

LISA PARROTT: OUT OF SIGHT

by Jim McLeod*

[This interview appeared in instalments in two editions of the magazine Australasian Jazz & Blues, Volume 2, No 2, 1995 and Volume 2, No 3, 1995]

Lisa Parrott first impressed me some years ago when Mike Nock brought some of his best students for a recording session, and the one who stood out, way ahead of them all, was saxophonist Lisa. Now one of Australia's most creative jazz musicians, she has studied in New York with leading saxophonist Steve Coleman, as you'll read in the text of this listening session we had recently. Lisa knew nothing of the tracks I played until after she'd given her opinions, when she sometimes gave further comment.



Lisa Parrott, pictured in 1990: now one of Australia's most creative jazz musicians, she has studied in New York with leading saxophonist Steve Coleman... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

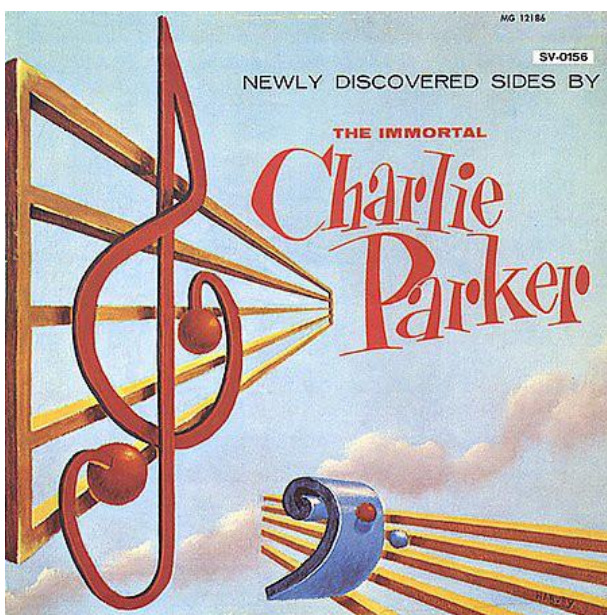
1/ **Lester Young.** *Ghost Of A Chance* from CD *Immortal Lester Young* (Savoy SV 0112, 1944). Count Basie, piano; Freddie Green, guitar; Rodney Richardson, bass; Shadow Wilson, drums.

**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.*



LISA: I'm pretty sure that was Lester Young. I've been getting into a bit of Lester only recently. I used to listen to him about nine years ago, but just the last year I've gone right back to early stuff. Lester is amazing... his phrasing, you can tell him by those little inflections and he's incredibly melodic and totally sweet. So pretty. There's such strong logic in the playing of Lester...it makes total sense. He plays a phrase and it's a great flow, not disconnected, like "of course, of course, of course", like a good argument. It sounded as though it might have been pretty early. Amazing time feel, so *there*, so relaxed.

2/ **Charlie Parker.** *52nd Street Theme* from CD *Newly Discovered Sides Of Charlie Parker* (Savoy SV 0156, 1948). Miles Davis, trumpet; Al Haig, piano; Tommy Potter, bass; Max Roach, drums.



LISA: Wow! That's fantastic. Parker playing in a club is really different from his studio recording. I tend to call it 'hard core Parker' - far more serious than his studio stuff. There are fewer quotes. It's as if he's playing more for the musicians than the audience, far more non-compromising.

JIM: Would you say that was true usually of 'live' performance?

LISA: Not necessarily. People approach it differently; some are more serious in the studio than they are on stage. All the 'live' Parker is the real Parker genius. That was Miles? It was amazing. At first his phrasing sounded like one of the early times he was playing with Parker because he's using something he didn't use later - inflections which reminded me a bit of Kenny Dorham. Then Miles was turning it around and so definitely that was Miles - some of the notes he chooses. I've listened to some of the later stuff Miles and Parker did and then Miles is playing more like Parker, as if concentrating on getting the logic happening. Damn that's good. Fantastic band and that was *52nd Street Theme*, his chaser but a slower version than later.

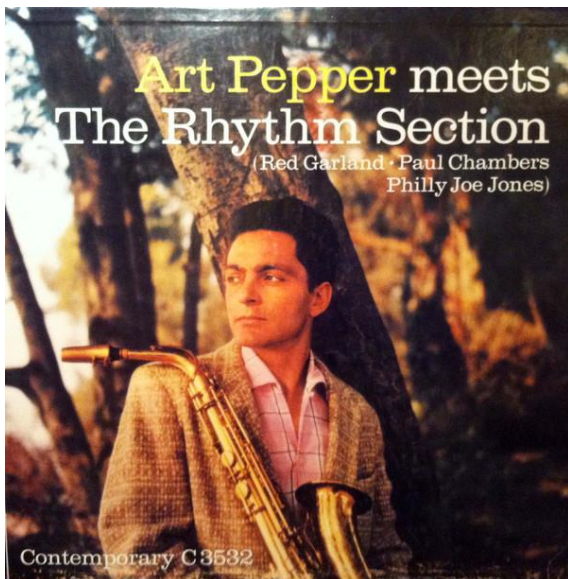
3/ John Coltrane. *I'm Old Fashioned* from CD (Blue Note CDP 746095/2, 1957). Curtis Fuller, trombone; Lee Morgan, trumpet; Kenny Drew, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; Philly Joe Jones, drums.



LISA: This is a really interesting track. That was 'Trane, beautiful 'Trane. The trombone player I cannot remember, but it's the same player who plays on the album *Blue Train*. Coltrane playing ballads is my favourite sort of Coltrane, actually. He plays melodies and ballads really, really beautifully, and in this period his tone was absolutely gorgeous. His top notes are so open, he's really close to singing it; you couldn't get any closer on a tenor saxophone. Was that Clifford Brown on trumpet?

LATER: It's from the same *Blue Train* album. I used to share a house with Cathy Harley and she used to press "repeat" on the title track of *Blue Train* so I never got to hear much of the rest.

4./ **Art Pepper.** *You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To* from CD *AP Meets The Rhythm Section* (Contemporary OJCD 338/2, 1957). Red Garland, piano; Paul Chambers, bass; Philly Joe Jones, drums.



LISA: Was that Art Pepper? I haven't listened to a lot of him, but I always dig it when I do. I think we both decided that was Alan Turnbull on drums. [Joking, but it did sound like him.] Pepper was different from Charlie Parker, but coming from a bebop thing. His phrasing is so different, from an older thing. That tends to make it a lot sweeter. He's tonguing a lot more notes so it sounds quite different to the hard core swing/bop. The first couple of notes I thought it was Paul Desmond, similar phrasing, but then those lines - that's Art Pepper. He plays some interesting notes on that song - on the minor chords, really pretty notes. Parker used to do that, too. He'd play some really bright sounding notes on a minor key, and dark notes on a major key. It creates a really nice balance.

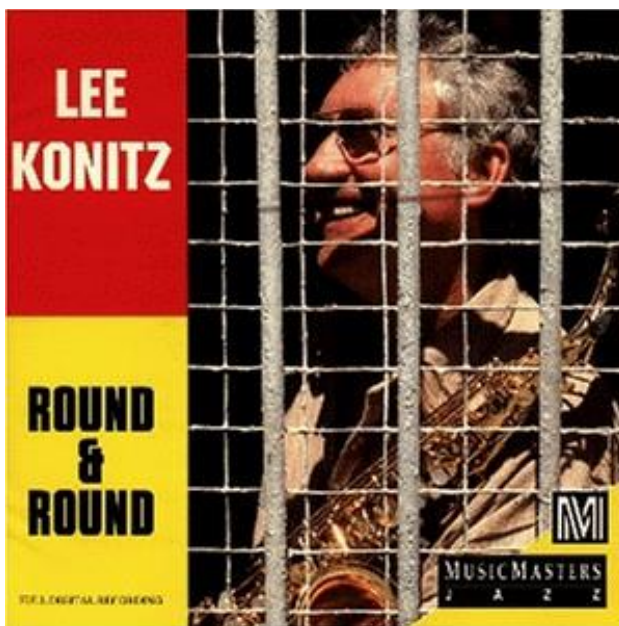
5/ Judy Bailey. *Quasi Blues* from CD *Sundial* (ABC 514 978/2, 1993). Graeme Lyall, alto saxophone; Craig Scott, bass; Simon Barker, drums.



LISA: They're doing some really interesting things especially in the beginning. That track sounds like it was just an idea they had in the studio and they just blew. It was so open. Was that Steve Coleman? I thought it could have been really early Steve, some of the lines were definitely in that vein...Was it a Geri Allen group? I give up.

LATER: Judy Bailey and Graeme Lyall?! Now that's totally sprung me. I've only heard Graeme Lyall play a couple of times. It was interesting in Wangaratta last year. He'd never heard me before then. We got together and had a long rave. Since I've been back from America, some of his students from Con have come and had one-off lessons with me; from them I learn he has a great way of teaching. Everyone who has come to me who has studied with Graeme has a great attitude I really dig towards music. I heard him play with Improviso. He has a very similar attitude to Steve - logic, symmetry - but he's coming at it intuitively. Judy was wonderful - I've hardly had anything to do with her. She was never one of my teachers at the Con. We had conversations about music in the ladies rooms!

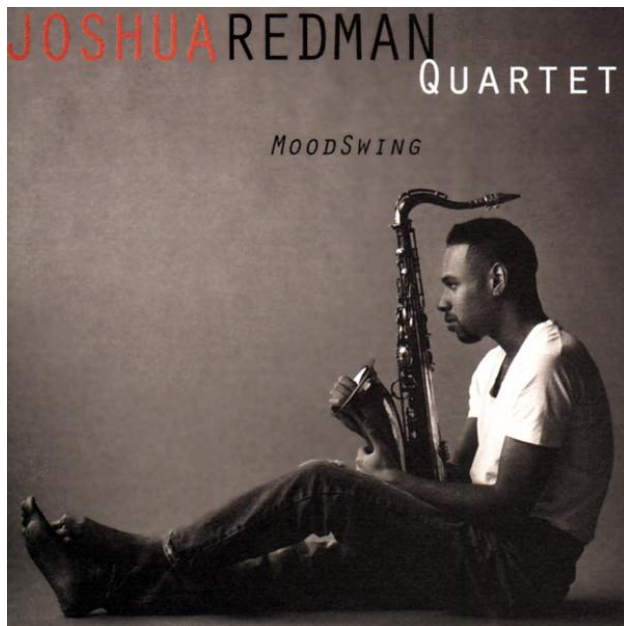
6/ **Lee Konitz.** *Nancy* from the CD *Round And Round* (Limelight 820 804/2, 1988). Fred Hersch, piano; Mike Richmond, bass; Adam Nussbaum, drums.



LISA: Damn. I know that sound, but I can't think who it is. I dig it. It's like Ben Webster on alto. I know I've listened to him before.

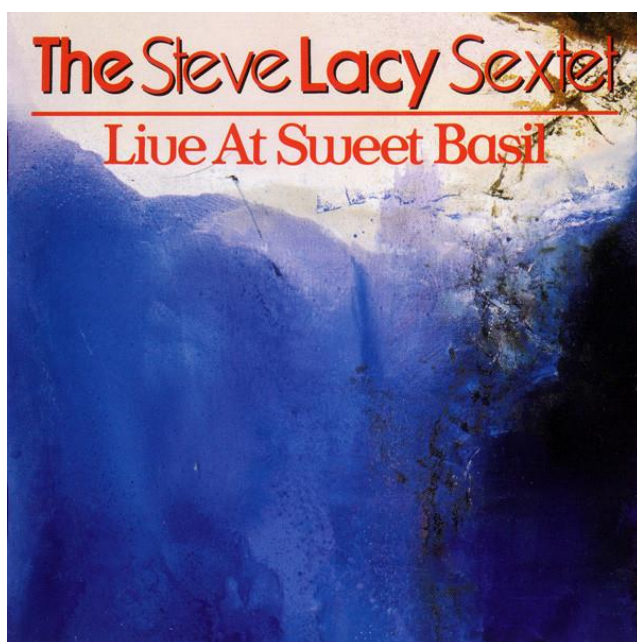
LATER: I've hardly listened to Lee Konitz for a long time. My listening habits have changed over the years. Lee Konitz's lyrical thing is a real pleasure to hear. My favourite players are the melodic players and that really speaks. That breathiness is so beautiful. He's different from the others. It's a modern but old thing and not from bebop but from something after that.

7/ **Joshua Redman.** *Sweet Sorrow* from CD *MoodSwing* (Warner 9362 45643/2, 1994). Brad Mehldau, piano; Christian McBride, bass; Brian Blade, drums.



LISA: That's really nice track. It sounds like a young player to me because there are a lot of influences in it; a lot, from early stuff to new. It's bluesy but too clean to be an old player. Is it Joshua Redman? I haven't listened to him but I thought some of it reminded me of Dewey (Joshua's father), but no way is it Dewey! The tradition thing is strong over there. If you're a young player you need to be doing what Joshua's doing to be accepted in any way. For my liking he's too clean, he's holding back. It's too thought out, too careful, or premeditated. I dug it but he's not letting go enough.

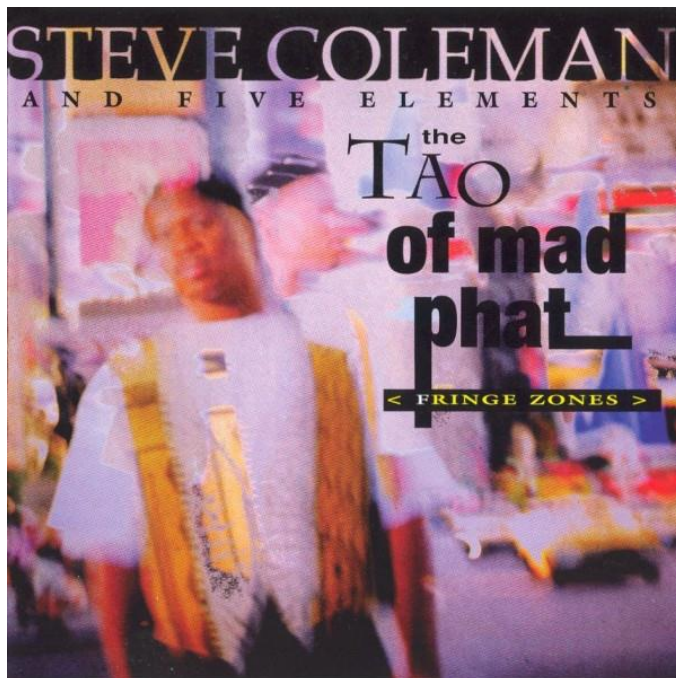
8/ **Steve Lacy.** *The Bath* from CD *Live At Sweet Basil* (Novus 63128/2, 1991). Steve Potts, alto saxophone; Bobby Few, piano; Jean-Jacques Avenal, bass; John Betsch, drums; Irene Aebi, violin.



LISA: I'm not sure but I think that soprano sax player was Steve Lacy. The alto player...if it isn't Henry Threadgill, maybe it's the guy with Air?

LATER: A long way off. Steve has a soprano saxophone sound I really like. I loved the way Coltrane played the instrument but I didn't like the nasally sound. I love the way Wayne Shorter plays it. When I first moved to Sydney it was my only horn. I was a tenor player but my tenor had an accident and I haven't played tenor since. Soprano is actually my most natural horn, but I have had to work more at alto; it suits the sort of music I play at the moment . Baritone was more natural.

9/ **Steve Coleman.** *Changing Of The Guard* from CD *Tao Of Mad Phat* (Novus 63160/2, 1993). Andy Milne, piano; David Gilmore, guitar; Reggie Washington, electric bass; Oliver Gene Lake, drums/percussion.



LISA: I was at that recording. I was there with Carl Dewhurst and his girlfriend. You can hear us laughing at the very beginning. Steve Coleman had an audience of about thirty in the large studio in Brooklyn. What you hear for the first tracks is exactly how they did it in the studio. They didn't even count in. Somebody would just start something. All of the segues are natural, not album cuts. I'd only been in America for two weeks and went to this recording. For the first time, since I was about sixteen, I was totally confused listening to the music. I absolutely loved it but had no idea what was going on, and it felt amazing! For a musician that's great. I experienced that twice there. The other time was listening to Herbie Hancock's trio the night before I left New York. I remember this one tune, they did fours with the drums, and I got totally lost. They were playing on such a high level.

When Sydney saxophonist Lisa Parrott got together with Jim McLeod for their Out of Sight session (Jazz n Blues, Vol 2, No 2), so much was said of interest that we decided to reproduce the rest of the conversation. The second instalment of this interview appeared as follows in Australasian Jazz & Blues, Volume 2, No 3, 1995. It begins with Lisa talking about women in jazz, especially in Australia.



Lisa Parrott: soprano is actually my most natural horn, but I have had to work more at alto... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ & bLUES

LISA: Everyone's had quite different experiences. There are common ones, but the differences are interesting. Nicki, my sister, the bass player, is more in the mainstream and playing with older people. She actually did have hassles when she

was first playing - people booking her then cancelling when they found out Nicki was a girl. Someone would book her, then someone else in the band would say, "I don't want a girl bass player in the band." This sort of thing happened a couple of times when she first started.



Lisa's sister the bassist Nicki Parrott: when she first started playing people would book her then cancel when they found out she was a girl...

It being a male dominated scene, you come up against weird things. Some men resent women jazz players because they think they have more opportunities than the guys, just because they're women. I've also experienced other things where I've been doing a big band gig and I've been involved with what you call "the boys club". It's a yobbo, Australian type thing; not just a jazz thing.

I'm in a transition generation. People like Sandy Evans went through a lot more. She had people teaching her at the Con telling her to stick to the flute and not play the sax. She didn't start playing the saxophone until she was in the Con, doing the jazz course. I've always done my own music which makes it different. It's as a sideman that you are going to have hassles. There are tensions between the sexes. Some men don't want a woman in the band because it might cause hassles.

I actually think generally there are differences between men and women playing jazz. Women tend to have a better melodic sense. I've taught a lot of people, including young people, and it's noticeable in boys and girls. Girls are much freer to use their ears, more trusting of their ears, and more willing to do something without having

music in front of them. I've been doing this with 8 and 10 year olds. I had a girl in 4th class. I didn't tell her she was improvising because she didn't know what improvising was. I just sang her a phrase and asked her to play it. She played and kept going on variations. Boys are more reluctant. They think you're playing a game with them and want it written out. They're reluctant to use their ears when young. It sort of evens up later on. They both get scared of improvising. I'm generalising but I think women have a more natural oral sense and melodic sense. That's in all arts. I have a strong melodic sense but Steve Coleman suggests I need to get the more logical side together on a more forward motion.



Steve Coleman: he suggested that Lisa needed to get the more logical side together... PHOTO COURTESY NOVUS

JIM: What made you choose Steve Coleman to study with?

LISA: I got into Steve's music back in 1988/89. What really appealed to me at first was it sounded to me like he was using serialism stuff, twelve tones in improvisation and getting really weaving type lines. Since I was a kid I've always been interested in what I used to call "perfect things". For instance, where I'd play a line and not repeat a note for ages; or I'd make up rules for myself. I'd do something like convert everything in my head to C major - no black notes. I'd think of these supposedly "perfect things". That's what appealed to me in Steve's playing because it had such a

strong logic to it in his lines. It's got so much forward motion in it. From these lines you can tell he has such an open approach to music and improvisation. He turned out to be the best person I could have chosen, because of the way he taught. Before the first lesson he said, "If I tell you how to play, don't come back." His whole thing is the individual's path, and he simply showed me different things that you can use anywhere - different ways of looking at things. He just opened my brain out. He'd talk about composition in terms of the Egyptian pyramids and mathematics. They weren't saxophone lessons, that's for sure; even far broader than music lessons.



Steve Coleman: when he was young he was militant about jazz being black music, but he has changed his attitude...PHOTO CREDIT MICHAEL WEINTROB

He lives about a hundred miles out of Manhattan. I'd get a lift or a bus out there and we'd hang out and talk. He has a whole room of books about non-Western art, philosophy, mathematics, and science. And another room full of music books. The whole day we'd talk, play and listen. I'd stay overnight and go back the next morning. He gave me an opportunity to get into his headspace. Just from the first lesson there's stuff I could work on for 30 years. He's not into teaching. It was quite flattering that he took me. I was worried about the black/white relationship; worried we simply wouldn't get on; we'd think very differently. When he was young he was militant about it being black music, but he has changed his attitude. He studies non-Western ways of thinking - not necessarily linked to colour. He likes teaching women, too, because he says they tend to focus on the general aspects which is how he likes to talk about music - rather than guys who'll just say, "Show me that lick". I went back to listening to some of the earlier things when I got a different perspective from my experience overseas. I got right into Charlie Parker through Steve Coleman. Parker was his first and main influence. The way he talked about Parker, and hanging out with Max Roach... and Abbey Lincoln gave Steve his first break. Steve went up to dinner with Max Roach who told him stories about the early days - not much about the music, and Steve realised the point was that Max was trying to take

away the god-like status that other people have put on to Max and 'Bird' [Charlie Parker] and the others. He opened my eyes to a different way of looking at Parker, from a much more general aspect than the way most people look at bebop... much broader. From there I started going back further, and everything is making a lot more sense.



Lisa Parrott refers to the way Steve Coleman talked about Charlie Parker (above left), and hanging out with Max Roach (above right)...

This is generalising, but I think there are two different schools of tradition. One seems to be from bebop coming from Coleman Hawkins through. Then there's another school that's like Miles. Not modal versus changes, but a different way of thinking. Parker and Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young had a lot of forward motion from the lines they played. Then there's another deceptively simple-sounding logic which I would call "Miles and Coltrane". Simplifying it, the Coltrane Quartet had a lot of focus on one note and variations around this one note, creating movement that way. The other way, the movement is in a different headspace. For



Parrott: she thinks a lot of musicians forget about actually playing compositions . . . not just the head and then whatever... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

instance, in Ornette Coleman's music - or Eric Dolphy's, or, Steve Coleman's - there's a lot of movement in the rhythm section as well; forward motion. To me Ornette Coleman's music is like bebop, but when you get to the blowing section, when you start to do the variations on a theme, you're making up the changes as you go along - but it is still bebop, it's not modal . I've studied a lot of Ornette's music. I learned the melodies and the compositions. I play them over and over, get inside them, improvise around bits of the melody. I think a lot of musicians forget about actually playing compositions . . . not just the head and then whatever.