

SIMA & THE STATE OF AUSTRALIAN JAZZ 2006

Peter Rechniewski interviewed by Peter Jordan

[This interview appeared on jazz.org on February 5, 2006 and can be read at this link <http://jazz.org.au/sima-and-the-state-of-australian-jazz/>]



Peter Rechniewski: some of SIMA's aims have certainly been realised...

As the Sydney Improvised Music Association begins its 2006 program, president and artistic director Peter Rechniewski spoke to Peter Jordan about SIMA's achievements, plans for the future and the challenges faced by jazz in the new millennium.

Peter Jordan: Has SIMA realised its original aims?

Peter Rechniewski: Some of them, certainly. We have played a major role in raising the profile of contemporary jazz in the Sydney scene; we've given long-term support to many important artists who have used that support to help them create a national profile; we've helped and sometimes prodded artists to create new artistic

**Peter Jordan was a founding member of SIMA in 1984, and its first vice-president. He resigned in 1993 to write on jazz for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.*

projects which we've then supported with gigs; and we've played an important role in developing the interstate traffic of jazz artists to and from other cities, especially Melbourne. SIMA has become much more professional, particularly in the last few years. And you need to be much more professional than we were in the 80s and early 90s.



Interviewer Peter Jordan: a founding member of SIMA in 1984, and its first vice-president...

PJ: Why is professionalism within an organisation such as SIMA important?

PR: Well, it's important for a number of reasons. One is the ability of the organisation to respond. You still need to have objectives, which relate to the reality of the scene in which you operate. It is also important to the way you are perceived. In the classical world, one of the reasons the organisations are taken very seriously is that they have heavy hitters on the board, professional administrators and they have high profile events, which they create. It was suggested Musica Viva was an appropriate model for us and I agree to a large extent, although I think we need to be more flexible.

PJ: Is SIMA now running at an appropriate level?

PR: Yes and no. We do a lot for the money we receive. However, SIMA does need more funding to better meet the needs of the scene. Any small regional theatre company with a much lower level of activity receives more money in grants than SIMA does. To be more specific, SIMA needs to be better funded because it needs to pay musicians better. And it needs to pay better in recognition of the kind of efforts we're asking musicians to make – to produce music of a really high standard on stage. Our funding has gone up tremendously but because the Australia Council has been so strapped for cash, particularly in the last five or six years, there hasn't been appropriate funding coming from their end until the last couple of years. They've been looking at us, as well as most other clients of our size, to be more efficient with

the money we have. That's a zero sum game. We have few administrative resources such that we could actually become more efficient.

PJ: SIMA has presented many important overseas artists over the years. Andrew Hill, Betty Carter, Roy Haynes and Horace Tapscott come to mind. Why is this an important activity for the organisation to be involved in?



Important overseas artists presented by SIMA over the years have included Andrew Hill, Betty Carter (above) and Roy Haynes (below)...



PR: One is the effect it has on the audience and, in particular, the effect it can have on the people who are on the fringes of the jazz audience. It can draw people in from the fringe into becoming committed enthusiasts. The other thing is the effect such tours have on the musicians who have played with the visiting artists. It's an experience with a musician or musicians from a different level. Of course, if you're bringing out a band, that's less available as an experience for other musicians to

participate in themselves but, nevertheless, they see something being done on stage by people who in the past they've only heard on CD and record. International tours are a highlight and if you get media coverage it throws the scene into relief and attracts new people. If you don't have the tours it interrupts the growth of the jazz audience.

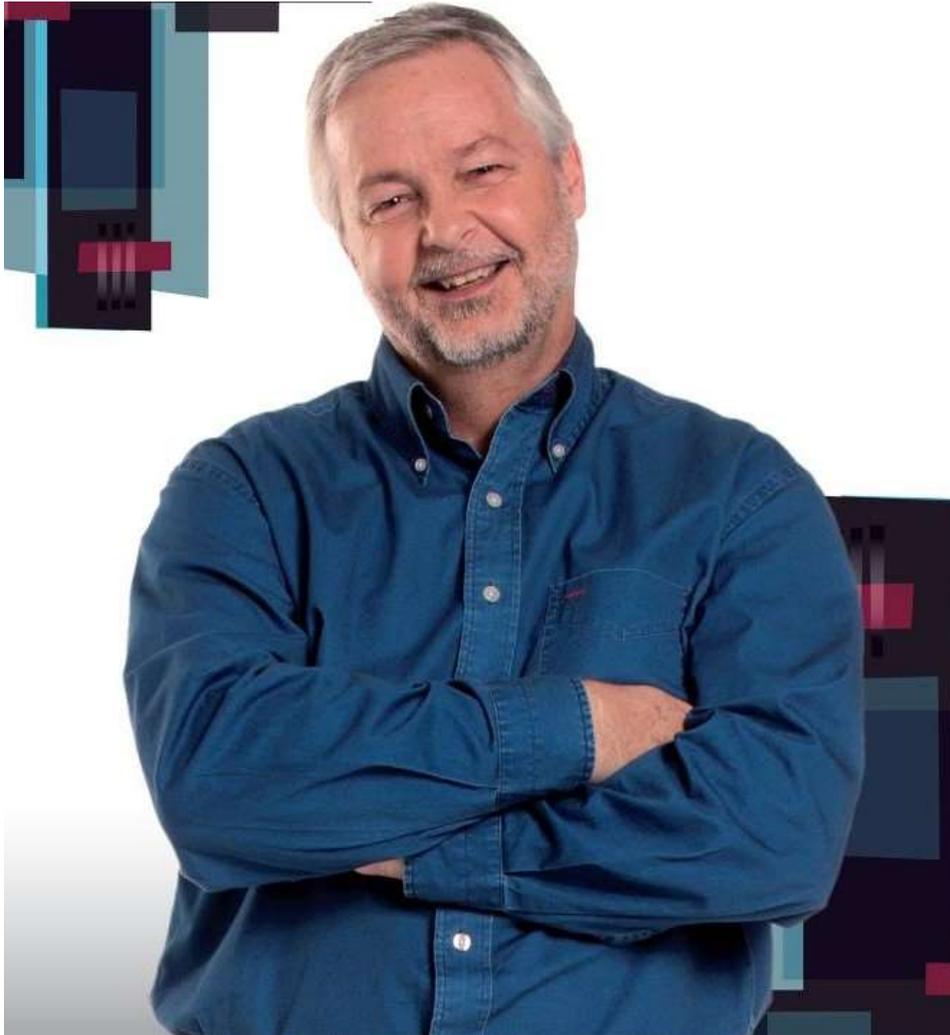
PJ: Why so few overseas tours in the past few years?

PR: Simply because it's such a big risk. It's not even a question of making money; it's a question of breaking even. The success or failure of these marginal tours in Sydney depends on getting something in *The Metro* [*The Sydney Morning Herald*] or the arts pages of the *SMH*, but editorial coverage of jazz has been pretty weak there for some time. The only way to more or less guarantee success is to bring out a high profile artist, such as Wynton or Branford Marsalis. These people largely sell themselves.

PJ: Broadsheet coverage of jazz has been mixed at best. How well has the ABC performed?

PR: At least the broadsheets carry reviews, except *The Australian*, but non-review coverage is poor in Sydney. There's little jazz content on the arts pages of the *Herald*, very little in *The Sun-Herald* or *The Australian Financial Review*, little in *The Telegraph* and nothing in *The Sunday Telegraph*. The ABC has a mandate to reflect cultural endeavour in this country, including jazz, but it seems to be ignoring that mandate in relation to jazz and improvised music. On the positive side, jazz has four hours of programming a week on ABC Radio – *Jazztrack* – hosted by Mal Stanley who is a very good presenter. By and large I like the things he plays. Also, that part of his budget which is available for recording is extremely important, probably the most important thing that has been done by the ABC. *The Planet* is a good program. It's not a jazz program but it has a significant component of jazz. And the *Drive* program on Classic FM features some jazz.* We need at least one program on the ABC that moves away from disc spinning, which is essentially what Mal Stanley does with *Jazztrack*. We need to have interviews with the artists and other people working in the jazz area, like artistic directors, writers and critics, other presenters. Sometimes that's done in a limited way on Radio National's *Music Show*, but in general not. Also jazz has no presence on 702, the ABC's Sydney mainstream station. This may vary from capital to capital but not by much. Stations like 702 and its equivalents in other states are meant to cover the "pulse of the city", if you like, but jazz is mostly ignored. The ABC has found ways of excluding jazz from things. Let's take *The Deep End*, perhaps the worst radio arts program I've ever come across. Endless pop groups are given a really big run, including live-in-the-studio stuff. Some of them are okay – I can't say I've ever heard anything really interesting there – but others, many, are truly abysmal. You hear that but no jazz is ever played. I consume a little bit of it three or four times a week and have been doing so all last year and I have never heard anything but that kind of fare. It's as if jazz doesn't exist. As if the ABC doesn't record it. Nothing on the program. I think that's just pathetic.

*Since this conversation, Classic FM announced a new weekly contemporary jazz program hosted by Melbourne broadcaster Gerry Koster.



Melbourne broadcaster Gerry Koster: a new weekly contemporary jazz program on ABC Classic FM...

PJ: What about jazz and ABC TV?

PR: It's really hard to know where to start with the ABC because it has, as far as I can see, ignored its charter. Its arts programs have been terrible. It seems to me that they're in a ratings-driven mindset and because certain ABC programs are doing very well they are happy with that. In terms of jazz, specifically, they did a series in '93 and it took them something like seven or eight years before they did anything else. It's now about four years since *The Pulse* was released and no one has heard of anything in the pipeline.

PJ: There is a perception in some quarters that jazz is no longer still evolving and still vibrant. This perhaps helps explain why it doesn't get much media coverage and isn't well represented by arts festivals. What are your thoughts?

PR: Why is jazz dead? It's not dead; it's just different now. We're not looking for the big breakthrough; what we're looking at is people reworking styles, combinations, finding fresh ways for personal expression. You're not going to get anyone as



You're not going to get anyone as dramatic or innovative as Coltrane (pictured above) on saxophone and you shouldn't expect it... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

dramatic or innovative as Coltrane on saxophone and you shouldn't expect it, but there are a lot of people who can make personal statements of an extremely interesting, exciting and original kind. Are we any different than any other art form? People were saying 30 years ago painting had come to an end. What do you do after someone paints one colour on a canvas? Where do you go after Mark Rothko or Pollack? Abstraction goes as far as it goes and then what? You go back to some sort of figurative painting which you were told was passé some decades earlier. Then somebody like Francis Bacon comes along with something that is really dramatic. In poetry, there aren't any great innovators, perhaps no "giants" left either. You haven't got an Auden, Pound, Eliot, Charles Olson – and the generation of great American poets that were a constellation around Olson, is aging. Their successors probably haven't got as profound an impact on their contemporaries as they did, but no one is saying poetry is dead. No one is saying painting is dead.

PJ: Are you optimistic about the Sydney scene at the moment?

PR: I think there's fantastic talent but, because of the problems of setting up venues in Sydney and licensing issues, we are not giving these musicians the opportunity that they deserve. Licensing is a very complex problem because there are so many vested interests at all levels. That notwithstanding, I think there are some extraordinarily talented musicians arriving on the scene. It's a pity they're not better known. John Clare gave a Bell Lecture a few years ago and said the Golden Age is now and I think, as far as Australian jazz is concerned, it is. It's very interesting that, while people are talking about the Jazz Age having passed, at this very moment we're producing more good musicians than we have ever have. But while I'm optimistic about the musicians, the scene is not too healthy in Sydney. It's much better in Melbourne from the point of view of opportunity to play and hear jazz.



John Clare (above) gave a Bell Lecture a few years ago and said the Golden Age is now...

PJ: Who are the standouts in your view?

PR: James Muller, Phil Slater, Matt McMahon, Aron Ottignon, Matthew Ottignon, Gerard Masters. I'm being unfair by leaving people out. There are really good drummers like Simon Barker, Felix Bloxson, David Goodman, Laurence Pike, and Evan Mannell. The Waples brothers are outstanding players. There's another good young bass player Mike Majkowski, a young piano player Jackson Harrison, and saxophonist Matt Keegan. We've lost a few players going to Melbourne or overseas like Willow Neilson, Roger Manins and Craig Simon. These are all really significant talents, I think.

PJ: Along with talented players, venues are at the heart of a successful jazz scene. What does Sydney need?

PR: I've been an advocate for many years of a government-funded performance space. Originally, I thought it should be modelled on what exists overseas in various cities dedicated five or six nights a week to jazz and improvised music. Maybe it's not possible to ever get that up here. But I saw something in Chicago which may be a realistic model. The HotHouse is a publicly-funded performance space in a country which doesn't usually fund cultural venues of this sort. It receives funding from the state, the city and private benefactors. Its programming philosophy is mixed, with world music, jazz, some blues and a bit of interesting pop. I think a venue like that could work here but it needs to be properly funded. It can't fund its own program from the door because if you're going to, say, fund it through the box office then you're asking it to have a commercial dimension. If that's what the government wants – fine – but really there's no reason for commercial jazz to be supported in this way; it doesn't need it.