was, and as such, is a major figure in the cultural history of this country. At least some recognition of this fact came from a television special, *Project 66*, intent on examining the work of a number of young men and women and who had 'made their mark on Australia'. They included, among others, Charles Perkins, Andrew Peacock, Richard Walsh, Richard Meale, Craig McGregor, Marian Henderson, and Arthur James, "an entrepreneur who started a jazz cellar in Kings Cross."

Arthur James went overseas in 1968, leaving the El Rocco in the charge of a cousin. While he was away, he was able to respond personally to some of the letters he had received from places like Ronnie Scott's and the Blue Note in Paris. When he got back, he was aware of changes. A license became available to him, provided he made certain extensions and alterations to the premises. But a year away had enabled him to see that a new era in Sydney's entertainment industry was beginning. The big clubs had come in, offering competitive money to musicians on a more or less regular basis, subsidised by poker machines. There was now more work playing for TV, so that even the younger musicians were often able to walk into paying gigs. Some of the dedication seemed to have gone.

Perhaps that generation was a little older, a little more tired. The way of life, the outlook, changed, new and various types of entertainment became available. Fire regulations were stiffer. Noise pollution legislation was formalised. "There's been nights down there that I've had a wall of saxophones. You couldn't have those things happening again." He decided not to take up the option of the license, nor to go ahead with the extensions. In 1969 he got married, and the El Rocco jazz cellar quietly closed. The small downstairs room is now part of a restaurant.

[Bruce Johnson writes: Thanks are due to the following who generously gave time to reminisce and answer questions. The order is alphabetical: Tony Buckley (who suggested this article), Don Burrows, John Edgecombe, Alan Geddes, Arthur James, Dave Levy, Ken Morrow, Col Nolan. Photographs were supplied by Arthur James and John Pochée. Memories deceive, and begin to do so quickly. I invite anyone who has noticed errors of fact or significant omissions in these articles to write suggesting corrections. Please send any suggestions to emyers2568@gmail.com.]