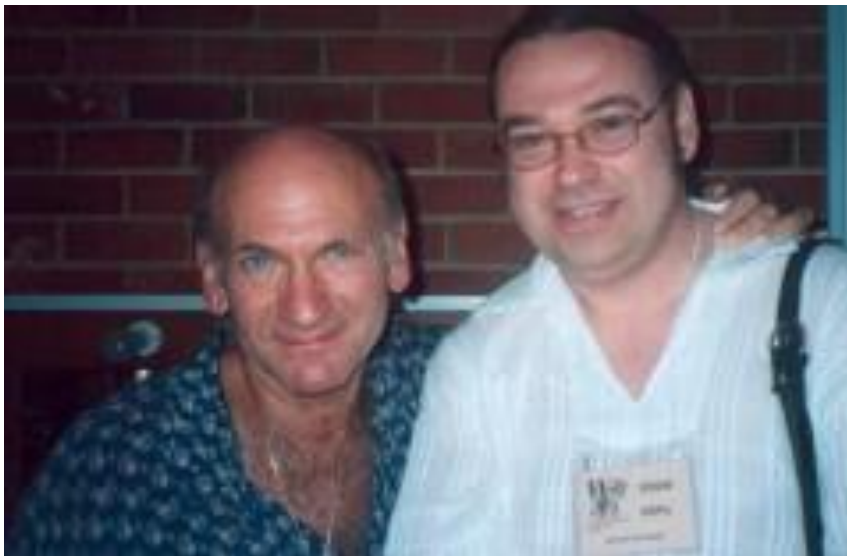


THE MELBOURNE JAZZ CO-OP AND THE STATE OF THE VICTORIAN SCENE

by Peter Jordan*

This interview with Martin Jackson appeared on the www.jazz.org.au website on April 2, 2006 and can be read there at this link <http://jazz.org.au/martin-jackson-the-melbourne-jazz-co-op-and-the-state-of-the-victorian-scene/>



MJC founder Martin Jackson (right) pictured here with the American saxophonist David Liebman...

In the latest in Jazz Australia's series of interviews with the people behind Australia's leading jazz organisations, Martin Jackson, founder of the Melbourne Jazz Co-operative (MJC), discusses funding, the impact of the inaugural Umbria Jazz Melbourne festival and the state of the Melbourne scene.

Jazz Australia: How long has the MJC been operating?

Martin Jackson: Our first official gig was in January 1983, at the almost finished RMIT Glasshouse Theatre, with an appearance by Paul Grabowsky, on a brief visit from Germany, where he was living. The performance was the premiere of the Browne-Costello-Grabowsky trio, which went on to win two ARIAs, so it was quite an auspicious start. Coincidentally, part of the opening set by Odwala is on the Jamie

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Fielding compilation, *Notes From the Underground*, and I think it conveys the sense of raw excitement that our group contributed. The monthly series was quite groundbreaking stuff, with Mark Simmonds, Bernie McGann, The Benders, Great White Noise (with Sandy Evans), Bruce Cale, Schmoe, McJad, Brian Brown, Ted Vining Trio, Onaje, and Jeff Pressing's World Rhythm Band. Odwala also played an opening set with a different guest (such as Jon Rose, Keith Hounslow, Diane Spence, and Louis Burdett, amongst others) performing new material each concert. All this was achieved on a grant of only \$3,000, with interstate artists staying at my parents' house.



Paul Grabowsky (above), on a brief visit from Germany, performing at the MJC's first official gig in January 1983, with bassist Gary Costello in the background... PHOTO CREDIT ADRIAN JACKSON. Other artists during the groundbreaking monthly series included Louis Burdett (below)... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER



Jazz Australia: How many gigs are you planning to present in 2006?

Martin Jackson: We have an increase from last year, which saw a total of 92 (including three co-presentations as part of the Women's Festival). For 2006 we are planning around 105, but the expansion is not just in terms of bald numbers and rather scope, scale and intent. We had proposed the presentation of two concert series at Federation Square venues to (a) increase the profile of Melbourne artists via concert venues and residencies, and (b) expand current audiences by accessing the broader public via location and increased publicity. As we did not receive a sufficient funding increase to produce these outcomes we decided to produce a 'bridging' compromise in 2006. We are presenting two series of four monthly concerts at venues other than Bennetts Lane jazz club. One will be the Ezz-thetics Series: MJC @ Lebowski's' (at Wesley Anne venue in Northcote), while the other will be the Destination Out Series: MJC @ Half Bent (at the Racibite Hall in Northcote). The concept is to give some financial support to some of the ongoing series run by musicians on only a door-deal basis, and to incorporate some new artists into our roster. Hopefully, the MJC can bring a greater profile and publicity (and newer audience) to these ongoing series.

Jazz Australia: Are you satisfied with the level of funding you are getting?

Martin Jackson: Relatively, in the short term context, I should be. After an unexpected 50% state cut last year (which was soon restored after a campaign of protests and lobbying), we received a \$5,000 state increase for 2006, for a total of \$25,000. While many local observers feel we have done well to achieve this within the more parsimonious Victorian arts context, it still less than 50% of the level of state support which SIMA [Sydney Improvised Music Association] receives! I have, of course, often made this point to Arts Victoria and other government figures, but progress in this direction has been slow. However, they finally did act on our call for a jazz representative to be on the assessment panel, so that is a first step. This was not the first problem we had at state level, as we had also received a major cut during 1997 (under Jeff Kennett), but that was rescinded and the money increased after I made direct representations to the Parliamentary Secretary for the Arts.



The MJC received a major cut in 1997 under Jeff Kennett (pictured left), but that was subsequently rescinded and the money increased...

As to the Australia Council, the level of funding we receive from the Music Board is a little below that of the Sydney Improvised Music Association (SIMA), but this exact amount is not really the main issue. It is more the situation where they cut the Victorian Jazz Development Officer Program in 2003 (saving \$17,000) and then gave the MJC \$4,500 in 2005 for Victorian jazz advocacy to partially replace the former program. There has been a 'black hole' left by the demise of the both the National and Victorian Jazz Development offices, and no-one seems to realise the extent to which it creates extra ongoing work for the MJC (and I imagine, SIMA, too). We have regular enquiries for information ranging from individual listeners to government bodies and overseas consulates, as well as musicians seeking advice and assistance with aspects of their careers. While \$25,000 per annum of Board funding went to the national website [Jazz Australia], the key jazz organisations should have been allocated a far larger share of the 'saving' from the cutting of the national, NSW and Victorian Jazz Development programs.

Jazz Australia: Do limited performance opportunities have implications for other areas of the scene?



Pianist Tim Stevens: as a CD reviewer he made the point that most Australian jazz albums are produced in one recording session out of financial necessity... PHOTO COURTESY TIM STEVENS

Martin Jackson: As a CD reviewer, pianist Tim Stevens made the point that most Australian jazz albums are produced in one recording session out of financial necessity. Well, I think that this was a very valid point, and would add that too many albums are produced without the groups really having the opportunity to properly workshop the material as an ensemble. This is purely because of the lack of performance opportunities for ensembles with more challenging and original music.

We increased our fees for local artists by 5% this year (and have introduced a small token fee for rehearsals, and also a slightly higher fee for a Senior Artist category). However, considering the effort which most of our artists make – composing original work, rehearsing, and sometimes helping with publicity – such as doing radio interviews or making posters – we would really love to be able to pay them far higher rates. Also, we have unsuccessfully applied over the past few years to increase our part-time administrative staff time. It would be great to be able to afford to take on someone who could specialise in the financial and more formal administrative aspects.



SIMA president Peter Rechniewski (above) said recently that it was important for jazz organisations to professionalise in order compete successfully on the same terms as other arts organisations... PHOTO COURTESY PETER RECHNIEWSKI

Jazz Australia: SIMA president Peter Rechniewski said recently on this website that it was important for jazz organisations to professionalise in order compete successfully on the same terms as other arts organisations. What is your view?

Martin Jackson: Yes, this is clearly both a desirable and essential aim. When Australia Council funding to jazz commenced in the early 1980s due to Dick Letts's great vision and initiative, the creative and contemporary jazz scene was virtually all existing on an amateur basis. The jazz co-ordination concept and support of organisations began a gradual transition from that basis, but it was not expanded and supported enough to keep up with the amazing growth of the Australian scene over the past 25 years.

Initially, there was some resentment from some of the dedicated 'honorary' amateurs towards the part-time payment of some of the state co-ordinators who were seen as coming from outside the jazz scene. And this is probably still an issue to some extent. In my case, I did admin work on a purely voluntary basis for the first ten years of the

MJC (aided by my late father, who was an accountant), and only became a paid worker (albeit modestly) at the instigation of an Arts Victoria project officer.

In regard to organisations, some dedicated amateurs such as myself, Jane March, and later Helen Matthews and, in a bridging role at the Melbourne International Jazz Festival, Adrian Jackson [Martin's brother] made the transition to successful administrators of organisations or festivals. Apart from Adrian (who had an economics degree and some business experience), I believe that none of us had formal administration training, but adapted and learnt on the job. We were similar to Victorian school principals who had to learn about business management when the state government under Kennett handed them global budgets.



Dedicated amateurs such as Jane March (above), and later Helen Matthews (below) had little formal administration training, but adapted and learnt on the job...



Critically, I believe that all of us put in far more time and effort than we were paid to do, and in some cases this was at times crucial in keeping some of these bodies functioning. In other words, someone less committed than Adrian (who spent long periods before being paid at the MIJF) would have quit, seriously jeopardising the future viability of that body.

It cannot be reiterated enough that there is hardly any professional management in the Australian jazz scene. Even Vince Jones' manager is part-time now. With the exception of the Australian Art Orchestra (which has the dedicated part-time Ann Moir), there are no jazz ensembles with managers. In this scenario, some of the state jazz co-ordinators had previously provided managerial advice, and even acted as surrogate managers for funded tours.



There is hardly any professional management in the Australian jazz scene. Even the manager of Vince Jones (left) is part-time now... PHOTO CREDIT JOHN FENTON

The Music Board may claim that a large percentage of its funding to jazz goes direct to organisations, but it must recognise that the jazz scenario is very different to that for classical music in this country, where there are several major organisations, various managers, entrepreneurs and funded ensembles (as well as some academic institutes or sponsors which support ensembles or ensemble leaders).

Jazz Australia: Changing the subject now, how would you rate the success of Umbria Jazz Melbourne 2005?

Martin Jackson: As I wrote in my *Music Forum* review, this was an extremely ambitious program, yet I think that most of it was quite successful in several ways (if not necessarily in financial terms). Normally it would take some time to successfully expand the scale of an event to this scope and keep up appropriate levels of audience and box office returns.

Without much pre-publicity and virtually no liaison with the jazz community, I was concerned about the event failing badly. However, with the big end of town behind it, the Festival received an amazing level of media publicity – a veritable avalanche compared to the trickle we are used to receiving. So with TV advertisements and street banners, it produced a tangible and visible profile for the general community, and this cannot be such a bad thing for jazz generally.

I am not sure of the financial success, but I would be most surprised if it did not sustain a sizeable deficit (which is to be expected on a brand new venture of this scale). Several innovations worked really well (such as the midday solo piano and early evening concerts, as well as the daily free Federation Square lunchtime performances). But strategically speaking, they kicked a few points instead of goals when the bigger budgets were involved (such as selling the Scofield/Shorter concert before trying to sell the second Fresu/Shorter concert, resulting in an almost full house for the former, and a half-full house for the latter). But a high number of people did come out overall, both to paid and free events, and that is a major success at any time for jazz.

Jazz Australia: Festival Chair Albert Dadon said if there were one thing he could be proud of it is the expansion of Melbourne’s jazz audience. Has he achieved that, do you think?



Festival Chair Albert Dadon (left) said if there were one thing he could be proud of it is the expansion of Melbourne’s jazz audience...PHOTO COURTESY MJC

Martin Jackson: Well, an undeniably large number of patrons did attend concerts – probably the most since the 2000 Bailey’s Melbourne International Jazz Festival.

But I do not believe that there has been much significant flow-on to the local scene. Historically, other jazz festivals in Melbourne in the past have produced very large crowds for international artists over a week or several consecutive nights, without making a real impact on the local scene. This scenario happens in several other cities around the world too. In fact, some only have a visible local jazz scene during the Festival period, and then the local scene becomes dormant again.

In contrast to this scenario, we have a robust scene throughout the year, but our average attendance with the MJC has not really increased since the Umbria event. Obviously one reason for this is the gross under-representation of local artists in that event (a condition which one hopes will be rectified in the future). If there are only a handful of local artists in the event for broader non-jazz audiences to discover – and no mechanism to promote and make audiences aware of the on-going activities of the MJC and other local jazz presenters – how can the Festival directly benefit us? Only indirectly, by accident it seems.



Martin Jackson: the MJC's average attendance did not really increase since the Umbria event...

Allowing for family connection, I honestly believe that the Wangaratta Festival does more to expand Melbourne's jazz audience at this stage simply because it presents Australian artists in first-rate settings. However, what the [Umbria] Festival did achieve undeniably was to place jazz in the middle of the Victorian arts scene agenda in a very prominent way. That has been its most important achievement.

Jazz Australia: The festival has been shelved in 2006 because, the organizers say, the event would have been badly affected by the Commonwealth Games? Was that the right call, do you think?

Martin Jackson: I think it was the wrong decision in terms of allowing the Festival to establish itself, but I do not think that Dadon had much choice in the matter. I believe that it was the State's decision, and it was purely motivated by budgetary considerations (as there were cuts to several other festivals and arts program, such as

the disappointing cut to Melbourne Youth Music). I believe that Dadon was sensible in trying to put a positive spin on it. The initial decision to also drop the Bell Awards for 2006 was hard to fathom (as the function raises revenue, I believe). So it is good that they are running it this year (although without enough effective communication to the jazz community to ensure a broader and more representative national participation in the nomination process).

Jazz Australia: How healthy is the Melbourne scene at the moment?

Martin Jackson: Very healthy in terms of all components (except level of State funding), and this health is directly reflected in the ever-increasing number of interstate musicians who settle here (both in jazz, and other music styles, such as John Butler). It has an ever-increasing depth and diversity of musicians (such as dual ARIA winner Andrea Keller), often produced by various courses such as the VCA, as well as newer ones, such as Monash University and Box Hill TAFE.



Dual ARIA winner Andrea Keller: she epitomizes the ever-increasing depth and diversity of musicians ... PHOTO COURTESY NATASHA BLANKFIELD

More importantly, it has a range of venues for jazz, with two long-running exclusive jazz clubs with grand pianos, Bennetts Lane (which opened in late 1992) and Dizzy's, with Scarlette a newcomer. Additionally, Bennetts Lane opened its larger Jazzlab room around 2000, and other venues ranging from Manchester Lane to Bar Open present jazz regularly.

We have the two major jazz festivals in Victoria, as well as the Melbourne Women's International Jazz Festival in December, and Bob Barnard's Jazz Party, plus several

regional traditional festivals. Recording infrastructure has been reversed from its previous Sydney dominance, with strong independent record labels based here, such as Jazzhead, Newmarket and Move, as well as the ABC's studio with Mal Stanley as a highly respected engineer.



Bob Barnard's Jazz Party is one of two major jazz festivals in Victoria. Here is clarinetist Fred Parkes performing at the 2002 Party...PHOTO COURTESY DIANA ALLEN

The Victorian Jazz Archive has been really successful in achieving museum status, and providing a resource to begin to collect and display our important local history. The Victorian Jazz Club and other venues (and youth workshops) ensure a strong traditional jazz scene, and younger contemporary jazz musicians can sometimes move between different styles – whether it be traditional jazz or rock – to broaden their playing experiences and work opportunities. The meeting ground of the Wangaratta Festival, pivotal leader Allan Browne, and the attitude of the better traditional players (such as Ian Smith) has ensured that there are more exchanges these days between traditional and contemporary scenes. Also, there is a healthier mix of the female and male instrumentalists on gigs than most major European or American cities.



The attitude of the better traditional players (such as Ian Smith, pictured left) has ensured that there are more exchanges these days between the traditional and contemporary scenes... PHOTO CREDIT RON JOBE

Sydney certainly has a greater depth of musicians, and some exceptional players. But this is changing gradually. While there are probably more outstanding individual players in Sydney at this stage, Melbourne possibly produces more distinctive sounding groups.



Jackson: overall, the scene here is about as healthy as one could expect for its resources (especially its financial limitations)...

Of course, I would always wish to see greater number of patrons supporting some local artists whom I believe are deserving of wider recognition. But overall, the scene here is about as healthy as one could expect for its resources (especially its financial limitations). This has not happened suddenly, but has been a gradual turnaround since the early 1980s, when the Victorian Jazz Action Society closed down through lack of interest. It has been achieved against the odds of an apathetic state arts bureaucracy by the ongoing commitment of various individuals and working together as a community. I am proud to have played some ongoing role in this process – to have helped achieve a very positive change for the next generation.
