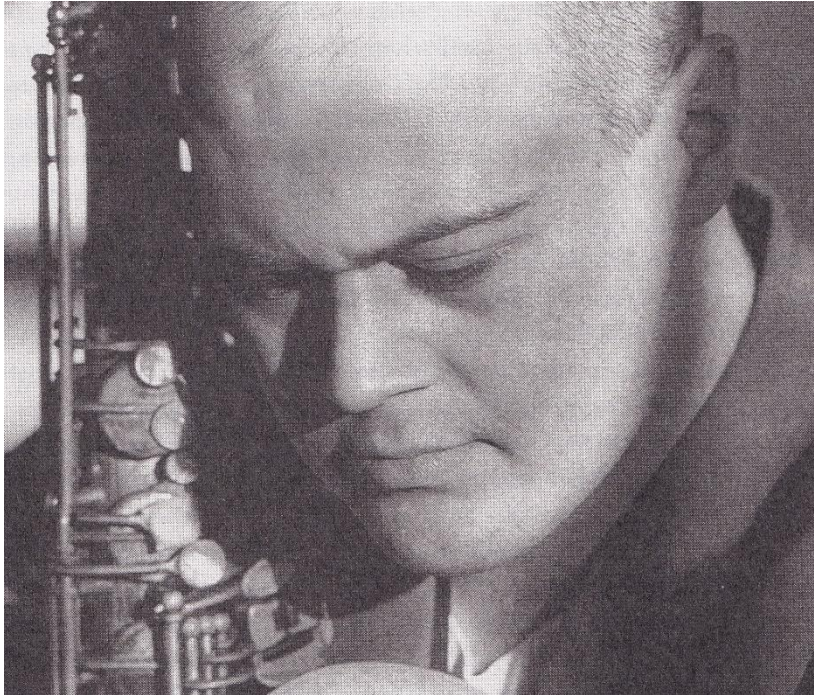


DALE BARLOW

by Jim McLeod*

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



Dale Barlow: he went to the source, New York, and lived the life of a young musician seeking a place... PHOTO CREDIT ROMAN CERNY

Dale Barlow is a powerful personality. And that's as obvious in his music as well as socially. He's determined and dedicated but always seems open to new ideas and prepared to go in different musical directions within the bounds of jazz. In the journey to be a jazz musician Dale went to the source, New York, and lived the life of a young musician seeking a place. He made it in a way no one else has done, in recent times anyway. He joined a major ensemble which has been a training ground for an enormous number of young players for years—Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. The lessons learnt in that environment, plus his natural ability and hard work, put Dale at least a step ahead of other musicians in his area of jazz. The tenor saxophone now seems as natural to him as talking but he did play and consider other instruments. We began talking about his piano studies.

**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.*

Dale: What are you going to be? Are you going to be a great star soloist? You know there's only one out of ten thousand that gets to be that. Otherwise you can be an accompanist or a teacher, so there's not really much professional leeway with the piano. But play flute, you're a talented flute player, you can play flute. So I kept going with the flute and everywhere I came up against stumbling blocks. I was hanging out in England with this friend of mine, David Heath, who's one of the greatest flautists who's ever come out of Britain; he used to be understudy to James Galway and did a lot of his gigs when Galway couldn't do them. He's now a composer. He used to say things like, 'Oh, what do you want to play the flute for? I wish I played tenor saxophone; I wish I was a jazz musician. There's no repertoire, there's only two or three flautists at the most in an orchestra—what are you going to do with the flute?'



David Heath: what do you want to play the flute for?



Alan Vivian: why do you want to play clarinet?

Jim: *You seriously considered being a concert flautist?*

Dale: I did, a classical flautist. I was good at it, but I didn't push myself because I was feeling schizophrenic playing the 'classical' flute and dividing my time between flute studies, 'classical' clarinet as well, jazz saxophone, piano—it just seemed like I had to split myself into so many different frames of mind. I took clarinet lessons from Alan Vivian, who's a great clarinetist, and he was saying, 'Why do you want to play

clarinet?' I said, 'I'm paying you all this money to take lessons, what do you mean why do you want to play the clarinet! I came because I heard you play so well and I wanted to get a bit of that. A bit of your insight and knowledge.' He said, 'Oh, stick to saxophone. It's much more flexible, there are more possibilities.' Some classical clarinetists will tell you the saxophone is actually an advancement of the clarinet. The clarinet is a straight bore and it's built on twelfths, which makes it awkward when you go over the octaves and over the break. The saxophone is a tapered bore which allows for the physics of the sound wave, the expanding sound wave as it leaves its source, and so because of that the tone is much bigger, it has more projection, more brightness and more flexibility. It's based on octaves and the whole key configuration and mechanism is much easier to play.

Jim: *What about your choice of tenor saxophone, do you still play the other saxes anymore?*

Dale: Yes I do. I play alto and I used to play soprano a lot. I started on alto, and I love playing baritone. I think what it comes down to is, who really turns you on when you first hear it. I really love Charlie Parker and Eric Dolphy and all of the great alto players going way back to Benny Carter; but, the tenor appealed to me because I think one of the first guys that really made a big impression on me, on the tenor, was John Coltrane. He was so revolutionary and different from the rest that I felt I really had to play the tenor to get in touch with that style, with improvisation. And, also, because at the time I was playing the alto and a position came up in the Northside Big Band for a tenor saxophone player! [both laugh]



John Coltrane: he was one of the first guys to make a big impression on Dale, on the tenor... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Jim: *There's often a practical reason which may affect a career.*

Dale: I wanted to play lead alto with that band, and they said, 'Maybe in a year's time.' I said, 'No I want to start now.' You know, I was about 14 or 15.

Jim: *Life was running out, huh?*

Dale: So, I thought I'd play the tenor until something else came up. My father's a saxophone player, so he had all the horns. I asked him 'Pop, I need a tenor.' So he said, 'OK take the tenor, play the gig on tenor.' I practised and, because I wanted to get familiar with it I listened to all the tenor players—Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Sonny Stitt ...

Jim: *It is in players like Mobley that I hear more as your influence actually.*



Hank Mobley (far left), pictured here with John Coltrane (centre) and Johnny Griffin... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Dale: Yes, actually that's true. I love playing Mobley, and Sonny Stitt has always been a big influence on me. He actually influenced a lot of people; he's fairly under-

rated you know. Stitt influenced John Coltrane. In fact, Coltrane used to sound exactly like Sonny Stitt. I found this out from the guys who were there, from Jackie McLean, Curtis Fuller, Art Blakey. It was a revelation to me and they were there experiencing this from their aural perception. They'd say, 'Remember that time we went down to hear Coltrane. Here was this guy trying to play exactly like Sonny Stitt but nowhere as good!' I was thinking, 'Wow!' I didn't know at that stage that Coltrane modelled himself on Sonny Stitt. You can hear the Dexter Gordon influence obviously. They were also saying, 'He sounded like Sonny Stitt. I don't know why they got him. Then we went back two months later and heard him. We couldn't believe what we were hearing. He was playing something different again; he was developing.'



Sonny Stitt, playing in Australia in the early 80s with bassist Ed Gaston behind him... PHOTO COURTESY VICTORIA GASTON

So everyone has had their influences, no matter how influential or how unique they become. I also loved to hear Stan Getz, a great player, a fantastic tenor player. He was the only player Sonny Stitt would let sit in with him. Stitt was really picky and ferociously competitive. Jackie McLean told me that he was playing one night with Sonny Rollins. Sonny Stitt burst through the door in old Western cowboy kind of vibe with a tenor under one arm and an alto under the other. He just stood there at the bar with the horns under each arm and said, 'I've been waiting for this moment for years.' He got up there and said, 'Jackie, you take the solo on the alto. You go first.' So Jackie went first, and then Sonny Stitt took the alto and carved him up. Then he said to Sonny Rollins, 'You take the first tenor solo.' Then Sonny Stitt played the tenor and tried to carve Rollins up. Well, there aren't many who could challenge

Rollins. He was just awesome and always is. I remember reading in Miles Davis's book where he said that if anybody came close to Charlie Parker in terms of conception and sheer brilliance on the saxophone it was Sonny Rollins. He and Joe Henderson are the two heaviest tenor players in the world right now.



Sonny Rollins (left) and Joe Henderson (below) are the two heaviest tenor players in the world right now...



Jim: *There obviously was never any doubt that you were going to be a musician.*

Dale: No, try as I might, I couldn't get away from that fact. My father is a musician and always played records and he had the saxophones around the house. I didn't really think about becoming a musician till I left school. I was always playing and

practising but I thought everybody could do it. I didn't think it was any big deal, but, after a while, I thought, 'Well, not everybody does this; maybe I can make a living out of it. Maybe I'm good enough to do something with it.'



Dale's father Bill Barlow (second from left), pictured in 1949. On the far left is Doug Foskett, others unidentified... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Jim: *How does your father feel about your success?*

Dale: He's very happy and very proud of me, but, at the same time, knowing what a musician's life can be like, he was hoping that I might go to university and become a lawyer, even if it was just as a back-up. But it's difficult to do that as a musician because you can be a lawyer starting out at the age of 35 or 40 and you can get away with it and become a professional if you're good enough. With music it's like one of those basic skills like painting, drawing, language skills, maybe mathematics—the earlier you pick it up the better off you're going to be. If you devote your time to law it might be six years at university—that's a crucial time for a musician's development, and for establishing yourself professionally in one country or around the world, getting some records out and building a reputation.

Jim: *Could you tell us about your time with the Young Northside Big Band? Was that a very important experience?*

Dale: At the time I didn't think it was. It was just like another thing. As a kid you don't value a lot of things at the time, but, retrospectively, they're very significant. I think the Young Northside was a great training ground for young players but I guess we all took it for granted. It was like, oh if you want a bit of fun every Saturday, let's go with the Northside Big Band, or after school on a weekday, go and play through some charts—great fun! There's that nice girl who plays trumpet in the band ... often something like that. When I think about it now, we covered a lot of the important big band repertoire, and, at that time for kids that age there was nothing outside that opportunity to play. John Speight was very good. He compiled a formidable repertoire which was very representative of the big band tradition from its inception to the present. We played Basie, we played Ellington, some Gil Evans, and all of those Mel Lewis band charts. It's very much to his credit that he went to that trouble to actually get a big band together with all those great young players.



*The Young Northside Big Band performing at the Manly Jazz Carnival in 1980, John Speight conducting. Dale Barlow (in dark blue shirt) is soloing on tenor...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

It was a very good education and, as a horn player, I think it's very important to play with a big band because you get the experience doubling on all the instruments—breathing together, phrasing together, playing in tune ... getting to work with a band dynamically, listening to the soloist, sight-reading charts and getting to know the form of tunes, being able to feel sixteen bar lots without having to count them one at a time. All those skills that I think you take for granted later on. I certainly did until I

started teaching guys who hadn't come through a big band. They always seemed a little behind. All of the guys who played in the Northside are professionals. Now you can see the benefits in the Sydney scene in particular. They're all good readers; they can do sessions, you can put anything in front of them and they can sight-read it really well. They're good to play with in terms of phrasing and dynamics, they listen to all of the other players around them. In the American system everybody does it anyway, but in Australia I don't think you really had that experience until that time. Nowadays there's a lot more opportunity, in some schools. Judy Bailey has a band, The Jazz Connection, that I actually performed with the other day, they're good young players. I think the oldest was about sixteen or seventeen.



Judy Bailey, pictured in 2012 with members of her youth big band The Jazz Connection... PHOTO COURTESY ABC JAZZ

Jim: *Did you ever attend a jazz studies course?*

Dale: I did it for two years.

Jim: *Many tell me that the most useful part was that you get to play with any number of others.*

Dale: Well, look, in any course it's the same. I could say exactly the same about Berklee — even more so because it's coasting on its reputation. It costs a lot of money to go there and people go there to say they have and get a certificate. Once you've been there you realise that the only admittance requirement is money. I've taught at Berklee; I was teaching some freshmen there and I said to one of the guys, 'What do you want to play?' He said, 'Oh nothing yet. I haven't decided yet.' 'Well, what are you

doing here?' Oh, well, I didn't want to go to university and Mum thought she'd send me here.' The thing is that amongst all this you get some very, very good players that go there, and there are very good teachers—James Williams, Jerry Bergonzi, Billy Pierce, Phil Wilson ... When you're talking about a course like that it comes down to certain individual teachers that you would do a course for, to get in touch with them, plus all the extra studies you mightn't get if you were studying under one teacher. More importantly, it's the association with the other pupils. The fact that you're in an environment where there are a lot of very good young, keen musicians who want to get to be as good as they can. When I was at the Sydney Con I remember that it was the other students who got me in touch with what was really happening. Maybe Chris Abrahams would ask if I'd heard the latest McCoy Tyner record, or Lloyd Swanton might ask, 'Have you heard this Charles Mingus record? It's amazing!' James Morrison might say, 'Have you checked out this Dizzy recording? It's just awesome.' And I'd be saying, 'Have you heard this Sonny Rollins? It's just great.' We'd all be feeding each other with the hippest, latest stuff.



Lloyd Swanton (left) might ask, 'Have you heard this Charles Mingus record? It's amazing!... Chris Abrahams (below left) would ask if they'd heard the latest McCoy Tyner record... Dale (below right) would be saying, 'Have you heard this Sonny Rollins?... We'd all be feeding each other with the hippest, latest stuff'.... PHOTO CREDITS PETER SINCLAIR



There were so many different tastes and I think we would spur people on to work harder and to listen to more music than they otherwise would have. There have been some great teachers at the Sydney course. Roger Frampton was running the course the first year I was there and he's a very, very fine musician. Bob Bertles was there then teaching saxophone, and Col Loughnan ... Howie Smith was still there. There were some good teachers. It was beneficial for me, plus the two years I was there they had the Jamey Aebersold workshops each year. The Woody Shaw group came out with Mulgrew Miller, Tony Reedus and Steve Turré.



This shot was taken during Greg Quigley's Summer Jazz Workshop, Australia/New Zealand, January 1981. Standing L-R, Mulgrew Miller, Jim McNeely, John Leisenring, Pat Harbison, David Baker, John McNeil, Michael Tracy, Rufus Reid, Steve Turre, Stafford James, Jerry Coker, Patty Coker, Ken Slone, Ed Soph, George Bouchard. Sitting L-R, Steve Erquiaga, Todd Coolman, Hal Galper, John Scofield, Tony Reedus, Jamey Aebersold. Sitting Foreground L-R, Randy Brecker, Woody Shaw... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

We had Johnny Griffin with Ray Drummond, Kenny Washington and Ronnie Matthews. Chick Corea was out. Dave Liebman, John Scofield, Randy Brecker was here, so was Hal Galper. So many really good players. Freddie Hubbard and Joe Henderson were here about that time, and all of the guys were willing to show you as much as they could. I think this really surprised the young students. I think they really expected these guys to be stand-offish and kind of up themselves, but they weren't. That was great exposure. We still suffer from the tyranny of distance but

before that it was even greater. It was always second-hand. You'd get in touch with the scene by reading books, reading the book *Bird Lives* by Ross Russell or the Coltrane book or the book about Miles. It was different to be able to talk direct with jazz greats.

Jim: *I think that Americans are more generous in that sort of way.*

Dale: I think they're more generous because they suffer less from a provincial attitude. Australia, because of the distance, tends to be very provincial. In a place like Sydney there's not so much of a transient population. In New York, for instance, I'd hear a tenor player one day and someone else the next, and then someone else the next day; I could never get used to who was in what scene because it would always be changing. So there wasn't this attitude of holding on to secrets and keeping them to yourself. I think that happens in Australia; there's a bit of that provincialism because people worry that someone might take their job, whereas, in America there's always going to be a million people out there to take my job. Why don't I just try to be as good as I possibly can and at least I can be me, be an individual, be unique and play the music I want to—if people like it, great! There are always going to be others coming along, so I think the attitude of actually withholding information, or trying to push people in a certain direction deliberately, is destructive.



Barlow: I tell students all the tricks I know, all the things I've worked out, all the things I've taken from other people... PHOTO CREDIT ROMAN CERNY

When I teach I give everybody everything I know. I totally spill the beans, because I don't think there are any secrets in music. No matter what I tell anyone, they're going to do it differently from me, anyhow. Charlie Parker records are available to everyone. If I listen to a Charlie Parker record, because of my tastes and experiences or lifestyle or attitude as an Australian, I'm going to pick off different things from that record than a guy who listens to that same record in China or in Europe. We're all going to sound very different because it's improvised music and everybody plays it differently. No matter how much you try to sound like Charlie Parker you're never going to sound exactly like him. Some come close but they never sound exactly like the real thing. They always will sound like themselves, so why not just absorb what you like and use that as part of your repertoire. I tell students all the tricks I know, all the things I've worked out, all the things I've taken from other people. I think that's the way the scene grows and that's the way musicians grow. I'm not in music to push myself right to the top at the expense of everybody else; I think that's the worst mistake you can make. I'd like to see the music scene in Australia be just as good as anywhere else. I am always surprised, when I go overseas, at how good Australians actually are. I remember coming back from New York and thinking, 'Oh, where will I go tonight; maybe I'll go down to Soup Plus, I know it's not going to be much,' and I was surprised! It sounded really good. All the guys were down there and it sounded great. I think the more information that's available the better the scene will be, and if the music is generally better more people will want to go and check it out and there's going to be more work around in that way.

Jim: *You are very ambitious though, aren't you? [laughs] There's nothing wrong with that. Ego is important.*

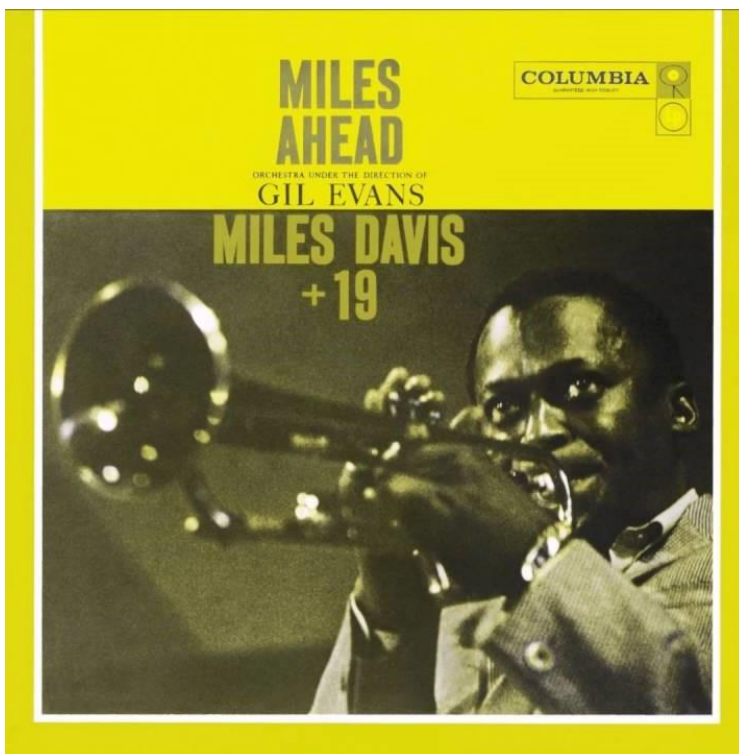
Dale: Yes, I guess it is. Ego, I suppose, means self-confidence, in a way. Self-confidence can be raw and undeserved, or there can be realistic self-confidence. The confidence I have is because I've put myself against the best, or in some very difficult situations, and I've made sure that I can cope with them. If I can't I go away and practise for six months and then go back and try again. I've had those experiences. It hasn't been handed to me on a silver plate. I've had the rough end of the stick many times in my experiences and I've had to learn the hard way. I don't think there is anybody good who hasn't worked hard, it's a myth. You show me somebody who says that they don't practise and I'll show you somebody who doesn't sound too good. I'll show you somebody who's lying or doesn't sound too good, or is extremely limited on their instrument and musically.

Jim: *Does playing a lot of gigs count instead of practise? A few musicians have told me that they don't practise when they're working a lot.*

Dale: No, that doesn't do anything. I've been through experiences where I've worked all the time, all day, all night, and I think what happens is that you get into this frame of mind where you play the same things over and over again. I don't think that's very good for you.

Jim: *When you practise, what do you practise?*

Dale: I practise the music. I think that's where it all comes from. I don't think you can separate one from the other. For instance, I've always listened to the best players, I've always had perfect pitch and I've always had really good rhythm, so I've always been able to memorise solos just off the record and play along with them. I've memorised thousands and thousands of solos. That's no trouble to me. To me that's the best source book because it covers everything. You're going directly to the source: to go from A to B you're not taking an indirect, round-about route. You know, the music contains everything. Once you've achieved a basic level of musicality on the instrument and you have all the music basics together, the next step is to get in touch with the music itself. The music itself is so demanding and changing all the time that there's always something new. It covers rhythm, it covers harmony, ears. That's how you find yourself, that's how you discover other people, the music. So I think it's the best way to learn and I can't stress that enough. It's actually difficult to do that. Most people shy away from it, especially these days, because you have books, records, videos, CDs, ... so much literature out there that people can just breeze through it and think they've covered it all. But if a student comes to me, I'll say, 'You want to be an arranger? Transcribe, say, *Blues for Pablo* by Gil Evans on the *Miles Ahead* album.'



If a student comes to Dale, he'll say, 'You want to be an arranger? Transcribe, say, "Blues for Pablo" by Gil Evans on the Miles Ahead album'...

They say, 'Wow. Where do I start?' 'Well, you want to be an arranger? Do you want me to tell you exactly what he's doing? That'd be cheating. Then you're not doing it. You have to do it yourself, then afterwards we'll talk about how it's done and the techniques he's using. Transcribe a great Duke Ellington piece or a Billy Strayhorn

arrangement.' There's so much that you can do and it's difficult to sit down and it might take you forever to do the first one. The second one might be a little easier and the next one a little easier still, but there are no short cuts, there's only hard work. That's the one short cut, hard work—that's it. I don't think anyone deserves to be a musician if they don't work hard. I know Miles practised a lot, a hell of a lot; Charlie Parker practised all the time. There used to be this thing in Australia, if you learn to read you lose your soul. So some players, so they wouldn't lose their soul, wouldn't learn anything about formal music. They could only play a few things in a couple of keys but probably play them with great inflection and emotion. Then a few years later players started coming along who could read and play their instruments—play all kinds of things, play in any key, and still play with great soul and emotion, in fact with more, because they had more understanding of their instrument's flexibility. They could play with soul and emotion over the most difficult things and also be very expressive in ballads. Then there was also this attitude in Australia which was very destructive, 'I don't practise, so considering that I sound pretty good, don't I?' If they started practising, if everyone knew that they practised, they'd say, 'Considering that guy practises so much he doesn't sound too good.' That does happen in Australia; people feel like they can just mooch around and not really work very hard. I was like that, too, years ago. I didn't practise when I was a kid. I was always a very natural player and could make people think that I practised a lot. But when I got to New York ...!



Australian guitarist Peter O'Mara (left) got Dale to Europe where he toured with O'Mara and two Americans who were living there. Through that he had enough money for a plane ticket to New York...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Jim: *Could you tell us how you got to go there?*

Dale: I actually went over because of Peter O'Mara [a Sydney-born jazz guitarist who has been living and working in Munich for some years now]. He got me to Europe and I toured Europe with Peter and two Americans who were living there. Through that I had enough money for a plane ticket to New York. I had a girlfriend in New York who had an apartment, so that part was easy! I set myself up in New York. That was a great experience, because in Australia it's really easy to get called a phenomenal player, even if you don't deserve it. At that time I loved the fact that everybody supported what I was doing and gave me great accolades, but I knew that I wasn't really as good as I could be, or wanted to be. I knew that I had to leave Australia to test myself and find out how good I could really become. Fortunately I was of an age—I was about 21 — that I could still learn and still develop and still be a part of the whole thing in New York. I completely immersed myself in New York. I didn't see myself as an Australian player at all. I had some contacts through the Jamey Aebersold thing. I knew Freddie Hubbard, I knew Woody Shaw. I called these guys up and went round to the clubs and sat in with people and got to know everybody. I took lessons from Dave Liebman, George Coleman, Hal Galper, Barry Harris, I went to his school.

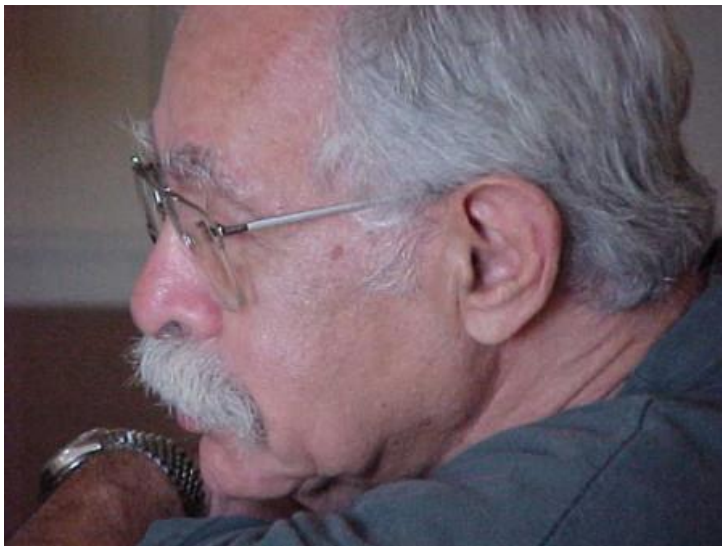


Barlow took lessons from many leading musicians in New York, including Dave Liebman (left) and Barry Harris (below)...





Dale studied arranging with Bob Brookmeyer (left) and Manny Albam (below)...



I studied arranging with Bob Brookmeyer and Manny Albam. I did the whole routine. I thought of myself as a New York musician for all that time, because that's how I judged myself and people started seeing me as that and including me in the good young players around New York. If a gig came up I would be considered. I was deliberately trying to get my standard to that stage. I wanted to sound like a New York player. In New York they have a much more thorough, rooted understanding of the music. It was fundamental to the culture. That was the melting pot and that was the place where everybody looked toward for inspiration. There was the greatest collection of talented individuals, in New York, at any one time, so obviously it would move ahead musically—a little ahead of the rest of the world. After a while they started advertising me as an Australian player and I couldn't really remember what the Australian scene was like, so I felt I wanted to come back for a while.

Jim: *How long were you in America then?*

Dale: On and off, for six years. I spent some time in England during that time, travelling. Then I went back in 1989 and was there for two-and-a-half years. But,

again, I spent a lot of time travelling. If you're lucky in New York, you never spend any time in New York, you're always travelling. The second time I did quite a bit of travelling.

Jim: *I have to ask you about the Art Blakey Jazz Messengers experience. How did that eventuate?*

Dale: Well, that came up just out of coincidence, really. You've got to deliver the goods, otherwise you won't last in a band like that, but there's a lot of luck involved, too, and opportunities that just come along. I have to say that that's pretty true. I'd played with pianist Cedar Walton at that stage and he recommended me to Art Blakey – 'I know this young tenor player from Australia. I think you'd really like him.' Art pricked up his ears, 'Ooh, from Australia. You mean there's jazz in Australia?' Charles Fambrough, the bassist, was a good friend of mine. I played a lot with him around New York. He started off in Grover Washington's band. He played with McCoy Tyner for some years and then he joined the Art Blakey Jazz Messengers. He's quite a famous bass player.

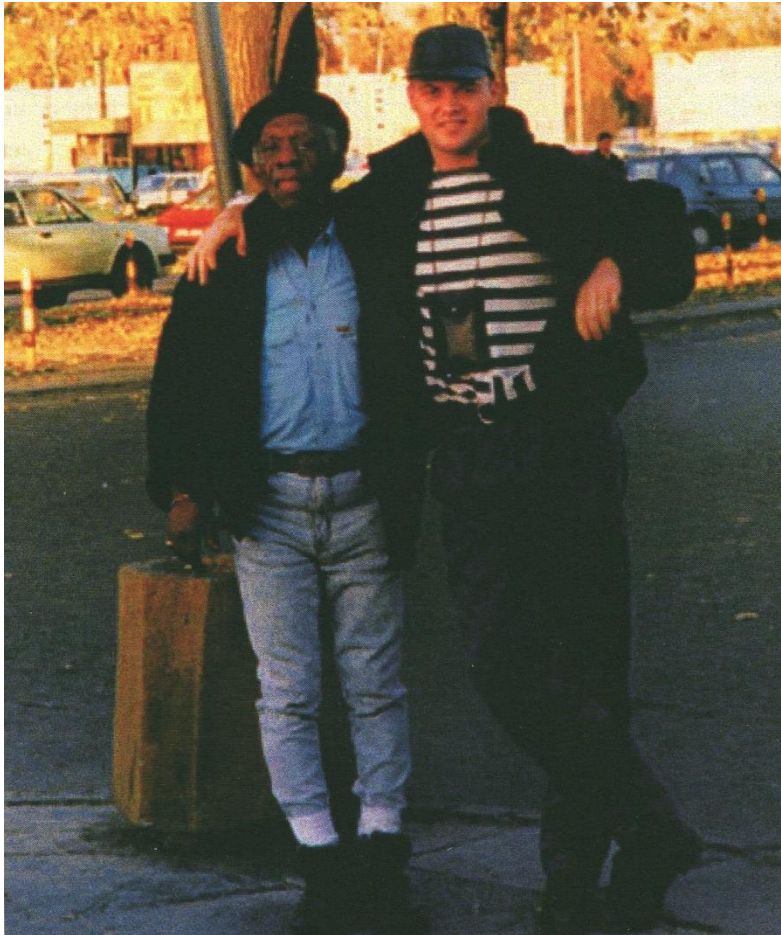


Bassist Charles Fambrough, a good friend of Dale's, took him up to Art Blakey's apartment and introduced him to Art...

Jim: *What did you learn from being with Art Blakey?*

Dale: It was funny, because I was very familiar with the Messengers' records and repertoire, and I didn't join the band until I was 29, which is actually quite late for a Messenger. There are some exceptions—Valery Ponomarev didn't join until he was 31, James Williams was about that. But most guys are really young when they start with the Messengers. So I knew the music really well and I'd had a lot of other experience there by then, so it wasn't as though they were getting a young guy in the band who was totally fresh and honing his skills. It was more that he was looking for a tenor player for the Messengers. Art Blakey didn't choose me because I'd played with Cedar or Gil Evans or because I sounded this way or that. He chose me because he wanted a functional tenor player to play the repertoire so he could go and do gigs—very practical, very simple. People get the wrong impression with the Messengers, 'Oh, he wants me in the band, so I'm going to play all my stuff.' He wants a Messengers-style tenor player, it's as simple as that. You do the job and you keep the job and that's what he wanted. It's like Vincent Herring, he sounds a lot like

Cannonball Adderley, so his obvious gig is with Nat Adderley. There was a time when I had a quintet that played a lot of Messengers stuff, so Art Blakey was quite surprised that I knew so much of the material. The first time I went to see Art, Charles Fambrough took me up. I got introduced. 'Oh, you're the tenor player from Australia. Where's your horn?' I didn't bring it. I just came up to say "hello". 'Well, go and get it. "Okay, I'll be back in a while.' Sure you will. You're not going to miss out on an opportunity like this—to play for Art Blakey.'



Art Blakey (left) pictured with Dale Barlow: Art wanted a functional tenor player to play the repertoire so he could go and do gigs—very practical, very simple...
PHOTO COURTESY BILL BARLOW COLLECTION

So, I caught a taxi up town to get my horn and raced back to the Village, horn in hand, knocked at the door. When I got in he said, 'Whip it out.' I thought that was really cold, in a way, but he didn't know me. Who am I?—just some guy from Australia. I got my saxophone out. 'Well play!' Here I was by myself and I just played for him. He was doing things around the house. When I stopped a couple of times he said, 'Keep playing.' He asked, 'Do you play the piano? Do you compose?' I said, 'Yes sure.' Well play me some of your songs.' So, I sat down at the big white Yamaha grand piano he had in the main room. I played my songs and improvised over them on the piano. Art said, 'Oh, that's good. OK, we're going up town for a while. You

want to come with us?' We got in his car and drove to visit a few friends of his, went to people's houses and stayed up there all night. He took us around the clubs and introduced me to a lot of people that night. Uptown in Harlem a couple of well-known singers and musicians—I can't remember who they were, they were all just hanging out. He was introducing me to the scene and wanting me to get to know the musicians, know the scene and see where he was at, and where he was coming from—and get some sort of angle on my reaction to it and how I was hanging. To hang with the Messengers is as important as being able to play well with them. Then Art Blakey said, 'Well, come down and play with the band. We're playing at Sweet Basil's, you've got the gig.'



Art Blakey (left) and pianist Cedar Walton, the two major African American bandleaders in whose groups Dale Barlow served... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS

So I played with them at Sweet Basil's for a week; it was very spontaneous. The other guys were very nasty because suddenly here's this other tenor player on the bandstand. They had a tenor player already. None of them was too happy about it, they thought Art was going crazy, but actually he'd always done that. When Wynton Marsalis started in the band there were two trumpet players and when Brian Lynch started there were two trumpeters. When Wallace Roney first joined there were two trumpets. That was how he did it. He gets one to push the other round or just kick the other one up the bum. He used to say, 'It's not a post office.'



Wynton Marsalis (left) & Wallace Roney (below): in both their cases, there were two trumpet players in the Messengers when they joined: Art “gets one to push the other round or just kick the other one up the bum”...



Jim: *Do you get nervous?*

Dale: I used to with that band. It was always on the edge because at any time there were great players in the audience, young players wanting to sit in and play. There was a lot of pressure, people expected to hear the best when they went to hear the Messengers, maybe the next greats. You were introduced as that.

Jim: *What is it that you look for in sidemen when you're choosing players to work for you?*

Dale: I usually choose sidemen totally at random. If I like their playing, if I've played with them before and it sounded good. I can usually tell how somebody plays just by the general vibe. Some players are deceptive, some you can't tell. Everybody's different. You know, just by the way they talk, by the way they pick up their instrument, the way they hold themselves, you can learn a lot about somebody just from that. You can learn a lot by hearing them play in different situations and seeing how they react with bands. Some players sound great at rehearsals or jam sessions but they don't sound too good on stage when they're playing in front of people. They might try to show off too much or they might play too selfishly and not with the other players. They might sound too weak and they mightn't support the others, or they might get nervous and rush. It's a performing art form. That's why recordings are so different because you're not playing for anybody. You're actually in the studio not playing for anybody so you don't have that reaction. It should be ultimately like a conversation with the audience. You're giving them something that they've come along to check out, that they're going to enjoy. I've found that a lot of players who record well aren't necessarily visual players. Sonny Rollins has always hated hearing himself; he can't listen to any of his records, he doesn't like any of them. The same with Joe Henderson, he's very worried listening to himself, or he used to be, but he records very well. So, when I think about sidemen I consider the fact that they've got to play in front of people and they've got to toe the line a lot of the time and play supportively and make the music sound good. There's got to be democracy on the bandstand. They all have to contribute to a general homogeneous musical whole rather than play for themselves.



Simon Barker (left) & Dale Barlow in performance at the Strawberry Hills, in Sydney, in the late 90s... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

Jim: *You are working in a few different styles, aren't you? The recordings we did at the ABC studio are different from the more straight-ahead sessions.*

Dale: It was very different. It's hard to know which direction to go in. I like to experiment with different idioms. I think Miles was a great teacher in that regard; he showed that the jazz musician can translate his improvisation, his art form into many different things. I think that's evident in the way jazz has developed, too. It's gone through so many changes but the essential thread of it is always there. A great thing about jazz is that it's flexible. You can adapt it to whatever's happening—to acid jazz, or hip-hop, or Indian music, African music, classical music—you can do anything with it, it's really up to the imagination or the limitation of the player or composer.



Miles (above, pictured in 1990) was a great teacher in experimenting with different idioms; he showed that the jazz musician can translate his improvisation, his art form into many different things... PHOTO CREDIT LINDY POLLARD

Jim: *Do you think there might be a wider acceptance of jazz if more jazz musicians were more flexible?*

Dale: A lot of people, and rightly so, are fearful that you can actually cheapen the music by doing that. Certain musicians do it really well, like Miles, but I've heard others do fusion or commercial records at the request of their record company because they feel they'll sell more records. They actually alienate the market they've already created but they don't get in that very competitive popular music realm. Their general reputation suffers. Some musicians, when they try other things,

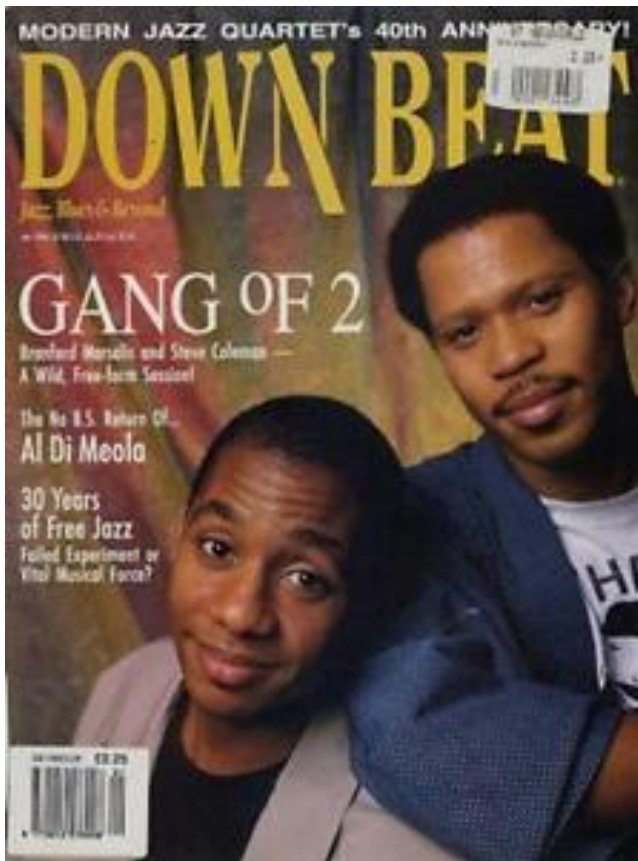
preserve their identity and integrity faithfully. I always try to keep the reins on what I'm doing.

Jim: *You always know it's you.*

Dale: To me that's the main thing. I always direct it in a way that satisfies all of the things I need to represent me, or to get off and be able to enjoy the musical situation. I always push in that direction.

Jim: *What about critics? Do you think they are necessary, important?*

Dale: I think so. Whether you like it or not they're part of the scene. I remember reading an interview in *Down Beat* with Steve Coleman and Branford Marsalis. They were getting stuck into critics. They were talking about how they should openly criticise critics because critics openly criticise them. Yet they are the ones who are creating the music, not the critics. The critics only create popular taste and opinion.



Certain movements and certain categories have been created by the critics and a lot of musicians have deliberately played to satisfy the critics so that they get good reviews, so that they get a better record deal, or can further their career in some way. I think that's a mistake. I'm a little bit scathing towards critics. I love what some of them write and what they say, I agree with them, others I don't agree with. You're just talking about a group of individuals with completely different tastes and

different listening experiences. I think critics are important because they bring jazz to people. Critics are fairly conservative generally; even when they think they're being outrageous they're actually fairly conservative. The best musicians are generally much more flexible than the critics and they're moving ahead of the critics. It's a matter of the critics bridging the gap between the public and the artist. I remember Art Blakey told me this story about a guy who came up to him at a gig years ago when he was just starting out and playing with the Billy Eckstine band. This guy said, 'Did you read that article about you? It said that you were like a little pygmy banging logs with big chunks of wood.' He rattled off all of these quotes from the article. Art said, 'Well, did they spell my name right?' You can't be worried too much about what people say because you cannot please all of the people all the time. You have to go with your own judgment as a musician who's had a lot of experience and what you believe is right for you and how you want to play the music.

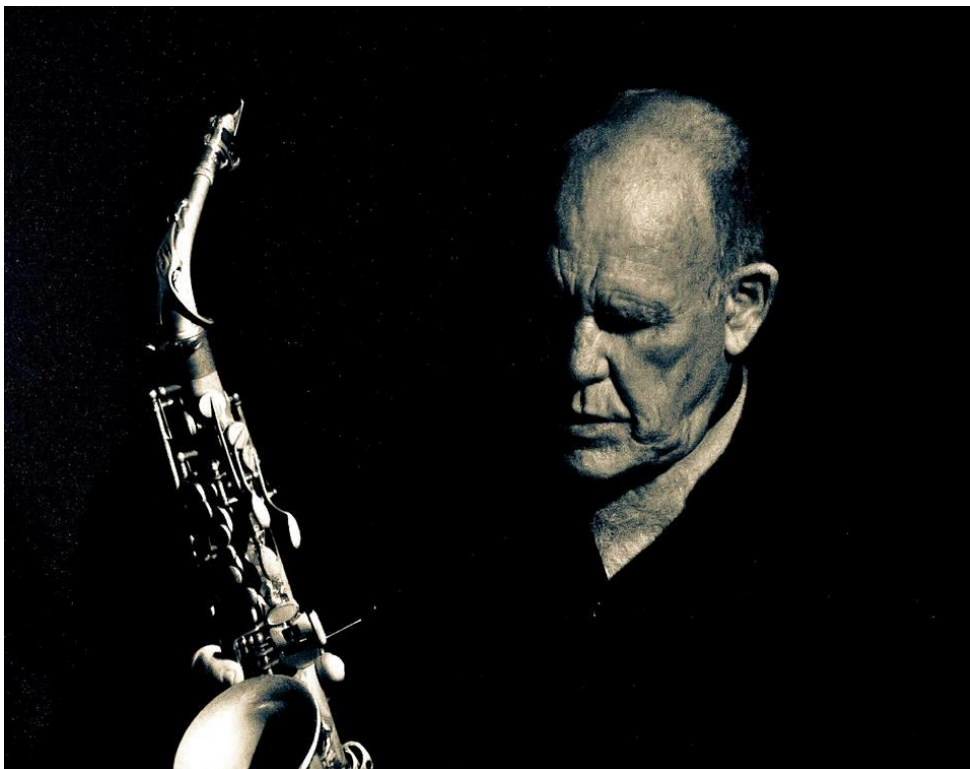


L-R, Essiet Essiet, Art Blakey, Dale Barlow: when Art was alerted to quotes from a music critic, Art said 'Well, did they spell my name right?'...

Jim: *What do you see for yourself in the future? Do you have a plan?*

Dale: There are a lot of things I want to work towards. Things are fairly stable at the moment but I'm never really satisfied with what I'm doing. I always want to change

it. If I get stuck in a rut I always want to break out of it no matter how comfortable or commercially successful that mould might be. It's an inner urge I have. What I really want to do is try to travel the world as much as possible with my own group. I do enough of that already but I'd like to do it with an Australian group. I'm doing that this year, 1994, with an Australian group for the first time. I've gone by myself and picked up bands in Europe, or wherever, and it's been great for me, but I'm still thought of as an American musician because of my connection with Art Blakey and Cedar Walton. It's more commercially viable to advertise an American rather than an Australian, so the agents did that. But there are some great things happening in Australia and I'd like to take an Australian band over there. Not just an Australian band that sounds like an American band, but an Australian band that sounds like an Australian band. To me it's like selling ice to eskimos or sushi to Japan, you have to have something a bit different and I think now in Australia is the time. There's a lot happening: the environment of Australia, the landscape, the language, everything ... the creative mind and improvising, because it's so direct and spontaneous, is affected by the environment and subtle things. I can hear those differences. I can hear those things in people's playing. I listen to Bernie McGann and I don't think you could have had a guy playing like that from anywhere else in the world. He's one of the elder statesmen of the music in this country. There's a wonderfully naive, raw and spirited and honest energy and drive that I think is the thing that is appealing to the rest of the world about Australia generally—our outlook, our attitude, our language, our movies. I think that's something coming into jazz and into Australian music generally.



Bernie McGann: he's one of the elder statesmen of the music in this country... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

Jim: *Do you see yourself being in Australia most of the time?*

Dale: Not necessarily. I really wanted to give it a go this time to see what could happen, but it looks like I could spend more time overseas. In New York or perhaps Europe this time ... jazz is more formal in Europe in a lot of ways. It's very much part of the European mentality now, jazz. In some ways there's more respect, and that's what the black Americans originally liked about going to Europe, general artistry, expertise, virtuosity and musicality were respected and revered, so they were put on a pedestal no matter where they were from. Black Americans immediately found acceptance in Europe and it's still like that. But the down side is that the music is very formal—that respect has a lot to do with formality. For instance, if you play a gig in Europe usually everybody will be sitting down quietly and studiously listening to every note. I remember playing with a band in Switzerland not so long ago. The bass player was taking a solo and it was amazing, they were all young kids in the audience and when somebody got up to go to the toilet, the person next to them told them to sit down and be quiet. That's great and respectful but a little stiff for jazz. In America the extreme opposite would be playing in Harlem. You have people whistling, yelling and hooting all the time, shouting out, 'Play, Play!'



In Harlem you have people whistling, yelling and hooting all the time, shouting out, 'Play, Play!'...

There's so much going on but it eggs on the musicians and milks the best out of them. It really makes them play and it's really fun and a very festive, happy friendly environment. In some ways I think it's part of jazz. I like the idea that you can feel comfortable to get up and move around, have a drink, look at the paintings on the wall ... then sit down while the music's going on. All the same I've been at places where there's been a rowdy bunch of businessmen down the front because they've made a lot of money, so they've got the best tables and the champagne, so the management respect them because they're paying the bills.

Jim: *Do you have a preference for venues?*

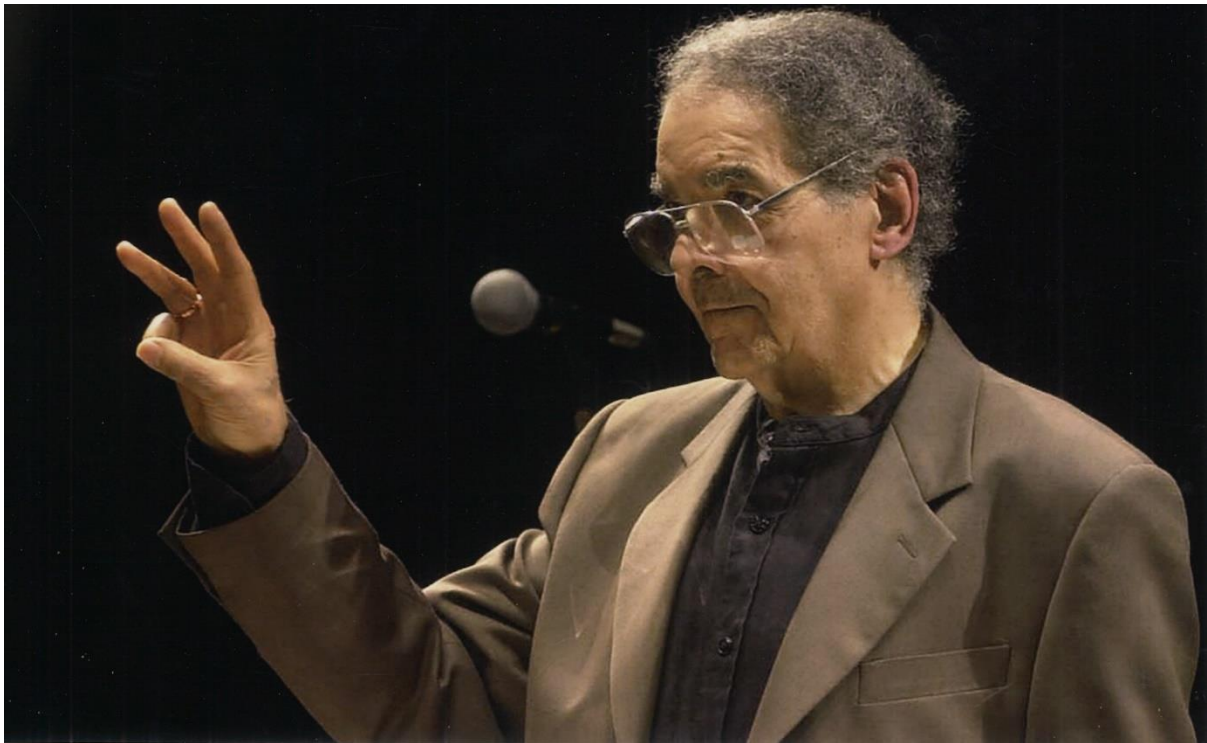
Dale: I don't like festivals very much. It's great to hang out with all the musicians, but you're on stage for forty-five minutes, and that's it. You're on the plane again. It just seems too short a showcase; you don't really get to hear the best of what a performer has to offer. So, I prefer clubs. Concerts are OK sometimes. I was impressed by the way Wynton Marsalis actually relaxed the whole concert atmosphere at the Opera House. He has to play in big concert halls a lot of the time and he doesn't like it. I was talking to him about it and he'd rather play small clubs, but he can't go back to doing that because the record company has pushed them to this demi-god status and expect them to follow through. It's really a lot of pressure for poor Wynton. I feel for him; it's a rough position to be in and he has a hard time. I know him pretty well through the Messengers connection. He's a very good spokesman for the music.



Wynton Marsalis: "he's a very good spokesman for the music"...

I like a lot of the things he says. He's very vocal and down to earth about the music. Some accuse him of being too purist, some say he's too conservative, but he's made a lot of records that don't indicate that and I think he's done a lot for the music. He's definitely an extraordinarily talented player. I've heard people say, 'But at that age when he started Kenny Dorham was playing much better and so was Dizzy Gillespie, Fats Navarro, Booker Little, Lee Morgan and Freddie Hubbard', which is absolutely true—they were playing amazingly well. When he first came on the scene Wynton wasn't playing anywhere near as well as those guys were at an equivalent age, but if you went into a club and heard him, you'd think, 'My God, who is this guy? Why isn't he famous?' He sounds really good. I love his writing. I think he's done some fantastic albums — *Black Codes from the Underground* is one of my favourites; *Blues Alley*, the way he's rearranged a lot of those standards. I really like the orchestral album, *Hothouse Flowers*.

Jim: *Do you use any techniques like the George Russell Lydian Concept, those sorts of theories?*



George Russell (pictured above at Umbria Jazz in 2001): Dale does not see the real underlying significance in a George Russell Lydian Chromatic Concept... PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE

Dale: Look, I've read all the books and I've got time for all of them. However, I fail to see the real underlying significance in a George Russell Lydian Chromatic Concept. To me it doesn't really have an overall bearing on how people sound. There are a lot of things that do and I'd rather go for those. It's an interesting concept based on the fact that in a natural harmonic series the fifth is actually flat, so the original, fundamental scale, the Ionian, should really be the Lydian and therefore that changes

the order of everything else. I can see the sense in that, and he's come up with a lot of interesting scales and justifications for it and everything else, but in America there are so many people who come up with a concept and ideas to sell a book—they want to sell an idea. They want to be an innovator. I remember taking lessons from a piano player who was telling me about this four-note concept that he'd developed and raving about it, saying, 'Don't tell anybody about it because I'm publishing a book about it soon. I'm going to make a fortune.' After a while I realised this concept was something that John Coltrane was doing way back when. Nothing new at all. It's just that this guy's formalised it into an idea. I'd rather go directly to the source to get my information rather than get it second-hand through someone who's interpreted the works of other people. I always get my information directly from the players, arrangers and writers. I'm working on a few things now. I'd like to write a piece for symphony orchestra because I don't think that has been done effectively yet.

Jim: *It usually sounds like two different worlds, doesn't it?*



Barlow: the more you learn, the more there is to learn...

PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

Dale: I'm convinced that it can be done very, very well. I think Wynton's *Hothouse*

Flowers is one of the most successful ventures in that idiom, but I think it can be done in a much more adventurous way than that, and a more interesting way. Writing for a symphony orchestra, and a string quartet interests me as well. I'm always looking for variations, ways of putting the music a different way, where it's going to say something a little different. Studying more is also important to me. It never stops. I think that's a very daunting thing for a lot of musicians. When they start, a lot think there's so much to learn it's so depressing, and the more you learn, the more there is to learn. My answer to that is, if there was a ceiling you'd get bored. You'd achieve it and what would you do after that? You'd have to go on and do something else, but music is limitless. There's always more to learn, and I think that's a great thing about it, the beauty of this music. You're only limited by your own imagination. It's all up to you, there's no limit. To me that's exciting, that spurs me on to make discoveries.