

## **SIMA: REWARDING EXCELLENCE, ENCOURAGING INNOVATION**

**by Peter Jordan\***

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I first got hooked, not by sounds, but words. In the early '80s, a story by John Clare about a saxophonist named McGann in *The Sydney Morning Herald* enticed me from my university room set among the cow paddocks of North Ryde to Jenny's Wine Bar at the seedy and windswept end of Pitt Street.

There I discovered not only a brilliant altoist, but a music scene that I came to love passionately. In the weeks and months that followed, I heard a number of other players and groups who excited me, and who I returned to hear again and again.

I also discovered that this fascinating art form, while bursting with creativity, was undervalued by the arts establishment and media, and grossly underfunded by state and federal authorities. So when I learnt of plans to establish an organisation to champion contemporary jazz and improvised music, I was eager to make a contribution.

The Sydney Improvised Music Association (SIMA) was formed in 1984 by enthusiasts like myself and musicians who realised there was more to be gained through collective action. In the years since, it has done much to elevate the music's status in Sydney and beyond.



*Horace Tapscott: one of the revered masters presented by SIMA...*

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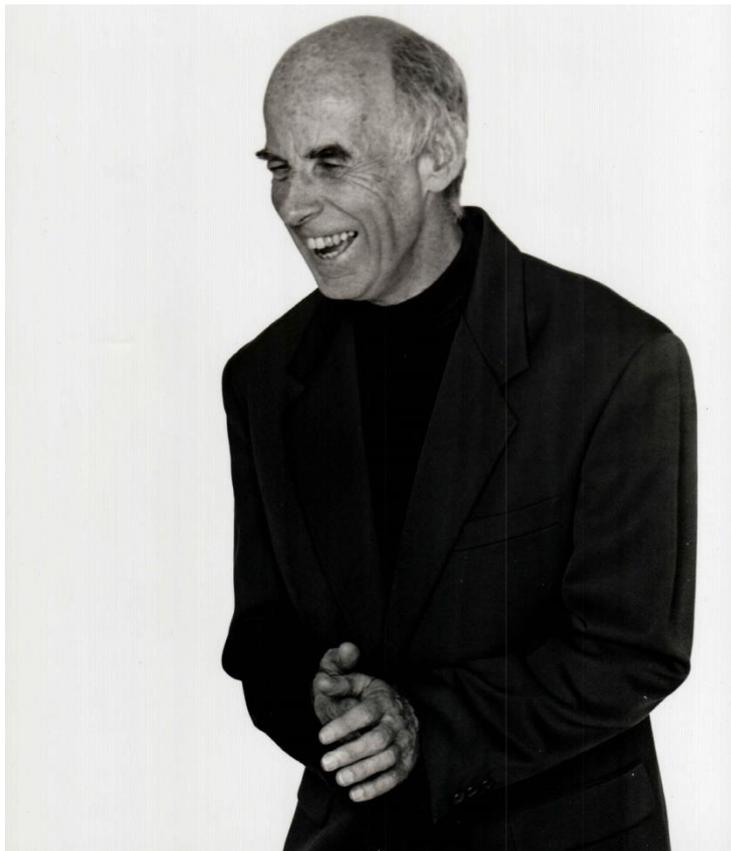
*\*Peter Jordan was a founding member of the SIMA committee in 1984, resigning in 1993 to write on jazz for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. At time of writing this piece, he was arts and entertainment editor of the Fairfax website *City Search*, and still writing occasionally on jazz for the *Herald*.*

It has presented some of the most important voices in jazz, from young firebrands such as James Carter and Vincent Herring to revered masters like Roy Haynes, Andrew Hill, Steve Lacy and Horace Tapscott. And it has recognised the universality of the art form by being involved in tours by such key European musicians and ensembles as the Clusone 3, Misha Mengelberg and Peter Kowald.

However, SIMA's most significant impact has been to provide a platform for the development of the local scene and its constituent musicians. It has been an articulate and persuasive voice in the corridors of power; not winning all battles by any means, but punching considerably above its weight, acting as an effective advocate for the music beyond its own particular aims.

Facilitating gigs was the main game (while I was an active member, at least), but this objective was always framed within a wider aim: to entrench the music and ultimately generate opportunities for musicians over and above the work created directly from SIMA's funding.

It has been this ability to see the big picture, to have a grand vision, if you like, and to understand the cultural context in which jazz is situated in Australia that, I believe, is responsible for the Association's continued success. (As a bit player in the enterprise until 1993, when I resigned to review for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, I don't claim any credit for this positioning).



*Leading figure Mike Nock: in no doubt that SIMA's role has been crucial...*

Yes, SIMA has had its critics. The jazz world is small and fractious, and not everyone has shared the vision. Others have had more particular gripes. Over the years, some musicians have felt - and perhaps still feel - that the gigs haven't been handed out equally. And indeed they probably haven't. There have no doubt been some oversights, but in the main, the policy

has always been — and I imagine still is - to reward excellence, and encourage innovation.

Leading figures, such as Mike Nock, are in no doubt that SIMA's role has been crucial. "Their dedication to excellence, consistent policy of programming both established musicians and emerging talents, plus their dedication to presenting the spectrum of contemporary music has been very largely responsible for the unparalleled creative musical environment the Sydney scene currently enjoys," says the pianist.

Indeed, it is easy to forget that at the time SIMA came into being contemporary jazz in Sydney was decidedly unwell, with performance opportunities extremely limited. The Association's President and driving force, Peter Rechniewski, describes it as being in a state of profound crisis.

"Important musician co-operatives like the Keys Music Association had broken up, the scene was drifting and contracting, and commercial pressures made it unlikely the problems could be addressed through the private sector," he says. "A number of us wanted to demonstrate that contemporary jazz had an audience which would attend well organised and publicised events."

And they did. People turned out in generally good numbers to places such as the Piccadilly Hotel in Potts Point and the reopened El Rocco in Kings Cross, before SIMA established the Strawberry Hills Hotel as the hub of the contemporary scene. From 1989 to 1997, when the venue mutated into a poker machine parlour, the pub hosted a wide range of music, two and sometimes three nights a week.

The Strawb, as it was affectionately known, had a unique atmosphere. When the room was full and the music was firing, the energy was palpable, and it seemed as though we were in the middle of something very special. However, selling tickets at the door on those dreary



*Wanderlust, one of the groups presented by SIMA, which has broadened its audience... L-R, Adam Armstrong, James Greening, Fabian Hevia, Alister Spence, Jeremy Sawkins, Miroslav Bukovsky. PHOTO CREDIT ERICA MURRAY*

winter nights when only a handful of people braved the cold could be immensely, if fleetingly, dispiriting.

It was there that groups such as Clarion Fracture Zone, Wanderlust, the Bernie McGann Trio and Ten Part Invention built and broadened their audiences, playing to diverse crowds that

often included a large component of young listeners. (Skateboarders sometimes competed with veteran listeners for the prime positions in front of the stage).

Important interstate artists and ensembles, including Ian Chaplin, Musikkii Oy, Artisans Workshop, Sam Keevers and Ted Nettelbeck, also got to play before the Sydney public, something that would have been far less likely if it weren't for SIMA's ability to operate outside the bottom-line constraints of nightclub promoters.

Such relative independence from commercial considerations meant that groups involved in the more experimental end on the jazz spectrum were also given opportunities to develop. Roger Dean, leader of the experimental group austrALYSIS says it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of such support.

"I'm very convinced that the mere existence of SIMA has encouraged several groups that it is possible to present their stuff, and that several would not have become effective groups but for that," he said.

Meanwhile, the centrality of the Strawberry Hills Hotel to Sydney's jazz culture was brought into focus by its demise, with the scene remaining in a parlous state until the emergence of the SIMA's new home at the Side On Café.

Rechniewski says in retrospect the Association should have searched for an alternative performance space earlier. However, he believes there was at least some consolation in the fact that when the axe finally fell people understood that the reason was the pokies and not because contemporary jazz didn't have an audience.

Located on a nondescript strip of main road in Annandale, in Sydney's inner-west, the Side On very quickly attracted a crowd - much to my surprise, I have to confess. The venue is often packed on Friday and Saturday nights, while Thursday nights, which feature younger bands, is steadily finding an audience. And June sees the introduction of Wednesday night jam sessions, presented in conjunction with the JazzGroove Association.

So what's next for SIMA? A new project, which commenced Thursdays in May, involves ABC Radio broadcaster Jim McLeod along the lines of the old Starfish Club live-in-the-studio sessions. "The band Jim records will be given two or three performances on Thursdays so they can have a better chance of getting a review and attracting new audiences," explains Rechniewski. "We'll be concentrating on young, underexposed and emerging artists."

Also on the agenda are ambitious plans for SIMA's recently launched newsletter, *Point Blank*, which it hopes will be good enough to one day find its way into newsagents; the establishment of a record label (there's already a name — Broken Time Records); and the never ending search for sponsorship outside the orbit of the funding bodies.

There is recognition from within the organisation that SIMA will probably need to operate with a higher degree of professionalism if it wants to meet its ambitious objectives: the volunteer base can be expected to do only so much. Last year that meant organising and promoting 127 gigs with the aid of less than one full-time position. (Co-ordinator Jane March's remarkable commitment over many years should be acknowledged here).

While a restructuring may be in order, I think it's important to be clear about just how much has already been achieved by the indefatigable Rechniewski and his small, hard-working team. As Fatboy Slim says, you've come a long way, baby.