

TRADITIONAL JAZZ IN AUSTRALIA

by Bruce Johnson*

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Readers of this magazine are likely to agree already that jazz in Australia is in an extraordinarily healthy condition when compared with other parts of the world. Sydney, for example, probably has more jazz played in it than any other city outside New York, and if we add the phrase per capita, then it's likely that no exceptions need be admitted. Of course this is not to say that the kind of jazz that preponderates here is anything like the dominant sound elsewhere. And I'm not talking about the 'Is there an Australian jazz?' debate, so much as the fact that most of the jazz played in this country is traditional. New York continues to be the 'state-of-the-art' city, where the latest experiments are most likely to be heard. While Australia has no lack of modernists, the idiom which gives us a reputation for being surfeited is several evolutionary steps back from the sounds of Greenwich Village. I know that the grey area between what are understood to be traditional and modern is large and in flux, and that many musicians wander back and forth across it. But we don't have to enter that contentious area to be able to say the following two things: first, that there are musicians who fall unambiguously on one side or the other — no-one would ever call Geoff Bull a bopper, nor Keith Stirling a mouldy fygge. Second, that if we do some arithmetic involving these two categories, it seems clear that jazz in Australia has been predominantly traditional.



Trumpeter Keith Stirling: No-one would ever call him a mouldy fygge...
PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

** When Bruce Johnson wrote this piece for Jazz magazine, he was Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of New South Wales, and an active jazz musician who had worked with a number of bands in Australia, England and the USA. He was then a presenter of a regular weekly jazz programme on 2MBS-FM, where he was Jazz Co-ordinator. He also wrote for a number of jazz publications, including Quarterly Rag of which he was then editor.*

Furthermore, our traditional jazz has achieved an unsurpassed degree of excellence. The point is advertised in a number of ways, both obvious and indirect. For example, while virtually every young Australian modernist aspires to visit New York to further his education in a way he could do nowhere else, even the most dedicated traditional jazz musician feels no analogous compulsion. The equivalent journey to New Orleans is a pilgrimage rather than a sabbatical, a sentimental journey, not an opportunity to expand the vocabulary. Indeed, the usual impression brought back from abroad by our traditionalists is that Australians are doing it as well as anyone. This can often be the manifestation of closed-mindedness: many traditionalists close their ears beyond a certain point of jazz development and thus maintain an insecure self-esteem by defining anything beyond their immediate comprehension as having nothing to do with jazz. But this is not always so. The most generous and catholic ears often conclude that Australian traditional jazz is, at its best, as vital as anywhere in the world (and those ears have often been attached to American and European heads).

Why should it be that traditional jazz should be both so prolific and so good in Australia? The following thoughts on the matter are more in the nature of speculation than dogma, a turning-things-over-for-a-look. It is also intuition after the event; I don't want to suggest that the situation as it has developed could have been predicted. And finally by way of opening disclaimers, let it not be thought that I am expressing some kind of partisan gratification in what I am describing. Anyone who thinks that 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. Both idioms have their own dialectic (their pluses and minuses, to put it crudely if misleadingly), both in what they are and in what they come from; and if this country has seemed to favour the earlier styles, it need not be for reasons that reflect well upon our character.



Jack Mitchell: one of our most tireless jazz archivists, basically though by no means exclusively aligned with the traditional movement...

At the outset it might be more prudent to express the question, not as 'Why does traditional jazz predominate in Australia?', but as 'Why does it appear to do so?'. The two questions presuppose circumstances which are not necessarily identical. I am implying of course that traditional jazz has had what might be called a more extensive press than modern music. For whatever reasons the earlier style seems to have attracted followers who include a large proportion of the historically minded. Most of the books or other publications related to jazz have been written by individuals or produced by organisations more concerned with the traditional end of the spectrum. Three of our most tireless jazz archivists, Norman Linehan, Roger Beilby, and Jack Mitchell, are basically though by no means exclusively aligned with the traditional movement. The closest thing we have had to an encyclopaedia of the subject was the work of Mileham Hayes, Peter Magee and Ray Scribner: again, associated primarily with the earlier styles of the music.

Some work I happen to be involved with at the moment seems also to dramatise the point. As a preliminary tactic in the preparation of an encyclopaedia of Australian jazz I have circulated a letter to some 80 jazz-interested people in all parts of the country, representing in about equal proportions every stage in the development of the music, from hot dance bands of the 20s and 30s to the most avant-garde experiments of the 80s. My purpose was to receive information which would cover every facet of the development of jazz in Australia. The range of responses has been enormously interesting, and in a way that is relevant here. First, of those who have responded, only 20% could be said to represent modern jazz ranging from post bop to avant garde. (It's also worth making the point that among those who have not troubled to respond are many musicians whose reputations are based very largely upon their alleged fervour as jazz educators, proselytisers, publicists, men who make much self-righteous noise about the lack of recognition which jazz receives in this country.) Second, of those traditionalists who have provided the majority of responses, 95% are amateurs in the sense that their main professional commitments are outside music. Perhaps this fact is the most pregnant: that is, that a greater percentage of traditionalist jazz musicians are 'amateurs', with a commitment to the non-musical world. The concept of the amateur will become crucial in our consideration of the preponderance of traditional jazz. In the present instance I think it may be relevant in two ways. On the one hand, the man with the 'day gig', with the need to accommodate and relate to the non-musical world, is likely to have a larger perspective which provides him with a historical sense. Hence, he is more likely to feel inclined to help to document his favourite music. On the other hand, modern musicians are more frequently professionals, specialised to the point where they are less likely to be accomplished public articulators. Exceptions are not the point here; I am noting a tendency over the whole range. The combination of all these considerations means that traditional jazz is likely to become more visible than modern.

But having accepted this possibility, and therefore trying to see past it, I think the fact remains that traditional jazz doesn't just appear to be dominant, but in fact is, even if not quite so much as it appears. Why should this be so? Why should Australian audiences over the whole range from pub to concert hall respond more vigorously to traditional jazz? Some of the reasons may be found in that foggy territory full of mythical beasts, called sociology. It may be that the historical moment at which jazz first impinged with any force upon Australia, was such that our national temperament was ripe for a profound imprinting process. Traditional jazz made its first big impact in this country during the forties. As I've indicated in an earlier series on the Bell brothers, we were more isolated then, so that whatever sounds we heard seemed louder. And this was true in another way as well: there

were fewer competing stimuli, like television, to distract or dilute our attention. Jazz, too, at that time, still had a raffish, subversive quality that made it congenial to young, independent, and powerfully creative minds who in turn would exercise a dominating influence. Indeed, the very inaccessibility of the music and its theory (compared with today's situation) required a greater strength of purpose in its neophytes, and tended to ensure therefore that they were more profoundly dedicated.

In the cultural origins of traditional jazz as opposed to modern there are also elements which portend the stronger affinity of the earlier style with what seems to be the Australian temperament. The pioneer jazz musicians were themselves not a professional body, but were required to cope with the demands of the mundane world of mainstream life. The old black jazz musicians of New Orleans were a part of the life of their community: heaving coal, cutting hair, publishing newspapers, stevedoring, labouring in the fields, playing music. Their music interpenetrated the active life of society, at picnics, parades, funerals, dances. The life of the community, the life of the musician, and the music itself, were all in the same dimension. One of the most enviable aspects of life in New Orleans as reported by early twentieth century inhabitants (listen to Morton's Library Of Congress records), was the fact that music was heard everywhere, part of the normal rhythms of life and work. Byzantium, but no saints. Many of those early musicians were surprised and even slightly irritated that interviewers and historians were interested in them only as musicians. They were proud of that side of their lives which many modernists scorn as 'straight'. Although not from New Orleans, Bill Dillard, whose origins lie in the same era and style, made the point recently when I interviewed him. He insisted on leading the discussion away from jazz to his skill as a carpenter, in which he took great pride.



Marty Mooney, snapped in 1976, with drummer Jim Piesse in the background: audiences get uncomfortable with uncompromisingly modern sounds...

The beginnings of modern jazz tell a different story. Between the turn of the century and the late forties to the early fifties, the black American community lived out at an accelerated pace

the whole history of the bourgeois consciousness, passing within one generation from a communal wholeness to the kind of fragmentation which creates alienation, in particular, the alienation of the artist from the mainstream of life. The process was reflected in their music. Modern jazz, the bop revolution, expressed in every way the separateness of the artist, his special status. Bop is hard for the uninitiated to dance to, to sing along with, to understand. Every facet of it says implicitly to the community, 'You cannot share in the creation of this'. It is a musical dramatisation of specialisation, of the division of labour, and in fact often measures its success by the distance it puts between a lay audience and the performer: that is, by the astounding virtuosity of its musicians. The peculiarity of the relationship which modern jazz establishes with its audience was demonstrated to me in the most forcible way when Marty Mooney worked with me in the Dick Hughes band. Basically it was a traditional band with a Kansas City flavour, but to add variety and (as it turned out, selfish) interest, Marty and I would introduce the occasional bop head — *Groovin' High*, *Scrapple*, *Half Nelson*. Almost invariably the audience, made up of an unexceptional cross section of white middle class Australians, became physically restless and inattentive. But if the band played *Shimmy Like My Sister Kate*, with a vocal, you had them on side. This is not just a matter of presenting a well-known song. Marty observed that most audiences get uncomfortable with uncompromisingly modern sounds.

In the simplest terms, and to use a phrase I learned from another member of that band, Mal Rees, traditional jazz 'gets across the lights'. A neat way of making a complex point, because it says in effect that traditional jazz tends to break down the barriers between musician and audience, while modern jazz often tends to erect them. Jazz began by expressing a communal solidarity, by asserting that no-one was above the common man. I think this is why most jazz clubs have been traditional rather than modern; because the whole idea of clubbing together, like the old Lodges in New Orleans, is more historically appropriate to traditional than to modern. This distinction is no more abundantly demonstrated than in a consideration of the Australian Jazz Convention, which has done as much as anything in maintaining continuity and esprit de corps in this country's traditional jazz. While its idiomatic tolerance has expanded over the years, the Convention remains essentially a traditional affair. And in comparison with the other jazz festivals which have come and gone in Australia, and in particular those with a modern bias, it dramatises the whole range of differences between the two types of music. The normal modern jazz festival places all its bands on stage and its audiences in seats, a static situation emphasising the distance between the two groups of people. At the Australian Jazz Convention that distinction is blurred and even disappears. The audience moves about during the 'concert' sessions, but more to the point, the most memorable music of the week generally evolves from unplanned jamming which develop spontaneously within the strolling or reclining crowds. It grows out of the dynamism of a temporary community, and not out of the regimentation of a time-table. The rigid schedule of the more usual and generally modern festival cuts across the natural flow of life and fragments a community (the delegates) by isolating its members in separate and static seats. The improvisational nature of most Jazz Convention activities makes the function a medium for music rather than a structure enclosing it. In this way it might be said that the Australian Jazz Convention keeps the original spirit of jazz alive far more than the concert hall festivals. In fact, the 'concert' situation is a theatrical convention totally alien to the earliest and least self-conscious traditions of jazz, a Western mannerism thoughtlessly grafted on to an exotic art form.

The question still remains: why should traditional jazz, with all that I have suggested it implies, take such a hold in Australia in particular? Perhaps it goes back to that point in the development of bourgeois consciousness at which we, as a nation, became arrested. Rather like the unique fauna of Australia, when our ancestors arrived here, cut off from their European origins, they ceased to evolve in the same way (if at all) as the world they had left behind, a situation which persisted until the communications revolutions of the past twenty years. In that state of cultural isolation our national sensibilities evolved distinctively. Generalisations about the Australian character are dangerous, but necessary if we are trying to make any sense of ourselves. One attribute which seems to have been prominent for much of our history is amateurism, in its best and worst senses, and with all its corollaries. This, I think, has helped to make traditional jazz more congenial to us than modern, and for a whole range of associated reasons. In terms of instrumental technique, for example, the 'bottom line' is lower in the former than in the latter. You can get by in a traditional group at an earlier stage of your development, so that it simply doesn't require the specialised development of the professional. This is related also to what until recently was an Australian suspicion of the exotic in any form. It goes back to the pragmatic streak in the British empiricist tradition, and to the need in a young, barely subsistent colony, for all activity to have a recognizable relevance to and function within the social order. Our Puritan distrust of pure play, in the sense of activity that does not contribute measurably to the common weal, militates more against modern than against traditional jazz. Professionalism tends to fall victim to the 'tall poppy' syndrome, for the professional becomes, by his skills, a man apart and therefore an object of suspicion. The negative side of this is obvious, and manifests itself in some traditional jazz thinking: a suspicion of excellence, disguising itself as a vote for authenticity. I recently heard a Sydney traditionalist telling a joke at the expense of someone who played what he called 'demented seventh chords'. The joke, as it happened, fell flat: his audience consisted of musicians with modern ears that could also tell whistling in the dark when they heard it. But the positive manifestation of this amateur spirit is that traditional jazz is generally prepared to be accountable to its audience. A happy band can generally convert the roughest pub audience to traditional jazz, but not to modern. Our notorious 'cultural cringe' is probably also significant in this connection. Our servility discourages experimentation and leads us to emulate what is formally established, to adopt what is traditional rather than to push beyond the vanguard.

There are signs that this situation is changing. The culture as a whole has evolved considerably since the forties, so that the music it produces has to adapt to a different matrix. The enormous vigour of the Jazz Action Societies, which tend (in NSW at least) to favour more modern styles, has made an impact on the public perception of jazz. The conservatorium courses, increasingly popular, are slanted the same way: I don't know of one musician whose training has been confined exclusively to the Con, who has emerged as a traditionalist. The ranks of the modernists are growing yearly, augmented by a new generation. But how many newcomers to traditional jazz have there been in the last few years? Looking around at Sydney Jazz Club meetings, you realise that the average age of traditionalist musicians and followers is rising — very little new blood is coming in. For the last 30 or 40 years Australian jazz has been dominated by the traditional spirit. But for good or ill, this could very well cease to be so, especially if its devotees complacently refuse to believe that this is possible. This is not a prediction, but a statement of a possibility: it may be that the great age of traditional jazz in Australia will fade with the generation that incubated it.