

BRYCE ROHDE

by Jim McLeod*

This interview appeared in the book “Jim McLeod’s Jazztrack”, published in 1994.

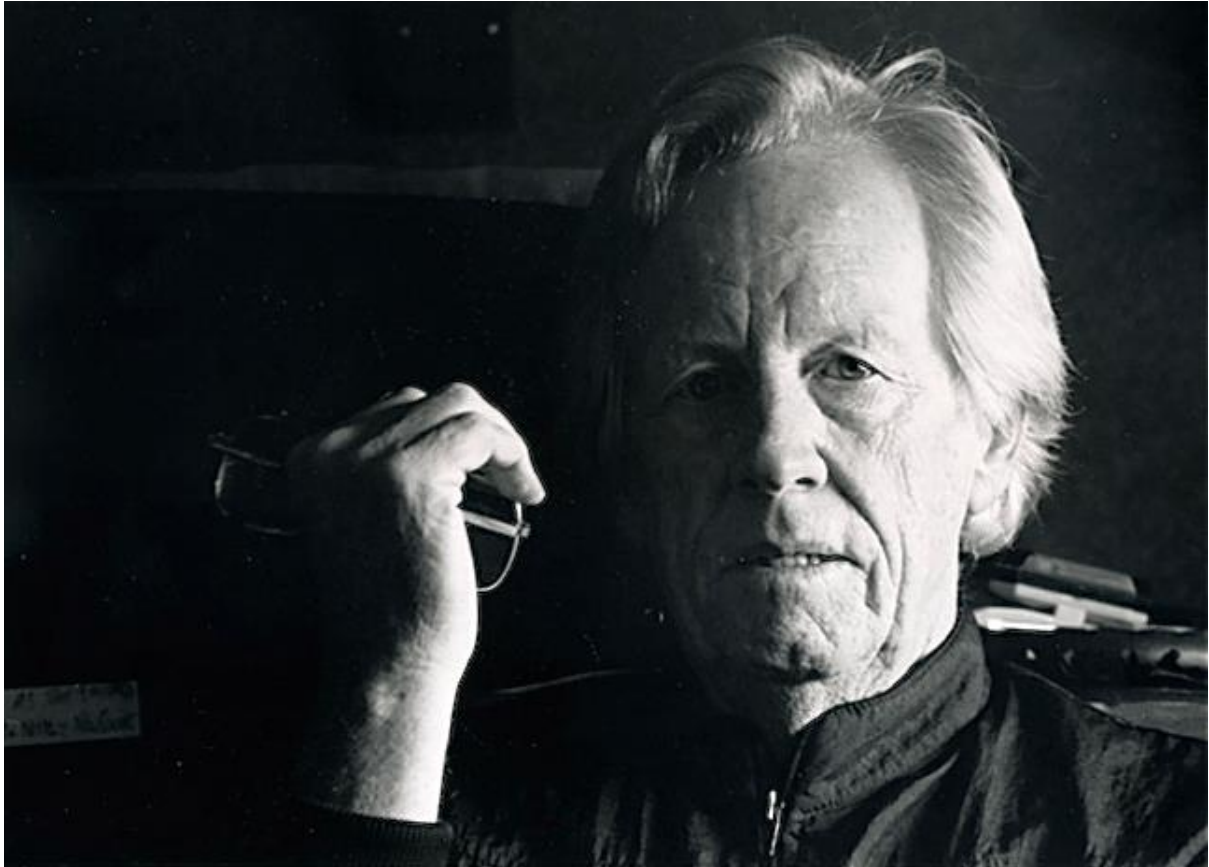


PHOTO CREDIT BRYCE ROHDE

Bryce Rohde's influence on Australian jazz has been quite significant though probably few realise it and few acknowledge it. As pianist with the Australian Jazz Quintet, Bryce was part of the most successful Australian jazz unit outside Australia. In the 1950s they got together in the United States—Jack Brokensha, vibes and drums; Errol Buddle, saxophones, flute, bassoon, oboe; Bryce

**ABC broadcaster Jim McLeod retired in June, 2004 after 48 years. He had fronted Classic FM's "Jazztrack", a two-hour program heard at 5 pm on Saturdays and Sundays for 28 years. In 2000 he was awarded an OAM "for service to the promotion of jazz music through media broadcasts and encouraging Australian music composition and performance". His book "Jim McLeod's Jazztrack" was published in 1994.*

Rohde, piano; plus American-born Ed Gaston, bass (for many years now a top bassist in Australia); and Dick Healey, saxophones, flute. The AJQ toured extensively as you'll read in this interview with Bryce and further in the interview with Jack Brokensha. Since the AJQ days Bryce has lived mostly in the United States, occasionally returning to Australia for brief stays. He was an important influence on a number of musicians here when he introduced them to George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organisation. As you'd expect from someone who's been so adventurous in music, Bryce is definitely an independent thinker.

Jim: I've finally caught up with you here in Mill Valley, California, and by coincidence you're just back from a tour of Australia. Did it go well?

Bryce: It went very well. The Adelaide concert was practically a sell-out, which is always nice. Everything seemed to work just fine. Half the concert we did in individual groups—Jack Brokensha did a spot with just rhythm section; Errol Buddle did a spot with rhythm, and so did I. The second half was just Australian Jazz Quintet. We did some new things and some of those charts which we remembered. I put up *April in Paris* which is one of the first charts I ever did for the AJQ. I was almost afraid to play it. I thought, 'God, what's this going to sound like?' It sounded OK. It was very simple because I wasn't too sure what I was doing. Often those things come off the best.



The AJQ reunion, 1994, L-R, Jack Brokensha, Ed Gaston, Bryce Rohde, Errol Buddle... PHOTO COURTESY LEE BUDDLE

Jim: Do you mind talking about the origins of the AJQ?

Bryce: No. It's a pretty standard question because there are generations that don't know anything about it—just as there are generations that have never heard of Stan Getz and so on. Jack Brokensha and I went to Canada at Errol Buddle's suggestion. He was already in Canada and had been there a couple of months, in Windsor, Ontario. He thought that we could probably work there so his letters were glowingly invitational. So, Jack and I went over there and eventually we fell into a job accompanying a singer, Chris Connor, who didn't have a band or got stuck without one. We backed her and, of course, we played a few tunes as a group and she sang a few tunes for the set. Then, after she left town, the club owner and the audience seemed to like what we were playing which was a new sound to them—to us, too, actually. We were held over and from then on it was pretty amazing.



Chris O'Connor: the Australians backed her, and were held over in the club, leading to the formation of the Australian Jazz Quartet...

Jim: Was Errol already playing bassoon and all of those things?

Bryce: He was playing bassoon and tenor saxophone. Then we had another guy, Dick Healey, who played alto saxophone and flute and bass. Of course, when he was playing alto and flute, there was no bass player and that wasn't satisfactory to us. Jack Brokensha was playing vibes and doubling on drums and when there were no drums that wasn't satisfactory either. I just played piano, that's all I did and wrote a few charts. We added a bass player as we went along, I just forget when. We went to New York pretty quickly. The manager of the jazz club we were playing in saw the possibilities, spoke to the ABC [Associated Booking Corporation] President, Joe

Glaser, who had Louis Armstrong and some big names in his books and they went for the AJQ and from then on we just worked.



Joe Glaser (far right), pictured with Louis Armstrong (second from right), others unidentified: Glaser was president of the Associated Booking Corporation which took on the Australian Jazz Quartet...

Jim: What year was that?

Bryce: That was in about 1953. Originally we worked for about a year in Windsor, Ontario, which is just across the border from Detroit. Jack and I worked there in a band which consisted of drums—he played drums—trumpet and piano.

Jim: Very avant-garde.

Bryce: Oh boy! In a pub for about a year and then we were suddenly thrown into this thing. From then on we just worked consistently and recorded consistently and the people liked the sound combination. That was the good era of music which included Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis, Count Basie, Gerry Mulligan and all of them. We used to go out on 30-day bus tours and do one-nighters. A bus full of all these wonderful, famous people. I wish I'd paid more attention. I was just having too good a time.

Jim: Some of these were college tours too, weren't they?

Bryce: Yeah. A lot of them were college tours. Some were just general, you know, just pick a theatre in town and put it on. It was about the time of Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic, that type of tour. There might be like six different bands on and we played from—look out, here comes that name-dropper—the East Coast to the West Coast, Carnegie Hall to some pretty low places but some wonderful concert

halls—Cleveland has a great concert hall, Chicago Opera House and the jazz clubs which operated on the West Coast. So, we were all over the place.

Jim: When was it that you came back to Australia?

Bryce: 1958, end of 1958. We came back because one night Kym Bonython—I think it was Kym Bonython—was in the Hickory House in New York. We said hello and we talked about coming back to Australia. We were about to disband and so it coincided with the break-up of the group. We came back in 1958, did a capital cities concert tour of Australia and disbanded.



Kym Bonython: he was in the Hickory House in New York...

Jim: In that time with the AJQ, touring in America, did you work with other people, or was it all AJQ?

Bryce: We started off with a booking agency who, to play it safe, sent us out backing a couple of singers. That was the safe way to go. At least, if the people didn't like us, they'd be there to hear the singer. We backed Helen Merrill, Carmen McRae and a couple of others. But, pretty quick, once they realised that we were becoming as big a draw as the name singer, they then booked us as a group. We didn't back anyone like Gerry Mulligan or anything like that.

Jim: It's amazing then that after only four years of touring how many people remember the Australian Jazz Quintet. This time I've just spent broadcasting on Radio KJAZ here in America, if you're an Australian a number of people are very likely to ask you if you know the AJQ. It's extraordinary that, in such a short time, it would have developed such a thing. What about the audiences back in Australia, what sort of ages were they this time?

Bryce: They were mixed. There were a lot of people such as we're talking about at the Adelaide concert. There were probably a lot of people that knew of us. We were

all Adelaide boys, Jack and Errol and me and so when we go back to Adelaide it's ... we're amongst old friends. But looking out there I saw all ages—saw some people my age, and some young people, 20-year-olds. It was across the board.

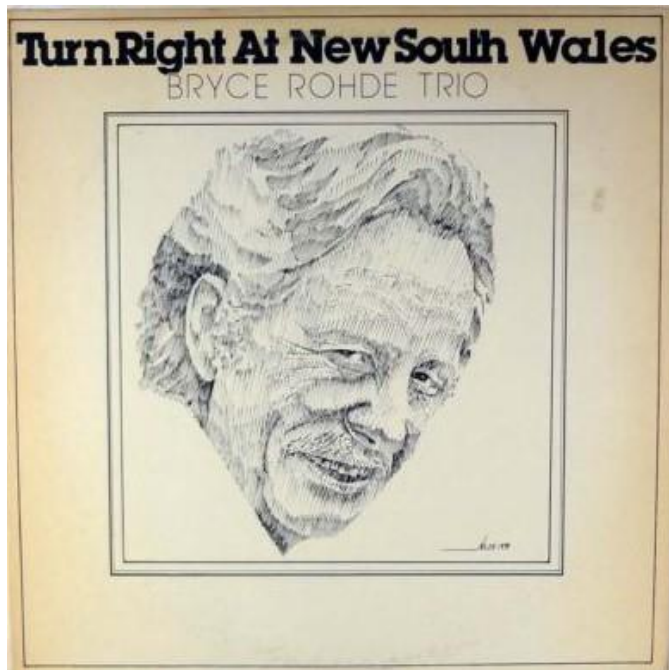


Errol Buddle, here on tenor sax, and Jack Brokensha (vibes) were Adelaide boys. This shot was apparently taken shortly after Errol left Adelaide and arrived to join Brokensha's quartet at the Plaza in Melbourne. The two other musicians are unidentified, but maybe are Ron Loughhead (piano) and Ken Lester (bass)...PHOTO COURTESY LEE BUDDLE

Jim: Were you born in Adelaide?

Bryce: I was born in Hobart, moved to Adelaide when I was two, brought up in Adelaide and left there about 1952. I was never a Sydney inner-circle musician. I just bypassed all that.

Jim: Turned right at New South Wales [the title of a Bryce Rohde Trio album].



Bryce: I won't tell you the full story of that. It used to be turn left at New South Wales but no more ... and so I went from Adelaide to Canada with Brokensha.

Jim: As a kid did you think you were going to be a musician?

Bryce: I never thought about it. I've always been grateful that I never had to think about what I was going to do. I never had a plan. My father was a pastry cook and so I would naturally help out there and I was in the business when he died. At that time I was starting to play. I'd studied classical music for about seven years and then I went on to more popular music during the war. I heard Stan Kenton for the first time and a few other people. In the army units: 'Classical music is boring. Play something we know!' So I was playing the top ten, as it was known in those days. In fact, I was the Miss Melody of Adelaide there for a few weeks on the radio subbing for a lady who played *On Top of Old Smokey*-type tunes. So I started to get an interest in jazz. I did a correspondence course in the army in arranging for big band. And then I came out of the army eventually. I thought it would never end. I went back with my father for a little while until he passed away.

Jim: Who supplied a correspondence course?

Bryce: It was out of the *Music Maker* in Sydney. I never did a lot of big band arranging. The only big band arranging I did was when I did a couple of charts for the ABC Dance Band—the Streamline Band.

Jim: Yeah, I remember those. They were wonderful. I was there when they were recorded but I don't have tapes of them unfortunately.

Bryce: My arrangements I took off the air. There's a bit of static interference I think. Anyway that's the only use I got of the big band experience. But those years ago it was getting me into thinking about popular music. Then I eventually sat in one night playing at one of the Canadian barn dances at the Unley Town Hall, somebody allowed me to do that. I think it was Frank Buller or Hedley Smith and then Alf Holyoak needed a piano player for a gig and I was recommended as being a pretty safe bet. Because they didn't know that I'd never looked at a small group arrangement before in my life and it had terms on there that I didn't know what on earth they meant. Not only that, there were directions that Alf would sing out, like 'Intro one ... Special and Ensemble'. It would go by so fast—'What did he say? What did it mean?' So I just winged it through there and got away with it. I know I had to rent a white tuxedo to do the job in the Glenelg Town Hall. I stayed with the Alf Holyoak Sextet, which was one of the best organised Benny Goodman-type groups at that time. I was very fortunate with that because it was like starting and getting the right training.



Alf Holyoak Sextet, circa 1949, L-R, Bryce Rohde, John 'Slick' Osborne, Holyoak, John 'Jazza' Hall, Jim Hogan, Milton Hunter... PHOTO COURTESY MAURIE LE DOEUFF OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ

Jim: Was that where you met Jack Brokensha?

Bryce: No. He wasn't in that. I met Jack Brokensha later. I was doing my thing in Adelaide. He was doing his thing wherever he was doing it—Melbourne or Sydney with Edwin Duff, Ron Loughhead and Errol Buddle.



Singer Edwin Duff (second from left) with the Jack Brokensha Quartet. Others clockwise are Ron Loughhead (piano), John Foster (bass), Brokensha (vibes), Ken Brentnall (trumpet)... PHOTO COURTESY MIKE SUTCLIFFE COLLECTION

Jim: Do you like being an accompanist?

Bryce: It depends on the person I'm accompanying. I've accompanied so many that I haven't particularly liked as people. I don't particularly like that role. It can be enjoyable, if the singer's a good singer. But singers are a strange group. I don't know that I'm really cut out for that.

Jim: Is it also that you'd rather be presenting your own music?

Bryce: Oh, yes. You feel so much better when you're doing your own thing and not being responsible to make or break that singer out there. If you're too loud, or too soft, or not playing enough, or playing too much, or the tempo is wrong ... all these things. I like to be a bit more in control of things. I guess I don't like being accused of being wrong, you know.

Jim: Would you say you were a sensitive person? I would, but I wonder how you see yourself.

Bryce: Sensitive? Yes, I'm aware. I like to feel I can 'psych' people to find out where they are; if that's anything to do with sensitivity. I certainly play with sensitivity. I like to hear somebody who treats the piano with respect because it's such a wonderful instrument. I like to hear musicians who treat each other with respect when they're playing. It doesn't really matter what they do off the bandstand so much, I guess. You don't like to realise, when you're on the bandstand, that somebody you're standing alongside is not even listening to what you're doing, or what anybody else is doing—just in their own bag. That goes under sensibilities which is probably close to sensitivity.

Jim: You're a bit shy about talking about yourself aren't you? Most musicians can't wait for the opportunity.

Bryce: I can be quite silent until I really have to answer the question. I was doing a radio interview in Adelaide. This gentleman was a very energetic Englishman. Jack took me up there. He'd done it the day before and so he said, 'You do the talking today.' I went up and I found that Jack was doing the talking. Not only because Jack is inclined to enjoy that, but I just didn't need to comment on anything. That's just not the way I felt at the time. If he looked me in the eye and said, 'Are you nine feet tall or two feet tall?' Then I'd probably look back and say, 'I'm two feet.'



Jack Brokensha: he was doing the talking...

Jim: What is it about life in America that makes it more appealing to you?

Bryce: It's certainly taken on a different look. I came over in the fifties, which was a really good period for music—for the type of music, pre-electric, post-bebop you might say. I'd come from Adelaide to America. That used to be a place you just saw up there on top of the atlas. Nobody ever went to America. Suddenly, we were there and the music just came rushing out at you. The way of life, the people, the culture, all that sort of thing just knocked you off your feet. It was very exciting. Time passed and the music changed some. I'm not as active now as I was. I'm a completely unknown person over here compared to what I was in Australia and I suppose, to a certain generation, I still am. Here, if I'm known it's just locally in the San Francisco area because they play some of the AJQ things and have played some Bryce Rohde Trio things on the KJAZ radio station here. But I have a little family nucleus here, two daughters in their twenties, and that really is the thing that keeps me here. They've grown up here and there's the three of us and we're pretty tight. We're in contact every day and it's the three Rohdes and the rest of America. We don't have any relatives. We go down to Australia ...



L-R, Bryce Rohde, Bryce's daughter Chelle, and Australian bassist Bruce Cale. This was taken in February, 2013, in Marin County, close to Bryce's home in Mill Valley, California, when Bruce was visiting Bryce. Bryce says that it's his daughters who keep him in the US... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CALE

Jim: You're a very close family there too!

Bryce: Yeah. Quite close. During those years of being here we lost touch. During the past five or six years I've been back to Australia about eight times, and I will continue to do so if I can. When we get down there we find we've got 15, 17 relatives. For my daughters here to experience that is quite an event. So, my daughters are what keeps me here. There's not such a strong musical reason to keep me in America, but I couldn't conceive of going back down there without my daughters. If they called me one day and said, 'Let's go down to Australia and see what it's like to live there,' I'd say, 'Well, OK.'

Jim: You've spent about half your life in the US now I suppose.

Bryce: I think it's more.

Jim: After the Australian Jazz Quintet broke up in 1958-59, how long did you stay in Australia that time?

Bryce: Three years.



The AJQ as it was when they arrived in Australia in 1958 for a national tour, before they disbanded. Bryce Rohde (seated), then clockwise Ed Gaston, Errol Buddle, Dick Healey & Jack Brokensha...

Jim: I remember seeing you a lot in those days. One of the places was the Windsor Hotel right in town, in Sydney. You also taught me to mix martinis around that time. In a teapot in a flat in Coogee. A teapot was all we could find that seemed suitable.

Bryce: In a teapot, eh? That's a beautiful drink, for a while.

Jim: After that time in Australia you returned to the US and I think that's when you got involved in the George Russell Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organisation.

Bryce: Yes it was. For three years, from about 1958, I started a quartet there in Sydney. I started to write rhythm section arrangements—guitar, piano, bass and drums. As some will remember, Colin Bailey was the drummer, Ed Gaston bass, and George Golla the guitarist at the El Rocco. I'm still mad I'm not in that movie.



The Bryce Rohde Quartet, L-R, bassist Ed Gaston, drummer Colin Bailey, guitarist George Golla, pianist Rohde... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIANJAZZ.NET

The Kingston Trio came to town and wanted a jazz group to do their concerts with them—precede them. They had a comedian, my quartet and the Kingston Trio. We toured Australian cities and went to New Zealand. I got to know the bass player with the Kingston Trio, David Buckwheat—no longer with us— who was obsessed with George Russell. He was carrying the book around. He used to sing in his hotel room—just play a chord and sing melodies to these different chords. I thought, ‘That’s beautiful-sounding stuff. What is it?’ So he gave me a copy of George Russell’s *Lydian Concept* book and that’s what started it. He actually gave me a second one and said, ‘If you ever run into anyone who’d appreciate it as much as you seem to, give them the book.’ I did that one day much later and it was Bruce Cale I gave it to. He is still George Russell-motivated. He’s writing music now but it’s George Russell-motivated. Interesting.

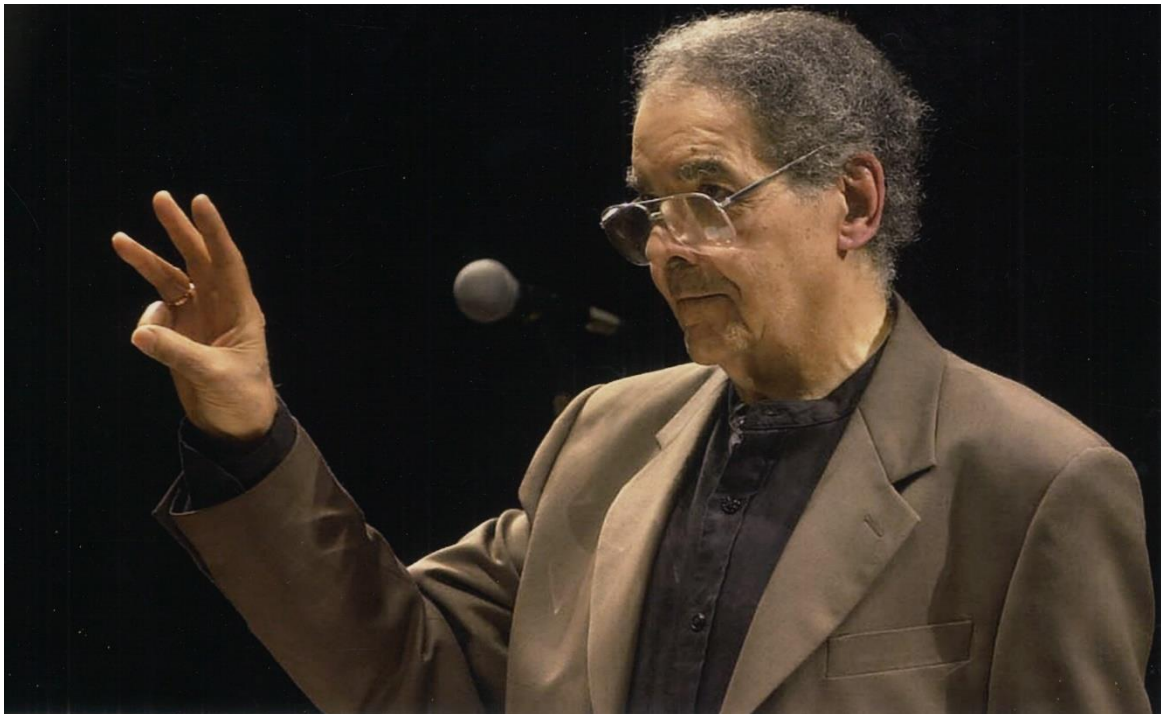


David Wheat, bassist with the Kingston Trio, sometimes known as David Buckwheat: he was obsessed with George Russell...

Jim: It seems to have been an enormously important thesis/work that George Russell wrote.

Bryce: It was, and even though I don't write any more music—and didn't write an awful lot I might have derived from the book—it changed my thinking. It gave me a way to think. That's what it was. It gave me a clear way to think of what I was playing—reduced it down. A lot of people think that George Russell's music is 'out there' and, at certain stages, it can be. It takes you right to the brink of pantonality,

but always knowing where 'home' is. No matter how far out, you were always relating to 'home'. You can also use it as an analytical tool for country music, classical, any sort of music that's in our 12-tone system. I used it more in my everyday playing, and still do. I also wrote some things which were from basic pretty things to madness. A couple of things which I did I can almost blame George for. One was *Corner Suite* that we recorded at the ABC with Charlie Munro, Mark Bowden and Bruce Cale. *Whatever Happened to Yesterday* and *Autocoptus*, which have been recorded. The Concept is still one of the most logical tools for an improviser to use. It's taught in some schools. It intimidates a lot of professional musicians because they say, 'Oh hell. All these systems I've looked at. I've got to look at another one now, at my stage in life?' But, if you can get past those things it's worth it. George is still teaching at the University of New England in Massachusetts.



George Russell, pictured at Umbria Jazz in 2001... PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE

Jim: He seems to spend a lot of time in Europe.

Bryce: He's not a real popular guy in the States. Yet the magazines that count, and in the articles that count from the writers who count, his name gets in there somehow.

Jim: Did you study the Lydian Concept more than from the book?

Bryce: No. I've spoken to George once personally. He came here to Mill Valley to visit with Buckwheat once. He authorised me to sell his books to the students I was getting at the time.

Jim: You introduced musicians in Australia to it.

Bryce: Charlie Munro went right along with it and Mark Bowden, a drummer, was thinking that way. In fact, that was a wonderfully enthusiastic group. It was a set-up. I'd just come back from the States and they probably thought, 'What's he up to? Oh Lydian Concept. Great. Let's have a look at that.' We'd rehearse every week. We'd talk Lydian talk. I had already given Bruce Cale the book. At that stage he was a physically slightly-built young man; almost could hardly stand up with the bass. This Lydian thing just supercharged him. It just sent him off. That whole group, especially Charlie Munro, got into it and it was a wonderful group.

Jim: One of the most important groups in Australian jazz I would say.

Bryce: Short and sweet. Sid Powell [saxophonist who recorded with them] was his own man too. It was a release for him to play in that environment. *Came a Ballerina*—Sid's got a solo on that that's just very flighty. I loved the way he played.



L-R, Bruce Cale, Bryce Rohde, Mark Bowden, Sid Powell, Charlie Munro: one of the most important groups in Australian jazz... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CALE

Jim: What playing do you do now?

Bryce: I don't have a group of my own. I don't want to think about how long ago it was that I had a group—it doesn't feel as though it was such a long time, but time flies by. It was the Bruce Cale, Lee Charlton Trio on the album *Turn Right at New*

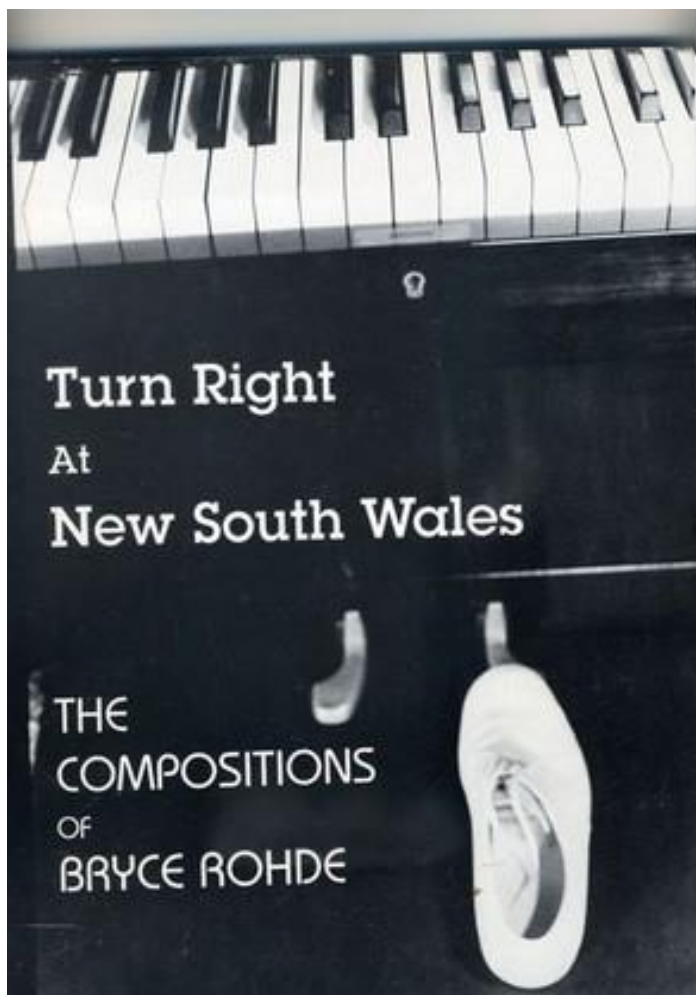
South Wales. When Bruce left, and went back to Australia, I had a bass player who stepped in, Joe Carroll, who is no longer with us. That was fine. It made the group a bit different. It wasn't the same. It wasn't the same, enough. When Joe left us, I didn't have the desire to pursue it any further. I felt a strong desire to be a sideman—and, I've become more of a sideman as time's gone on. So, people call me up for jobs, any sort of job. It's like they might call me to go and play somebody's Steinway up in Vaucluse, people in the art world. They have decent instruments, that's the main thing. I'm not going to play any more out-of-tune instruments. That's probably why I don't work too much. I may go up to the wine country here and do somebody's wedding—any sort of little casual thing that comes along. I don't work bars any more. There used to be a lot of bars having music, but I won't play them anymore. They don't pay much money, and they never did; plus the fact that it was a smoking, drinking environment which I don't care for too much anymore, no longer being in either one of those categories. The drinking laws tightened up so much here that all those bars that had music up to 1.00 or 2.00 in the morning don't have any business any more. People don't go out to drink any more. I imagine they are listening to their music at home. That's where part of the music business went. Even the jobs I used to do in the best hotels in town, where you'd go in and play for 500-600 people, everybody whooping it up, not any more. They're wending their way home much earlier. That was quite a considerable part of the business. I don't do a whole lot any more. I wrote a book, containing all of my 63 compositions, and included black and white photographs of mine. I bought a computer and a printer and fed these compositions in there over a period of time, and after much frustration.



Rohde: I'm not going to play any more out-of-tune instruments. That's probably why I don't work too much.... PHOTO CREDIT PROBABLY BRYCE ROHDE HIMSELF

Jim: What is going to happen with that book?

Bryce: I would like to see it published. The problem is that I got a few copies—like ten—and each one cost me \$32 a copy. Too expensive, in my opinion, for a book. Some people in Australia have told me that's not too bad. Just the same, if I'm going to be doing it for any sort of gain, I've got to be charging at least \$50. That's not fair. Unless I can get some idea or somebody's going to come up with some plan where a quantity could be printed, then I'm just going to do it for friends. Go down to the store and do it copy by copy. If someone writes to me and says, 'I want a copy', one day I'm going to write them a letter and tell them I've got a copy ready. Ideally, I'd like to have a bunch of them done. I'm still working on it.



Jim: Was photography something you did professionally?

Bryce: In 1982 I was wondering if I was able to do anything else in life but play the piano. I thought I'd go back to school full-time and I did, here in California. I took 13 units, which was the full count, and studied a variety of subjects—one of which was photography. I'd always taken snaps, but I'd never done the whole process. I went back there and ended up being able to go from buying the film, taking the shots,

developing the film and printing them, whatever size. Consequently, I got a little dark room equipment which works well enough for me. I got really wrapped up in getting my seeing eye going. That was what was happening for a couple of years and I was getting much enjoyment. The music writing, and concern about it, got replaced by photography and it was just as thrilling for me to print a good photograph.

Jim: Do you play much for yourself at home? Do you practise?

Bryce: Oh, God no! No, I don't practise anymore. I do play a bit preceding jobs—whether it's a day, two days, three days ... There's something magical when you reach this age, I guess. You can lose your facility to play—something to do with your mind as much as what you do physically. I could see where if your mind started to go ... if you started to lose it up there ... I don't feel I'm losing it yet. What comes out? You don't do anything foolish. I think you get to a stage where you know how you play best and that's what you do. Now, for this Australian tour, I did do a bit of practise. In fact, I practised quite a bit ... scales, exercises ... until I thought I was getting Carpel Tunnel Syndrome. So, I had to back off because I was spending too much time at it, having not done it on a steady basis. When you're working, that's your practise. It's boring to practise. It's mainly for playing 'classical' repertoire. I know a lot of players do run through exercises and there are a whole lot of books up there by Clare Fischer and others who have tons of exercises. I look at it but in about two minutes I'm bored with it. I drift off into something else.



Gonzalo Rubalcaba: a wonderful technique but he also has some stuff out that is not necessarily technical... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Jim: Are there any young players around today who impress you?

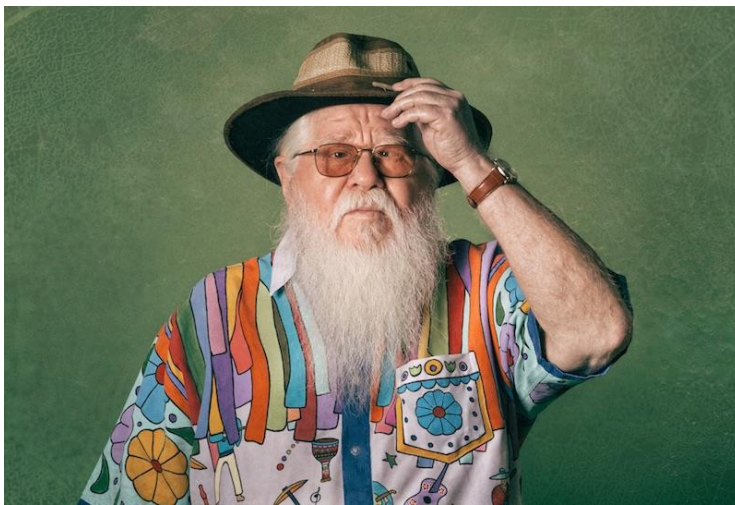
Bryce: That question. I can't put it on any one person. There are a heap of players around and I wouldn't name anybody. There are some players who've come out of Berklee, some who haven't. I think you probably mean players who've become prominent since Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock, there was a line in there. There are so many young players who play astonishingly well, but as far as anyone jumping out ... they jump out for different reasons. There's a guy from a Latin American country, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, wonderful technique but he also has some stuff out that is not necessarily technical. It's more on sounds from his background. That's where I'm likely to get my spark. I always get a lot of sparks from Latin players. In my whole experience, the whole Australian experience is that there's been no real close association with rhythm—the life of rhythm ... all of those people south-of-the-border. When Cuba becomes free, we are going to hear some pretty interesting stuff. There's some fine music going on there, on that whole strip across that part of the globe. I've always missed out. I've always envied that. I've often thought it would be nice for someone to say, 'Hey, do you want to come and play with this Latin band?' There are a few around this area. Just for the experience, just to get that core rhythm thing and that spark they've got. I really enjoy that.

Jim: One of the sensations of the Monterey Jazz Festival this year [1993] was Ruben Blades and his band from Panama.



Reuben Blades: his band from Panama was a hit at the 1993 Monterey Jazz Festival... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Bryce: That's the colour missing from Australian people. Where does our stuff come from? Mainly from recordings and the white swing experience. It would be good for more Australians to travel and stay somewhere to pick up on that stuff. I'm sure there are some good Latin-type bands or people that are there for a while. There is a little genius, Hermeto Pascoal. I saw him with a piano player, Egberto Gismonti. Not a young lion, an old lion, and a wonderful piano player who is obviously a 'classically' trained pianist but a very rhythmical one when he gets into more contemporary stuff. They incorporated a cello player, three percussionists and maybe two synthesisers. Pascoal plays several things. He seems as though he's about three feet tall, a very short man. He runs around all these instruments, completely 'hyper'. The music is up there.



*Bryce saw Hermeto Pascoal (left) with Egberto Gismonti (below): Rohde feels that the music in Australia could do with this sort of Latin colour...
GISMONTI PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*



Jim: Critics. Do they have a place?

Bryce: If you were to ask me what do I think critics do, that would be better. We're all critics. They can get to be very powerful and can hurt some people in their efforts. At the same time, through their criticism, they can probably help others. There's a guy, John Wasserman, who used to write the entertainment column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. When he criticised anything he did it in a very humorous way. He didn't say anything was bad or lousy or anything, but, by the time you got to the end of the article, you got the message that it would be best if you stayed home that night. There are those people who come on like they know what jazz is—no such person exists. It all gets down to personal opinions. A lot of musicians complain that we are out here trying to make a buck ... you come into town and somebody comes to see your opening night, puts you down ... that hurts business, hurts the club owner, keeps people away. Critics are necessary because they do inform you that somebody's in town. If they didn't do it sometimes you wouldn't know anybody was around. If you compare it to the way I look at movie reviews—they have very little influence on me. I can recognise who's in the band, or who's in the movie. I start from there. If they're in it I'll think he or she has got to be at least interesting, even if the reviewer doesn't like the movie. Often theatre critics and music critics hear and see so much they can't really approach it with an open mind.



John Wasserman (left) who wrote an entertainment column in the “San Francisco Chronicle”. When he criticised anything he did it in a very humorous way...

Jim: I'd like to get your opinion about some other musicians—mostly pianists. Keith Jarrett.

Bryce: One truly remarkable player. Sometimes he plays as well as anybody I've ever heard. He has a good head. He can get on a level of concentration which is very impressive. Even some of the stuff he's done which has been self-indulgent, some

stuff going back there with Dewey Redman. He did a lot of experimental stuff too. Overall I think the guy's one remarkable musician.



Saxophonist Dewey Redman & pianist Keith Jarrett...

Jim: Teddy Wilson.

Bryce: A great influence. A beautiful touch and a lot of piano players were influenced by him. He had such a light, featherweight touch. I think of Teddy Wilson and I think of Hank Jones and Tommy Flanagan—a whole school that follows there ... that beautiful touch. I love people who appreciate that side of the instrument. I like the digging, not hitting, the digging in and pressing into the piano. The opposite to that, most of the time, is McCoy Tyner. He can just beat the 's' out of the piano, and it sounds like that sometimes. Pianos can send the message back, 'You're making me sound ugly by hitting me that hard.'



*Teddy Wilson:
a light,
featherweight
touch...*



McCoy Tyner: he can just beat the 's' out of the piano, and it sounds like that sometimes... PHOTO CREDIT STEPHANE BAZART

Jim: Art Tatum.

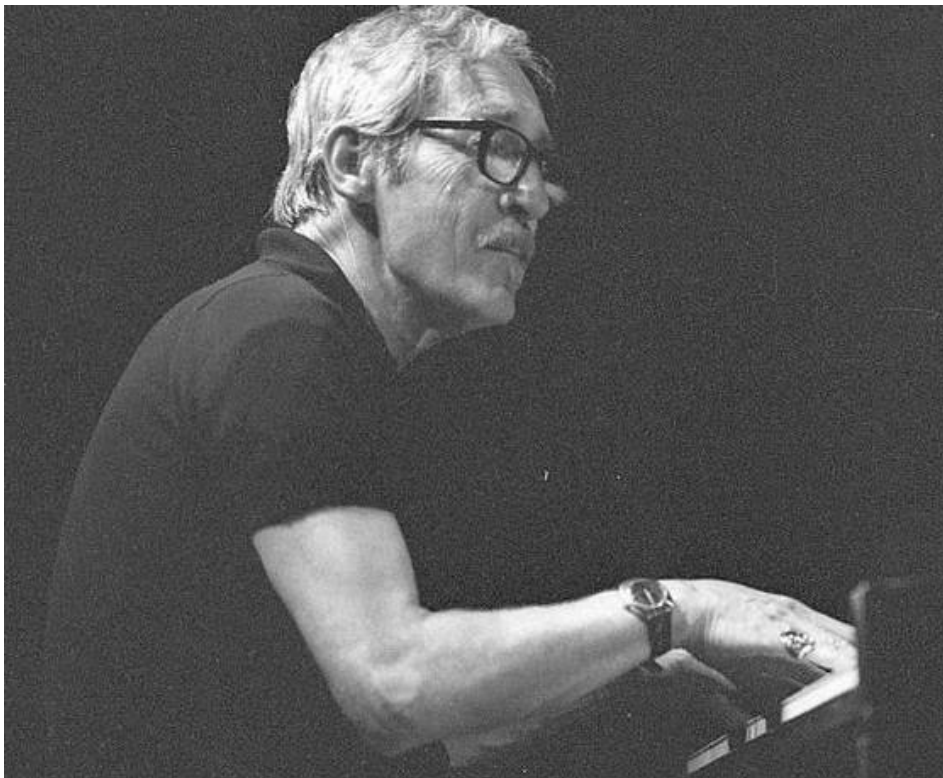
Bryce: He was more than the fastest. He had great harmonic sense. He was his own person. I would have hated to be a guitar player in his band. One time I saw him with a guitarist and a bass player. It was just awful. Awful. Tatum doesn't leave any space. Everyone else has to get in the way. Get out of the way when Tatum's playing. A remarkable ability to play the piano.

Jim: Bud Powell.



Bud Powell: Bryce says he loves Powell's thought processes, "I love to hear somebody who's playing with his head, I really do"... PHOTO CREDIT FRANCIS WOLFF

Bryce: He was a wonderful player. I heard something this morning, Charlie Parker and Bud Powell. Powell played something there which was so modern and so inventive that it was unbelievable. We don't talk about 'those' days, just the good days—that's what you talk about. Anybody could be awful or sick sometimes. He played a lot of bad pianos too. You don't hear any CD sounding Bud Powell. His thought processes I love. I love to hear somebody who's playing with his head, I really do. Jimmy Rowles has that ability. I love his playing. I can really relate to the way some of these guys play. They're so into it, and yet, so relaxed.



*Jimmy Rowles:
so into it, and
yet, so
relaxed...*

This is it, and away they go and play—slow, whatever. I heard an arrangement on the radio the other day of an award-winning record for the best arrangement by a big band for a certain year. It was the Rob McConnell Big Band playing *Strike Up the Band*, which started at a medium swing tempo and then they doubled it. It was an insane thing. This track went on and on. I'm walking around the house waiting for something to happen in this arrangement that got an award! Compare that to a Gil Evans arrangement. No contest. There's a guy, Gil Evans. Something else. Beautiful. Gil Evans and Duke Ellington. I don't know. I still have a lot of thoughts about Duke Ellington's music. He's like a king, Duke Ellington is—that is it. Some of the stuff he wrote, he probably wished it wasn't ever copyrighted. Some of it is very commercial. He had a shot at commercialism. He had his own working band, which is a great outlet for a composer.



Gil Evans (left): Bryce says “There's a guy... Something else. Beautiful. Gil Evans and Duke Ellington (below). I don't know. I still have a lot of thoughts about Duke Ellington's music. He's like a king, Duke Ellington is”...



Duke Ellington
Photograph by John Antill

PHOTO CREDIT JOHN ANTILL

Jim: Thelonious Monk.

Bryce: Now, it was Thelonious Monk's birthday yesterday and, frankly, it was like a two-day birthday because I had about as much Thelonious Monk as I can handle. Here are all these people in the musical world saying you've got to do a Thelonious Monk tune. I do one or two. I've got his music here. I've been over it and over it. A lot of it I just don't relate to very well. It's probably because I'm a white Australian.

Jim: There's certainly a current Monk vogue.

Bryce: That's right. People are doing albums on him. I almost think I know what Thelonious Monk did years ago. He thought, 'Well, Bud Powell's over there playing that sort of bebop. I'm not going to play that any longer. I'm going to play my own style.' I think that's what he did basically. He decided this was how he was going to play. He was, before, a regular Bud Powell-style bebop piano player. I noticed they've cleared one thing up lately. They're giving the right credits to the song *Round Midnight*—including Cootie Williams. The other credited composer.



Thelonious Monk in Sydney in 1965...

Jim: George Shearing.

Bryce: He's one remarkable person and he influenced a lot of people. He really touched a lot of people. He touched me because I was working in Cowlie's Bakery Pie Shop in Adelaide. I must have gone there after my father's business closed. One day on the radio in the bakery, George Shearing came on, playing, I think, *September In the Rain* where he plays the melody with the group—Marjorie Hyams playing vibes probably—then he improvises on the next chorus. I thought, 'What the hell is that? What's this guy doing?' Later I heard some of his ballad treatments. Shearing has a very 'classical' underpinning to his music. Later I got to know him a little bit in Los Angeles. You can say what you don't like but what's the point in that really? It's what you love that's most important. George Shearing has a touch for the instrument, a gentleness, a beauty. I've got an album put out recently with the Canadian arranger Robert Farnon. That's just a delightful album. When you consider what George's mind is doing, how his ears are registering the arrangements—that's a thing sightless people seem to possess. Julian Lee has just some beautiful aspects about his playing too. George Shearing is definitely on my list. His cuteness, I've got to say, sometimes almost makes me want to throw-up.



The George Shearing Quintet, with Shearing at the piano and Marjorie Hyams on vibes. According to Bryce, Shearing “has a touch for the instrument, a gentleness, a beauty”...

Jim: Professionally, are there any things you'd have liked to have done differently?

Bryce: I don't know. I don't think so. Our greatest experience was the American experience. Sometimes I've thought what it might have been like if I'd never left Adelaide ... you can go back and back and back. Why did I leave Adelaide? I was in a divorce-hold phase. That's why I considered going away while I waited out my time. I used to be in town playing swing shows, playing dances, playing *Handful of Keys* for the ABC—a small handful in my case. I had never been to Sydney. I've never served my time in the Australian Big Apple. A bunch of Adelaide boys did that—Johnny Bamford, Bobby Limb, Clare Bail, Beetles Young—some good guys came out of Adelaide.



Some good guys came out of Adelaide. Here are three of them, L-R, Johnny Bamford (far left), Bob “Beetles” Young (second from left) & Bobby Limb (far right), here pictured in Sydney with the British actor Donald Novis...

Same thing out here in the States. There are a lot of people here but there were little hotbeds like Detroit, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis. I don't think it could have been any better. I'd have liked to have had more money, but I could have had more if I'd been prepared to play the game that you have to play to get more money. You have to go to Los Angeles and try to become a Henry Mancini or write scores for Disney or work in the studios. It can be done. I wasn't the type of person to do it so I probably made excuses that I wasn't interested in money. Well, I truthfully wasn't interested in money. I was just disappointed I didn't have more, that's all.



Rohde: I truthfully wasn't interested in money. I was just disappointed I didn't have more, that's all...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Jim: You may have made more in the bakery business.

Bryce: Oh, yes. There's a good mark-up in that. My dad never learnt that. He made some of the most beautiful-looking cakes that you've ever seen. Small dainty stuff, and he was an expert cake decorator. Nowadays you stick it on or you pinch it on. He was born in Peterborough, South Australia, of Austrian background.

Editor's note: Bryce Rohde was born on September 12, 1923 and died on February 29, 2016. An obituary written by John Shand appears on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/new-page>