

WHAT DO JAZZ CRITICS DO?

II - John McBeath is interviewed by Peter Jordan

[This appeared on jazz.org on Apr 2, 2007 and can be read there at this link <http://jazz.org.au/what-do-jazz-critics-do-part-two-mcbeath/>]

In the second of a two-part series on Australian jazz criticism, John McBeath, reviewer for *The Weekend Australian* and *The Adelaide Advertiser*, discusses the challenges of writing about music.



John McBeath (with glasses, facing camera) pictured with broadcaster Gerry Koster in 2014... PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL

Peter Jordan: How do you see your role as a critic and music journalist?

John McBeath: Firstly, I come from a musical background. I played three instruments and I studied theory, harmony and arranging when I was a teenager. So I do understand what is going on technically when I listen to it. I feel that gives me a bit of an advantage. What I see then as my role is to explain to a general readership what is going on in a way that they will understand. In so doing, I hope that I might attract more people to listen to the genre than otherwise. At the same time, you have to try to be entertaining otherwise people aren't going to read the piece at all or just drop off after the first sentence. Most of all, I try to educate people about what the musicians are doing. I try to avoid too many comparisons but sometimes they are unavoidable. You need sometimes to say this sounds like that so that people will have a better idea of what I'm trying to describe. Music is not an easy thing to describe in words. What did somebody say? "Describing music in words is like dancing to architecture." So it's quite a challenge. I often agonize for quite a while over a phrase or the way to express something in a way that people will understand. You can't lose sight of the emotional impact of the music, the analytical or technical impact of the

music and you certainly can't lose sight of your responsibility – in some mild way, at least – to entertain readers.

PJ: You mentioned that you have an advocacy role. Can you say a little more about that?

JM: Jazz is a minority art form and it has been most of my life. Here in Australia we have some of the best players in the world yet the broad population is largely unaware of that. So one of the things I want to do is very vociferously promote Australian jazz. In the last 12 months of reviewing CDs for *The Weekend Australian* I have written about 40 reviews. Of those, 35 were Australian and five were from overseas. Fortunately, the people in the arts section at the paper are very supportive of Australian artists and original work by Australians, so I don't have much trouble getting them to accept a recommendation of mine if they are Australian musicians. I'm concentrating on local music because I think what is going on here is quite remarkable in global terms. So why should I be writing about US players? There are plenty of people writing about them but very few are writing about Australian players.

PJ: Would it be possible to review such a high percentage of Australian artists if the quality were not as high as it is currently?

JM: It might be possible but it would be a lot more difficult and you'd find yourself being a lot more negatively critical than I am. That's a bit of a pitfall, too, because I'm obviously selecting what I believe to be the cream of the cream because it is impossible to review every Australian release. So I end up selecting the very top stuff, which creates a dilemma of its own really because when you're talking at that level it gets very difficult to negatively criticize something because the standard is so high.

PJ: Have you had much feedback to your work?

JM: In the main, you don't get a lot of feedback. You write reviews of albums or gigs and off they go to the paper – perhaps subedited severely, perhaps not – but quite often that's the end of it. You don't hear a lot of feedback, so it's very hard to judge what people are thinking about what you've written. Most of the feedback has been good. I write for the *Adelaide Advertiser* and most jazz musicians here have seen some of my writing and have been quite congratulatory about it. I don't know many of the musicians interstate personally. I have adopted that as a bit of a code. While I'd like to get close to the musicians, I find that if I do it starts to colour what I'm going to say. So I have found that it's better for me to keep the musicians at arm's length rather than develop friendships with them because there's no doubt it colours what you write about them. I have had an angry exchange of emails when I negatively criticized somebody. They took exception to something I wrote, which was interesting because they had previously sent me an email congratulating me on my review work and saying that they enjoyed it and thought it was pertinent. That can be true of many people until you give them a bad review.

PJ: Have you ever been confounded by what you've heard because it was new and you couldn't easily contextualize it?

JM: Not really. The funny thing about music is that it's all evolutionary. Somebody can come out with something new but – and maybe it's because I have been listening to this music for the best part of 50 years – I can usually think of something on which it could have been based. There seems to be a bit of a resurgence of free jazz if last year's Wangaratta Festival was any indication. But it has been here before and while today's players are not exactly the same there was an Albert Ayler, there is a Cecil Taylor and there were other people in the 60s which musicians today have taken one



There was an Albert Ayler (above), and there is a Cecil Taylor (below)...



more evolutionary step with. I'm always interested in new schools of music but I can usually say, "Ah, I can hear where that has come from". It's very rare that I hear something and say, "That is so different and I haven't heard anything remotely like it

before”. For example, I heard the Toykeat Trio and I was impressed but, as I said in a review, parts of it could have been Tchaikovsky. I do listen for those references because you will find when you speak to the musicians – if they’re honest – that they have been influenced by certain composers or other musicians in some way.



The music of Trio Toykeat: parts of it could have been Tchaikovsky...

PJ: What’s the hardest thing about what you do?

JM: I find that it is hard to keep your descriptions of the music interesting, understandable and fluent so that people will continue on with reading them. It’s no good starting out with a complex sentence, which uses words or references which people might not be familiar with. Some things are a lot harder to review than others. And it’s in the area of new directions where you’re struggling the hardest to describe what it is because you might not have an immediately available reference that you know people will understand. For example, I reviewed an album by the Chicago vocalist Patricia Barber. Like many cutting-edge singers, she uses highly literary poetic lyrics in a somewhat free musical form.

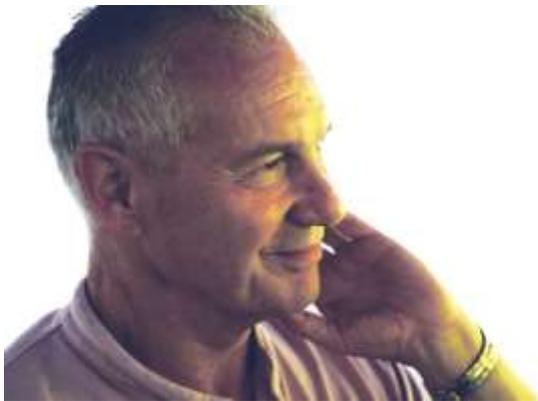
PJ: Are there any critics or jazz writers who you particularly like?

JM: There’s an American guy I like a lot – John Szwed – who has put out a book called *Jazz 101: A Complete Guide To Learning And Loving Jazz*. A lot of it is history I know very well but in it he includes his own reviews and some are breathtakingly good. He writes extremely well, extremely knowledgably and entertainingly about the music.



John Szwed: author of Jazz 101: A Complete Guide To Learning And Loving Jazz...

I also quite like Stuart Nicholson, author of *Is Jazz Dead?* I don't agree with everything he says but I quite like the way he puts things and I like the stands that he takes, such as his attitude to the neoconservative approach to jazz at the Lincoln Centre. In Australia, I think John Shand writes well about jazz in *The Sydney*



UK writer Stuart Nicholson, author of Is Jazz Dead?...

Morning Herald but I'm hard-pressed to tell you too many others that I think are very good. Some of the reviewers in Australia are writing from a purely emotional point of view. That's justifiable, I suppose, but when it becomes nothing more than the way somebody reacted to the music emotionally I think there is too much left out. It becomes a very subjective exercise and you end up searching endlessly for more superlatives to describe your emotional reaction to the music. If the review doesn't go beyond that, I think it has failed.

Editor's note: John McBeath died in Adelaide on March 12, 2018, after being diagnosed with cancer. His obituary, written by Roger Mitchell and Martin Jackson, can be read on this website at the following link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-20>.