

SERIOUS FUN: THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF MIKE NOCK by Norman Meehan. Published by Victoria University Press, Wellington, New Zealand 2010 www.victoria.ac.nz/vup ISBN 978-0-86473-636-9.

Reviewed by Tony Mitchell

[This review appeared on the Music Trust of Australia website on September 3, 2014, at this link <http://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/serious-fun-the-life-and-music-of-mike-nock/>]

Mike Nock has been a stalwart of the Sydney Improvised Music Association and was a star turn at its August celebration of its 30th anniversary. In the general spirit of reminiscence, he offered The Music Trust this biography, published in 2010, for review. It was published around the time of Mike's 70th birthday celebrations so in the span of a longish life, what's a few years?

The book complements Nock's double CD, *An Accumulation of Subtleties*, at the time his 22nd album as leader, according to Norman Meehan's extensive discography. The first was *Move*, with the 3-Out Trio, recorded in Sydney in 1960. Wellington-based jazz pianist and lecturer Norman Meehan, whose 2008 album *Modigliani* was nominated for a New Zealand jazz award, has researched this book exhaustively, listing 32 interviewees in the USA, the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Meehan has also dug up reviews of every Nock album, some from *Down Beat* (for which he was a correspondent) others from the San Francisco Chronicle. These are critically examined with a musicologist's ear in the course of the narrative. Meehan also narrated six one-hour radio programs for Radio NZ based on the book, including a lot of rare Nock music.



The image which appeared on the cover of Mike Nock's legendary 1960 album Move, featuring the 3 Out Trio, L-R, Chris Karan (drums), Freddy Logan (bass), Nock (piano)...

We begin in Ngaruawahia, south of Auckland, where as a ten year old Mike Nock formed a neighbourhood band with piano, cornet, guitar and 'noisemakers' such as

alarm clocks, influenced by Spike Jones. 'I was surrounded by the green hills and two rivers and I was aware of the open space. Growing up in that definitely affected my attitude toward music making ... I love the thought of writing slow music making that really reflects the landscape, those rolling hills that just go on and on'.



Nock's soundtrack for Strata contextualises the film's stark, rugged, landscape and its mystery, isolation and menace... PHOTO CREDIT KAREN STEAINS

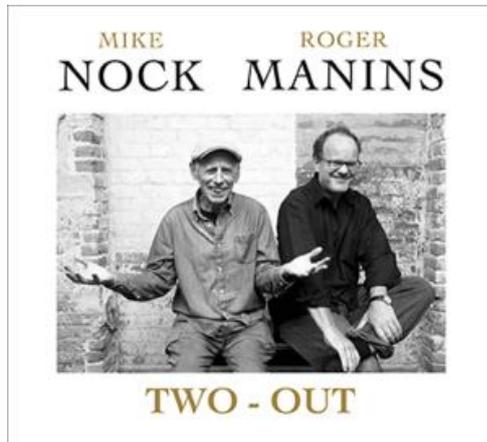
He got an opportunity to do this in his soundtrack for Geoff Steven's 1983 film *Strata*, about a volcanologist on the remote White Island. The film was (unjustifiably) panned, but Nock's surprisingly lush soundtrack, released on vinyl in New Zealand, contextualises the film's stark, rugged, landscape and its mystery, isolation and menace.

A year earlier, what many regard as his best album, *Ondas*, recorded in an astonishing two hours and released on Manfred Eicher's ECM label, also recalled his roots, notably on the track *Land of the Long White Cloud*. Although Nock has lived



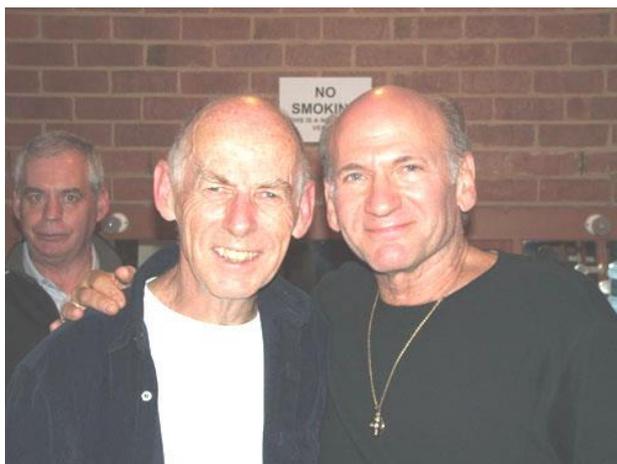
Many regard Ondas, released on Manfred Eicher's ECM label, as Nock's best album...

in Sydney since the mid-1980s, and continues to teach at the Conservatorium, he makes frequent visits to his homeland and maintains strong musical contacts there. He has been mentor to numerous New Zealand jazz musicians who have moved to Sydney, most notably saxophonists Roger Manins and Tim Hopkins, and also to Con graduate the Sydney bassist Cameron Undy, who plays with Nock on the DVD documentary accompanying this book.



Nock (left) pictured here with the NZ saxophonist Roger Manins on the cover of their duo album Two-Out...

It is Nock's experience in the USA which gives him his extensive "cred" as a jazz pianist: firstly in Boston at Berklee, where he gigged and recorded with Yusef Lateef. In the late 60s he was in San Francisco with his ground-breaking jazz fusion group, the Fourth Way (his 'new ager' period); famous collaborators in those years included Larry Coryell, John Handy, Dave Holland, Steve Swallow. Later he was in New York and New Jersey with John Abercrombie, Dave Liebman and others. Meehan omits reference to the famous "I hear you're a genius" phone call from Miles Davis, letting Nock's considerable achievements speak for themselves.



Mike Nock (left) & US saxophonist Dave Liebman...

What emerges is a modest but intense musician, accepted on his own merits in often threatening African-American jazz circles, continually driving himself (and sometimes others) like an athlete to achieve more, a stylistic polymath, an inspiring teacher, a generous collaborator, and still, at 70, "a man on a mission".