

ADRIAN JACKSON RESIGNS FROM WANGARATTA FESTIVAL

by Martin Jackson*

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The national jazz scene was shocked by the announcement that Adrian Jackson would no longer be Artistic Director of the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz and Blues (a position he had held for 27 Festivals). Combined with the recent cutting of music programs from ABC Radio National on January 20; the closure of the Bennetts Lane Jazz Club venue on February 8; and yet another cut (\$9.2 million) to the Australia Council's budget, this is what Mike Nock summarised as a 'perfect storm' for the jazz community. Almost overnight, the fragile ecology of the jazz scene is facing momentous threats to its health.

It is a very sad reflection on the media's current coverage of jazz that no major newspaper has (to my knowledge) covered this major development at the Wangaratta Festival.



Adrian Jackson: the artistic director can only work with the budget he is given, and Adrian has worked wonders with smaller budgets over the years, and talent-scouted breaking artists such as Kurt Elling...

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As Adrian's brother, I was not totally surprised at the announcement, but the handling of it could have been done in a better manner (as with the dropping of Mike Nock as National Jazz Awards' Chairperson, and the decision not to renew publicist's Prue Bassett's contract). As Adrian had acknowledged in the *Border Mail*, he had been 'warned before the 2016 event, the Board was considering a change'.

In fairness to the all-voluntary Board, this was certainly not a decision taken lightly, and is a 'bold' change to make (as the *Wangaratta Chronicle's* editorial pointed out, in a well-balanced piece). While most jazz supporters are concerned that the Board's statement about 'new ideas' and 'change of direction' is a signal for a broader program with diluted jazz content, the Board has reassured that this will not be the case: the artistic direction will remain.



Pianist Mike Nock: dropped as chairman of the Wangaratta National Jazz Awards ...
PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

Of course, the Festival Board has a right to react to the financial "bottom line", and recent attendances have been gradually seeping away since the halcyon days of the Festival, when its budget enabled it to boast both the Scofield-Lovano Quartet and the David Murray Quartet in the one 2008 program.

But the Artistic Director can only work with the budget he is given, and Adrian has worked wonders with smaller budgets over the years, and talent-scouted breaking artists such as Kurt Elling, Linda Oh, Ambrose Akinmusire and Gregory Porter through his expertise, initiative, imagination and insider knowledge.

In financial terms, the 2015 Festival should have been regarded as a transitional one, with the dropping of the free Reid Street Stages, and the introduction of paid Garden stage performances. In 2016, the flooding (and subsequent media coverage of that) drastically affected ticket pre-sales (something a well-connected professional publicist, like Prue Bassett,

could have partially addressed). No doubt the Festival incurred a significant loss, but it was mitigated by virtually all artists taking a significant pay cut to ensure that the event went ahead (and was not cancelled).

This point illustrates that the success of this event has been a partnership between the Festival and the jazz community, which greatly values the event (although it is not always seen this way by the Festival).



Adrian Jackson (right) pictured with the American saxophonist Wayne Shorter...

The high artistic standards and integrity of the expert programming are solely what made this event so unique that patrons came from Melbourne, Sydney and across the country to attend it.

Therefore I am somewhat dubious about the Board's decision to appoint a Panel to program the Festival (despite their protestations to the contrary, this has not worked often overseas, and it did not work with the 2015 Stonnington Jazz shambles). Knowing the two musicians on the panel at the moment (one from Sydney, and one from Melbourne), they should be able to produce a strong local jazz program, following the well-established template.

However, it is not the programming that has been the core problem with the Festival's diminishing returns.

Now is the juncture when they need to thoroughly examine their publicity and marketing strategies; ticketing; almost total lack of corporate sponsorship; lobbying; and, how they will now interface with the jazz community.

The jazz community also needs to give the Festival a "fair go" in 2017, and continue to give its support in trying to ensure a sustainable long-term event. The MJC has always supported

the Festival in a variety of ways (including program advertising and some co-presentations, such as Barney McAll's Graft and David Ades), and will continue to do so in 2017.



Barney McAll: one of Adrian Jackson's co-presentations was McAll's Graft...

The Festival has been an unique platform for the meeting of jazz musicians from around this country, and the continued development of the Australian jazz art form. We cannot afford to lose this (nor the National Jazz Awards).

The Board cannot under-estimate the level of expertise (and budget) required to produce a first-rate artistic event. They need to remember that "musical magic" has always happened at the Festival, but loyal patrons will definitely not be coming for musical mediocrity. Fraternal prejudices aside, congratulations Adrian on an unimpeachable record of programming, but also additional management work in the 'darkest days' of the event. The jazz community owes you its gratitude. Now you might have a time to write a book on your 40 years in the jazz world....