

DAVE LEVY: THIS TIME THE DREAM'S ON ME

by Barry Morris*

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Some jazz musicians come, shine briefly, then splutter out and drift into obscurity. Others endure. One of the more enduring is pianist David Levy whose 'career path' has had him working in the wool trade, as a copy writer for mail order catalogues and a composer of 50 songs. Today, despite many ups and downs in the 'industry', he is still around. Barry Morris caught up with him at a bad time.



Dave Levy: despite many ups and downs in the 'industry', he is still around... PHOTO CREDIT YVONNE DALY

Dave Levy squats barefoot, in shorts and T-shirt on a worn sofa in the tired, rambling house which is home to him and three other musicians in the Sydney beachside suburb of Coogee. In this pose, he looks even more elf-like, a Woody Allen figure, a jockey in search of a mount, a boxer who has taken plenty of life's punches, but still has plenty of fight left in him.

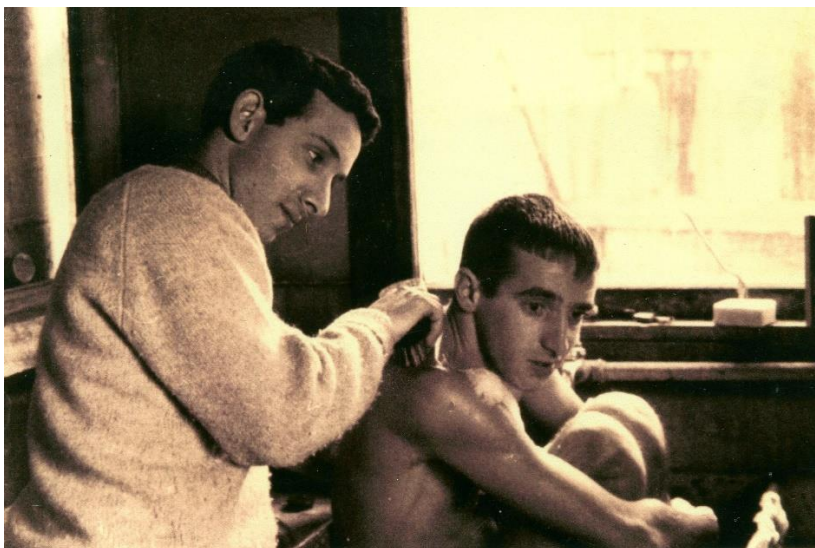
The latest blow — his car has just been stolen and with it his golf clubs which threatens to deprive him of one of his great loves, the game of golf. But right now he

is fretting about how —without transport — he is going to pick up his youngest daughter from over at Mona Vale, some 50km away.

But he puts this aside and, occasionally taking a swig of a beer, he looks back on The Most Interesting Life of a Jazz Musician. For as well as being a gifted pianist/composer, accomplished at playing traditional to free form improvisation, the 57-year-old Levy is one of the characters on the Sydney jazz scene. Articulate and with a piquant sense of humour, he recalls the good and the bad ol' days of jazz in Sydney in the 50s and 60s.

Born in Tasmania, Levy moved to Sydney at the age of three. By the time he was learning piano he managed to outrage his classical piano teacher by playing boogie-woogie. He also began listening to a schoolmate's records, from dixieland giants to the bebop innovators — Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Howard McGhee and Fats Navarro.

As school students Levy and Albert Landa (who became a member of the Brisbane and Sydney Symphony Orchestras), and Warren Leroy, used to entertain pupils and masters at Sydney High School by playing boogie on rainy days.



Levy (right) with his school friend from Sydney Boys High, Albert Landa, who played classical piano, French horn & trombone. In 1957 in their early 20s, they shared a house in Glebe... PHOTO COURTESY DAVE LEVY

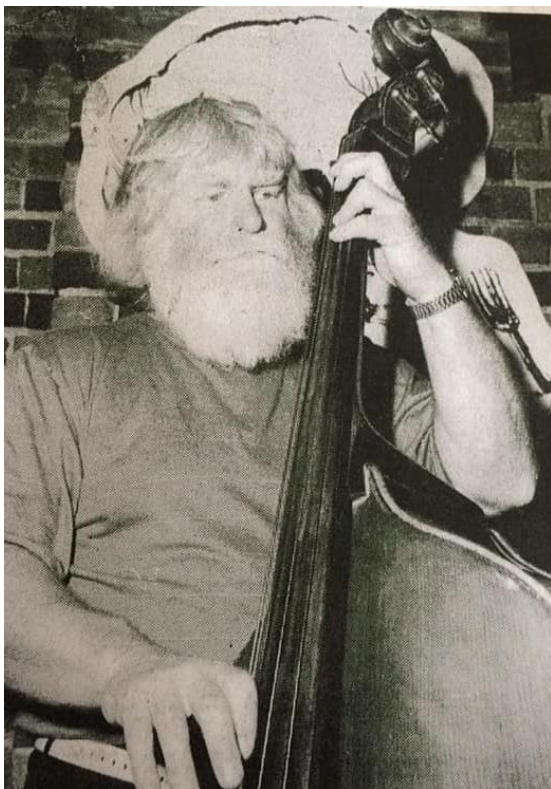
"Soon after I became enraptured with Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond and I met guys like Ray Warleigh, who later went on to success in England", he says. "I also met John Pochée and Bernie McGann and played with them — we got a gig at the El Rocco up at the Cross and the Mocambo Lounge at Newtown. The Mocambo was a place where there was a lot of jamming done up until seven o'clock in the morning — because the owners loved it. I first met Bob Bertles there and that's where I first met black jazz enthusiasts ... Bird, The Messengers."

"We were all very inexperienced and in our early 20s, all self-taught basically. A lot of swapping of information went on and 'Have you heard this record?' The first quartet I played in at the El Rocco had Dirty Dick Barnes on bass, whose main attribute was that he owned one. He later became a pig farmer, which was a bit the way he played

sometimes (Laughs). Dirty Dick was a pretty good name. I'd love to meet up with him again.”



The Mocambo: a place where there was a lot of jamming done up until seven o'clock in the morning, because the owners loved it...PHOTO CREDIT ERIC MYERS



Dirty Dick Barnes (left): he was in the first band of Levy's which played at the El Rocco; Barnes's main attribute was that he owned a bass...

"I left Sydney to go to England in 1964 and by then the El Rocco was playing six nights a week." But for a couple of years before quitting Sydney, Levy was experimenting with free form music at the El Rocco.

"This is one of the things we should have talked about in the *Beyond El Rocco* movie. My trio was probably the first Australian experimental group," he said.

The worst thing that had happened to Levy in his life up until that time, was in Switzerland. His luggage was stolen on the train, including every piece of music he had written, his repertoire and changes, his Bill Evans-influenced works. "It was devastating," he said.

Levy went to London, stopping off briefly in Paris where he met Eric Dolphy, Nathan Davis and Donald Byrd. He arrived in London with five pounds, and stayed for three years, making enough money to buy a grand piano. As well as playing solo piano, he played at The Little Theatre Club, an avant garde venue and Ronnie Scott's old club.



Levy lived and worked in the UK from 1964 to 1967. Here he is on keyboards while on tour backing the singer Helen Shapiro... PHOTO COURTESY CENTRAL PRESS AGENCY COURTESY DAVE LEVY

He also did a lot of listening — to the English players such as Tubby Hayes, Ronnie Scott, Pete King, Gordon Beck and Stan Tracey as well as American visitors The Jazz Messengers, Jimmy Giuffre and Don Freedman, the Ray Charles Band, the Duke Ellington Band, the Horace Silver Band with Woody Shaw and the Sonny Rollins Trio. And for 3 weeks he listened every night to Bill Evans at Ronnie Scott's club.

"I worked steadily, paid off the piano and made a lot of friends — I could have stayed there forever. It was an incredible experience. But I was offered a free trip back to Australia playing piano and bass. So I shared duties with another piano player, Ian Mawson, who bought the bass and we learnt some bass on the way back. Ray Warleigh, on alto and flute, also travelled back with them for a visit home. Within a year he was playing with Doug Foskett's band at the Wentworth Hotel — and in 1969 he married.



Australian expatriate saxophonist Ray Warleigh: he travelled back to Australia with Levy, and got married in 1969...

There followed a long period of teaching, playing commercial gigs, restaurants, clubs and pubs interspersed with some jazz. He and Pochée spent a year playing seven nights a week in a commercial band at the Motor Club from 8 pm until 3 am. Levy was also a foundation member of The Last Straw in 1974 with Pochée, McGann, Ken James and Jack Thorncraft. He left because outside work pressures did not allow him to put in the time practising the difficult material.

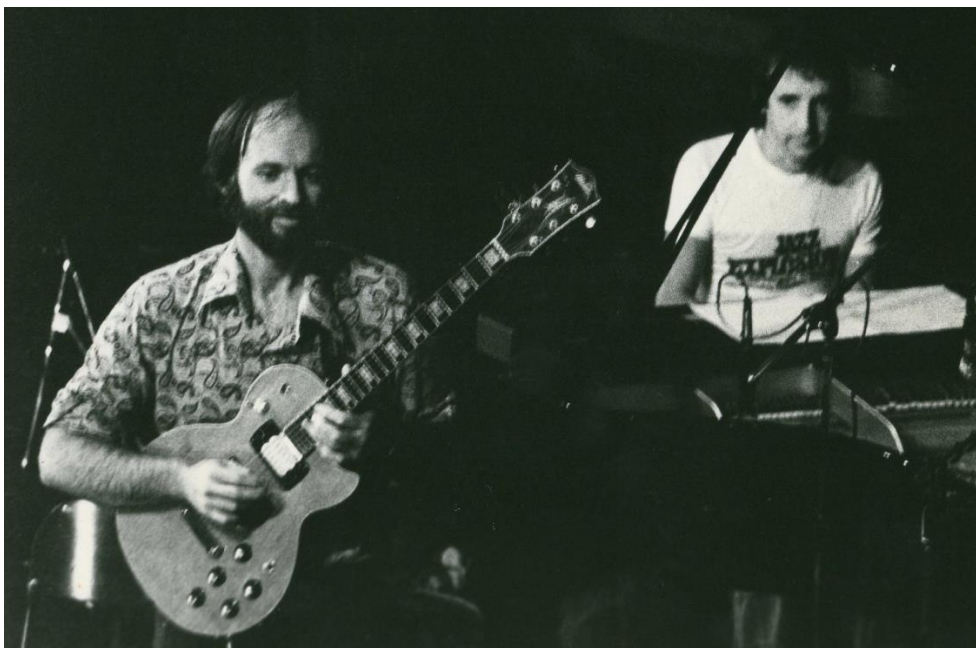
"It was a sad thing leaving The Last Straw considering the band is still bloody well going in 1993," he mused. He also did a year with Galapagos Duck at the old Basement with visiting Americans frequently sitting in — Percy Heath, Milt Jackson,

Bud Shank, Ron McClure and Tony Clapka from Blood Sweat and Tears, Jerry Bergonzi, Marvin Stamm.



Levy at The Basement, playing with The Last Straw in 1975, L-R, Roger Frampton, John Pochée, Levy, and Jack Thorncraft (obscured). Bernie McGann & Ken James were on the gig but not in this frame... PHOTO COURTESY DAVE LEVY

In the 70s, Levy played in the Ken James Reunion Band at the Paradise Room in Kings Cross and also worked with guitarist Peter Boothman's quartet. "At this time I formed Phingus. I had two Phingi — one modern and one playing traditional because I was playing modern, traditional and avant-garde."



Levy on electric piano with guitarist Peter Boothman's quartet...

Levy is currently playing with James' new Reunion band and the Bob Bertles Quartet which last year toured Tasmania. And he has just joined the Noel Crow band Mister Crow. In the 80s to early 90s he taught piano and jazz history at the Sydney Conservatorium and was workshop director for the Jazz Action Society. He currently teaches at Sydney Grammar School.



Dave Levy with members of the trad band Mr Crow, L-R, Mike Poore (trombone), Mike Hallam (trumpet), Phil Pryor (saxes/vocals), Noel Crow (saxes/clarinet), Levy (piano), Will Dower (drums), Stan Kenton (bass)...

"I seem to be able to compartmentalise. If I'm playing traditional jazz I'm not tempted to play bebop or free form and mix the idioms." On why he hasn't recorded ... "to be honest, in my early days the only way I really wanted to be a bandleader was to play a trio.

"I've been influenced by Bill Evans, Denny Zeitlin, Paul Bley, Bud Powell and Herbie Hancock, from the early 60s. I've always had a strong affinity for trio playing."

Levy is very excited about presenting his Phingus Quintet this year and showcased some of his new compositions (and new arrangements of jazz standards) at a Jazz Action Society July concert. My final impression, as I leave, is of Dave Levy shadow boxing on the footpath, bobbing and weaving and pretending to knock himself out. Always the joker. He calls out: "Don't forget to mention that I'm fit for a jazz muso. I play golf and walk and swim. Me and Bob Henderson — fit."

Footnote: Levy got his car and his golf clubs back — undamaged!