

## ALL WHAT JAZZ?

by Kevin Jones\*

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The most important date in the postwar resurgence of jazz among the public was Sunday, December 8, 1957. It marked the television screening of the program *The Sound of Jazz* in the United States, part of the CBS series *The Seven Lively Arts*. It was the music form's most important step towards the public consciousness since television had replaced radio as the medium of mass entertainment. Nearly 38 years later, in a completely different world of popular music, pianist and composer Paul Grabowsky told me we were "in the golden era of Australian improvised music".

# THE SOUND OF JAZZ

Featuring COUNT BASIE, MILES DAVIS, JIMMY GIUFFRE, COLEMAN HAWKINS  
BILLIE HOLIDAY, AHMAD JAMAL, THELONIOUS MONK, CHARLIE PARKER,  
BEN WEBSTER, LESTER YOUNG, GERRY MULLIGAN... among many others.



Maybe, but is anybody listening? They were in 1957, when on *The Sound of Jazz*, the music was allowed to speak for itself in a program highlighted by taste and dignity with an all-star cast of some of the greatest names in the music's hallowed hall of

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*\*In 1995 Kevin Jones was The Australian's jazz writer.*

fame — Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Jo Jones and Thelonious Monk to name but a few. *The Sound of Jazz* ushered in the music's first golden year on television, giving it a high profile. With so many of the "greats" still alive, jazz's future seemed limitless.

Sadly, the years 1958-62 can be looked upon as the music's final gasp in its great era, a slow decline accentuated by the popularity of The Beatles in the 1960s and the mad scramble by the big record companies to cash in on the pop /rock boom. The music has been struggling ever since to gain a foothold in the slippery market of mainstream consumerism — and we're talking about jazz, not its funk/fusion derivatives.

Denied an outlet in the commercial radio world dominated by talkback and marketed pop, jazz has slowly retreated to become a specialist music with a devoted but small following. In Australia, it would probably be only between 15,000 and 20,000 people. Jazz has not recovered from the 70s worldwide slump in the music when clubs and venues disappeared beneath the rock-pop phenomenon, forcing many artists into jobs outside music.

It makes sombre reading to realise that Wynton Marsalis is the only jazz musician to have emerged in the past 25 years who consistently plays to sell-out audiences. So is anyone really listening to jazz? At first glance it appears an easy question to answer if you were among the tens of thousands at last weekend's 18th Manly International Jazz Festival in Sydney. But again I ask is anybody listening?



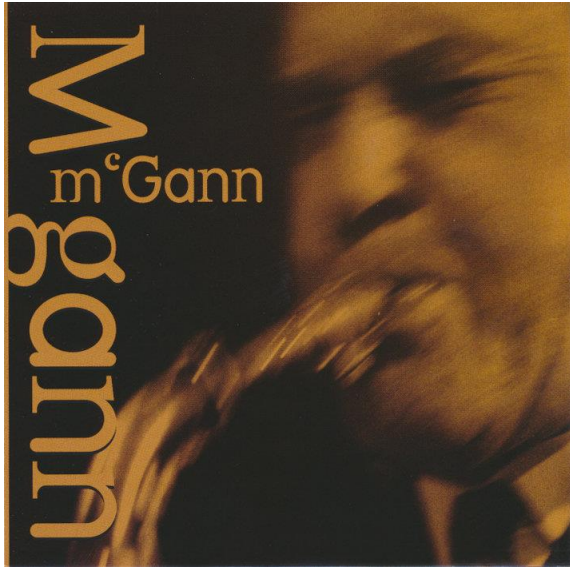
*Wynton Marsalis: the only jazz musician to have emerged in the past 25 years who consistently plays to sell-out audiences...*

The last recorded figures two years ago for jazz CD sales totalled only 1 to 2 per cent of the market and more than half of those were the more traditional-based forms. The jazz label co-ordinator at Polygram Records in Sydney, Carmel Hadid, summed it up when she quipped: "Everybody's into it [jazz] but nobody's buying it." Jazz is a slow but steady seller and in the words of Hadid, "never doing as well as anticipated. It's a small market. Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong sell well; Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie don't."

As for local recordings, David Seidel of La Brava Records claims "accessible jazz sells itself". The company's best-selling record is vocalist Janet Seidel's *Little Jazz Bird*, but the number of copies is small by the standards of other music forms — a little over 2,000 was the figure quoted. The classic set by Bob Barnard's band at the Sydney Opera House is "selling steadily" both here and overseas, but we're talking about a few hundred copies. In contrast, *Zones on Parade* by the avant-garde group Clarion Fracture Zone at last count had sold about 25 copies in Australia and 50 overseas.



The Zenith New Orleans Jazz Band sold 200 albums on its recent British tour, where it played at the Edinburgh International Jazz Festival. Even the sales of Bernie McGann's ARIA award-winning album *McGann McGann* were described as "disappointing" by Polygram's label manager (Australian jazz) Caroline Berry. One gained the impression Polygram would be delighted if they reached four figures. Berry believes more mainstream jazz should be recorded to balance the contemporary repertoire.



*The ARIA award-winning album McGann McGann: sales were disappointing...*

It's the music's traditional and mainstream stylings that are its biggest attractions in Sydney – the weekend gigs at the Strawberry Hills Hotel in Surry Hills, where Tom Baker's Chicago Seven consistently draws overflowing crowds of up to 150, and with Geoff Bull's Olympia Jazz band is one of the few bright lights in the city's gloomy jazz scene with its lack of venues and out-of-work musicians. The bias towards contemporary groups, both in Australia Council funding and by a small coterie of journalists who, in the words of Marsalis, are "trying to make something out of something that's not", has not helped the Sydney scene.



*Tom Baker: his Chicago Seven consistently draws overflowing crowds of up to 150...*

Young alto saxophonist Graeme Norris describes it as bleak, and another fine alto player, Blaine Whittaker, calls it patchy. He added that if you want to be a musician, "make sure you've got something else that brings in money".



*Blaine Whittaker in 1996: if you want to be a musician make sure you've got something else that brings in money... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER*

Don Rader, former lead trumpet player with the big bands of Basie, Woody Herman, Maynard Ferguson and Toshiko Akiyoshi-Lew Tabackin, pulls no punches. Rader, 59, now domiciled in Sydney, leads a world-class quintet. It hasn't worked since July and its next gig will be at the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues at the end of the month. It should have a weekly residency in Sydney, but it hasn't. So much for the health of the jazz scene.



*Don Rader: he hasn't worked since July...*

"I don't think jazz is very popular at the moment," he says. "The scene was a lot healthier in the 1970s and 1980s. I wouldn't recommend anyone becoming a musician. It's too frustrating without having anywhere to play." Rader uses Australia as a base from which to play overseas in festivals in Europe and Japan. It's a circuit many overseas jazz stars are using to survive — and Australia is headed in the same direction.

The federal office of the Musicians Union of Australia says there are fewer than 1,000 full-time jazz musicians in the country. There are five main festivals — Manly and Telecom in Sydney, Montsalvat (Melbourne), Wangaratta and York (Western Australia) — with another 50 of varying importance. Manly, the biggest and most popular, gives many musicians a chance to play that they would not usually have. There are three main nightly venues in Sydney for jazz, with about 15 hotels and clubs offering Sunday jazz. The latter are always well attended.

Perth produces some of our finest young musicians. The city has 223 jazz musicians with only 12 venues, most playing jazz one night a week. Melbourne is the healthiest city as far as venues are concerned, with a lively hotel scene and three main venues, Peter Gaudion's Jazz Lane (capacity 300), Bennett's Lane (160) and the Continental Café, (220) with another, Mietta's (100), presenting jazz several nights a month.



*Drummer Allan Browne: there are a few good things happening in Melbourne...*

"There are a few good things happening here," says drummer Allan Browne. "The best of the young musicians are working." Melbourne jazz writer Adrian Jackson summed it up best: "It may not be the land of milk and honey but at least you can find good jazz here every night of the week."



*Melbourne jazz writer Adrian Jackson: at least you can find good jazz here every night of the week...*

But overall, jazz is hurting in Australia. It's not being played extensively on radio and has only fragmented support in the education system. Conservatoriums are turning out technically proficient young players, as good as we have ever had, but they're playing in a style that doesn't appeal widely and, anyway, there's nowhere much for them to play. Then again, as Maynard Ferguson once said to me, "Music is a great hobby; it beats golf."



*Maynard Ferguson: music is a great hobby; it beats golf...*

Perhaps an appreciation of the roots of jazz would give a solid foundation for the wider exploration and understanding of the music, but it doesn't get the chance to be presented regularly to younger audiences except mainly at jazz festivals. A top Sydney musician told me at the weekend that he had helped a friend over a bad patch by playing her music by Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee and Ray Charles. She loved the music but had never heard of them before — and she's 25!

Educate the public or perish — that should be jazz's catch cry. Before it's too late.