

JAZZ BIRDS

by Ian Muldoon*

Charles Parker Jr (1920-1955) nicknamed “Bird”, is one of the two most esteemed soloists in jazz. Louis Armstrong is the other. The world famous New York club Birdland (est 1949) is named after Parker. *Lullaby of Birdland*, written in ten minutes by its composer, pianist George Shearing, is that club’s theme song but when rendered in French translates as *Lullaby of the Land of the Birds*.



Charlie Parker, pictured at 18 years old: his mother Addie had no idea how her son got named Bird...

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child’s ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour. In 2021 he published a collection of essays on jazz subjects, entitled “My Jazz Odyssey: Confessions of a Lifetime Enthusiast”.*

Parker's mother Addie had no idea how her son got named Bird. Violinist Teddy Blume (1917-1992) reckoned Parker was 14 and unable to enter clubs so was constantly in the yard with an ear against the wall listening to music inside and that's the reason he was nicknamed Yardbird, later shortened to Bird. Another story was about a dead chook killed by a car driven by members of the travelling Jay McShann band. Band member Parker retrieved it for cooking later and was nicknamed Bird for that reason. My preference of the origins of the name is that Bird "signified melodious beauty, mastery of the air, and quickness of flight." (*Jazz*, Giddins/DeVaux, Norton, NY, 2009, p 301).

Parker's influence has been widely felt and continues today. One example is *Bird Calls* (The ACT Company) 2015 a programme of 13 original compositions based on a Parker composition or solo written and produced by the New York-based Rudresh Mahanthappa (alto saxophone) leading a quintet with Adam O'Farrill, trumpet; Matt Mitchell, piano; Francis Moutin, acoustic bass; and Rudy Royston, drums. It is the classic bebop line-up with 20-year-old O'Farrill taking Gillespie's chair. Their reworking is sometimes startling with Parker's classic bluesy ballad *Parker's Mood* transformed into frenetic jazz (*Talin Is Thinking*) with what seems to be an Indian sub-continent mid-tempo mood with a Coltrane influence.



New York-based alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ TIMES

Parker's greatest contribution to music was not his speed of execution, his harmonic sophistication in which Gillespie excelled, nor his tone (cf Desmond, Hodges), nor melodic invention(cf Konitz), but, as Gillespie put it "a sense of rhythmic phrasing that was unimpeachable." (cf *The Complete Charlie Parker On*

Verve – Bird (2013). Parker insisted “the beat in a bop band is with the music, against it, behind it. It pushes it. It helps it. Help is the big thing. It has no continuity of beat, no steady chug-chug.” His tone was vibrato free and he admired Lee Konitz. Parker’s first hero was vocalist Rudy Vallée (1901-1906) who starred in 42 films many of them with a musical theme or content. Vallee was one of the first modern vocal pop stars whose first instrument was not voice, but drums, then clarinet, then saxophone. Parker was also a devotee of Hindemith, and later of Bach, Beethoven and especially Stravinsky.



Rudy Vallee (pictured here in 1929) was one of the first modern vocal pop stars whose first instrument was not voice, but drums, then clarinet...

The arrangement by Gil Evans of *Bird Feathers* (Parker) is one homage to Bird’s compositional genius. It’s the final track on the original album *New Bottle Old Wine* (World Pacific) 1958. Noteworthy is the melody played by drummer Art Blakey; the rhythm and harmony of the fabulous brass section; and the bebop solo by Cannonball Adderley. The band was Johnny Coles, Louis Mucci, Clyde Reasinger, trumpets; Frank Rehak, Joe Bennett, trombones; Tom Mitchell, bass trombone; Julius Watkins, French horn; Bill Barber, tuba; Cannonball Adderley, alto saxophone; Phil Bodner, piccolo, flute, bass clarinet, English horn; Chuck Wayne, guitar; Paul Chambers, bass; and Art Blakey, drums.

If Parker is the most famous “bird” in jazz, the creature itself has been influential in the genre from the beginning. Before Bird was born, the poet Emily Dickinson humbly wrote that “one note from one bird is worth a thousand words”. Just as rampaging ignorant invaders brought their diseases, guns, and industry to Australia and millions of words of justification or rationalisation will not change the poisoning of water or the massacres and killing of many thousands of Indigenous people or the present threat to more than 216 species of bird, my words are little compared to you dear reader walking outside and listening to birdsong. Even so I think it’s worth reminding ourselves of the positive power of nature and of Dickinson who, moved by birdsong, in turn inspired some great musicians such as Jane Ira Bloom.

Wild Lines: Improvising Emily Dickinson (Outline) 2017 2CD is a programme of 29 original works and one by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart *It's Easy To Remember*. The musicians are Bloom, soprano saxophone; Dawn Clement, piano; Mark Helias, bass; Bobby Previte, drums and Deborah Rush, voice. Like the elliptical, constrained power of Dickinson’s words, Bloom’s exquisite tone and disciplined strength of expression is quite moving. Contemplative and immersive listening is the best reward for this music, inspired by words like this quoted on the foldout CD:

*Of Robins in the Trundle bed
How many I espy
Whose nightgowns could not hide the Wings
Although I heard them by
Take all away from me, but leave me ecstasy,
And I am richer then.....*



A 2013 work Bloom’s document *Sixteen Sunsets* (Outline, 2013) is a programme of 14 compositions including six originals, and closes with the original *Bird Experiencing Light* (Bloom). The performance features a soaring, expressive and uplifting solo by the composer on soprano saxophone, a joyous sound celebration of new light and new life supported by Dominic Fallacaro, piano; Cameron Brown, bass; and Matt Wilson, drums.



*Jane Ira Bloom: a soaring, expressive and uplifting solo by her on soprano saxophone...
PHOTO CREDIT ANDREW LEPLEY*

Birds have inspired words and music from great artists, even popular songs like *Birth of the Blues* (Henderson/DeSylva/Brown) of 1924, which was a pop phenomenon for Sammy Davis Jr (1925-1990) in 1954 and in its lyrics point to a real beginning of birds as one of the original sources of the music:

*From a whippoorwill
Out on a hill
They took a new note
Pushed it through a horn
'Til it was worn
Into a blue note
And then they nursed it, rehearsed it
And gave out the news
That the Southland gave birth to the blues!*

Other references to this bird include *My Blue Heaven* (Whiting/Donaldson) - "When Whippoor-wills call and ev'ning is nigh.." and *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry* (Williams) - "Hear that lonesome Whippoor-will he sounds too blue to fly". But it was the sounds of nature generally, and birds specifically, that informed musicians' sensibilities, including artists such as W C Handy, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, George E Lewis, Barney McAll and Maria Schneider.

On a lighter but sexist note, when big band musicians talked about the band's "canary" they were referring to the "girl" singer (usually white) sitting stage side, her crossed legs revealing just enough for titillation, who on cue, rises and wanders out to the microphone and delivers a vocal, - one can imagine Sarah "Sassy" Vaughan's reaction if she had been so called!



Sarah Vaughan, pictured in 1948: she would not have appreciated being called a "canary"... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Through the music's evolution, beginning with Louis Armstrong's example, singers like Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan were recognised as musical instruments rather than "fronts" for bands. A post-modern "canary" Cassandra Wilson figuratively referencing herself as a crow, sings about being a *Black Crow* (Wilson) on her document *Blue Light Til Dawn* (Blue Note, 1993):

*In search of love and music
My whole life has been illumination, corruption
And diving, diving, diving, diving*

*Diving down to pick up
Diving down to pick up
On every shiny little thing
Just like that black crow flying
In a blue, blue sky*



Cassandra Wilson: A post-modern “canary”, figuratively referencing herself as a crow... PHOTO CREDIT ANNE SAVIOPP

The crow is not considered the most beautiful of birds and in Australian argot has negative connotations as in “eat crow”. In terms of beauty, the wrinkles associated with ageing around the eyes of women are called “crows feet”. Wilson’s self-

deprecating modest reference of herself as a crow fits tellingly into the historical place African Americans have found themselves or been pictured by others in the land of their birth, even when they may be as physically attractive even as beautiful as Wilson is, who is also an outstanding artist of beautiful music of considerable value. In a major document Barney McAll sees the bird as a metaphor for the aspirations of the human spirit and that work will be discussed in detail below.



Barney McAll performing at the 2022 Sydney Con Jazz Festival: he sees the bird as a metaphor for the aspirations of the human spirit...PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL

Birds have been a source of inspiration for all music. Is it the case that the further music drifts from the sounds of nature (wind, humans, birds) the more sterile it becomes? Electronic “music”, huge orchestral structures in classical music, seem remote from life itself, from the pulsing heart, breathing air, and songbirds. Moreover, the sheer complexities of living things, their mystery, it seems to me, scares some creative artists who want control and subjugation and mastery of the mysterious. If sound can be written, reproduced, and moulded then all the better. Artists like Phil Slater in the document *The Dark Pattern* (Earshift, 2019) have turned to the natural environment - "we can begin to understand place through sound ... and can develop our understanding of place through a musical experience and engagement with it" Slater writes in comments on his music. Immersion so to speak, and intimacy are apropos: I see the intimacy of a club as a special element in connecting with the artist and the music created, in the same way many of the greatest works of classical music are chamber works.

In the heyday of the modern revolution in music - covering the period of the greatest humanitarian disaster (WW11) and the great economic revival (1950s) -

music clubs thrived especially in the USA. Sonny Rollins has said that the audience “played too, they were part of the music.” In an audience in close proximity to the artists before the performance, during the performance and after, with the musicians interacting with the listeners, the warmth and the feelings of both intermingle and charge the musicians and hence the music with an energy and life it might otherwise have lacked. The remoteness of the formalities of large halls tends to work against this human collaboration between maker and listener. A mother crooning to child is the genesis of this powerful emotional connection and jazz is the most potent artistic manifestation of these origins. But this quote from biologist E O Wilson on nature and our relation to it fits with the attitude of many of our finest improvising artists:

*Now to the very heart of wonder: because species diversity was created prior to humanity, and because we evolved within it, we have never fathomed its limits. As a consequence, the living world is the natural domain of the most restless and paradoxical part of the human spirit. Our sense of wonder grows exponentially: the greater the knowledge, the deeper the mystery, and the more we seek knowledge the create new mystery. This catalytic reaction, seemingly an inborn human trait, draws us perpetually forward in a search for new places and new life. Nature is to be mastered, but (we hope) never completely. A quiet passion burns, not for total control but for the sensation of constant advance. (from *Biophilia*).*

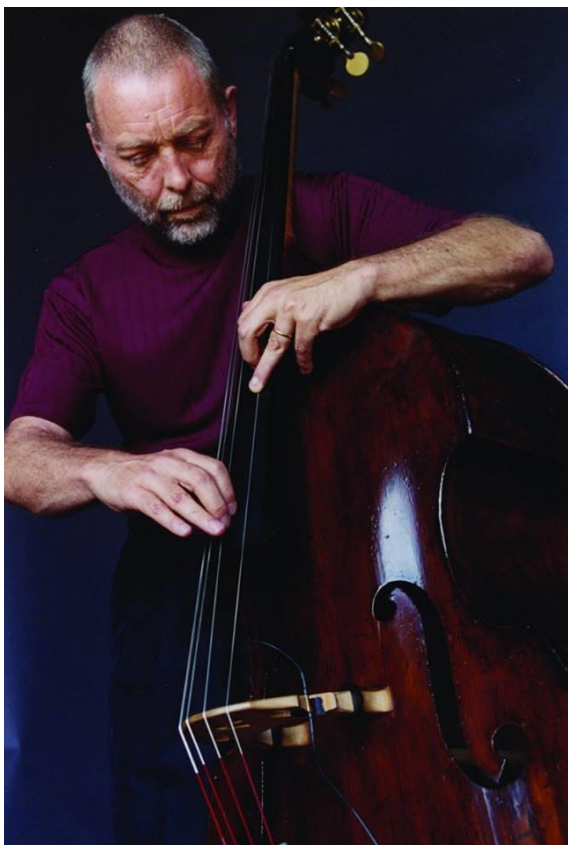


Biologist E O Wilson... PHOTO COURTESY NEW YORK TIMES

One artistic advance was the suite of original compositions recorded by contrabassist and cellist Dave Holland on 30th November 1972. Anthony Braxton and Sam Rivers are on reeds, and Barry Altschul on drums and percussion. The document is called *Conference Of The Birds* and was inspired by the morning chorus outside Holland’s London flat. 1972 was the heyday of the Rolling Stones and works like Neil Young’s *Heart Of Gold* were popular and “jazz” was a distant memory.



Conference of the Birds on its release may have been perceived as avant-garde “outside” music yet it was seen then by music aficionados as brilliant modern music and has since established itself as a masterpiece. Neil Young? The Rolling Stones? Distant (but nice) memories. *Conference of the Birds* is a classic in the sense of being serious music of lasting worth. That 26-year-old Holland was able to get Braxton and Rivers as musical members under his leadership is a signal of his musical standing at the time. Since 1972 Holland has established himself as the most important bassist after Charles Mingus. But the qualities of sound in birdsong has been specifically attributed to the originators of jazz.



Since 1972 Dave Holland (left) has established himself as the most important bassist after Charles Mingus... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS

The 1928 Broadway production of *Blackbirds* was the original major commercial event connecting African Americans with the notion of song bird music. The music was written by Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields and performed exclusively by African Americans. A Blackbird is a song bird, specifically of the Thrush species most commonly in the USA seen as the Robin Red Breast. These birds are accomplished singers, with relatively loud, melodious songs that carry far. The original production was by Lew Leslie and opened on 4th January 1928 at Les Ambassadeurs nightclub in New York and in May 1928 opened on Broadway at the Liberty Club.



L-R, Jimmy McHugh, Dorothy Fields... PHOTO COURTESY NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM AND THE SUN NEWSPAPER PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION.

In February 1933, Jack Kapp of Brunswick Records engaged Duke Ellington and His Famous Orchestra to record the entire score. Ellington did so between 1.30pm and 7.00 pm on 17th February 1933. The music was issued on six 10" 78s available in an album set (the first such set of "popular" music from a Broadway show). The orchestra was: Cootie Williams, Arthur Whetsel, Freddie Jenkins, trumpets; Joe Nanton, Lawrence Brown, trombones; Juan Tizol, valve trombone; Barney Bigard, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Johnny Hodges, clarinet, alto saxophone; Otto Hardwicke, alto saxophone; Harry Carney, clarinet, alto saxophone, baritone saxophone; Duke Ellington, piano; Fred Guy, banjo, guitar; Wellman Braud, contra bass; and Sonny Greer, drums, chimes.

This aggregation was amongst the best in the world at the time, and in this estimation I include the Vienna Philharmonic and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra as well as The Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In terms of rhythmic brilliance, individual soloists, and Ellington arrangements and original compositions

it may indeed, have had no peer. The recordings made of the music from *Blackbirds* was however, unusual, because it was an uncommon instance of Ellington recording works other than his own in a programme. At least one work of what was officially known as *Blackbird Medley*, became an established jazz standard, *I Can't Give You Anything But Love* (McHugh/Fields) later recorded by Louis Armstrong (masterful and ironic underpinned with rhythmic brilliance), Sonny Stitt (playful), Stefano Bollani (quirky), Ella Fitzgerald (scat), and Martial Solal (modern).



Jack Kapp of Brunswick Records: it was he who engaged Duke Ellington and His Famous Orchestra to record the entire score of "Blackbirds" in February 1933...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

But Ellington also composed works with titles about birds. One was *Pigeons And Peppers* (M Ellington/D Ellington) recorded 26th October 1937 with Cootie Williams, trumpet and leader; Juan Tizol, valve trombone; Barney Bigard, clarinet and tenor saxophone; Harry Carney, alto and baritone saxophones; Duke Ellington, piano; Billy Taylor, bass; and Sonny Greer, drums. It is an easy walking piece featuring the expressive talking trumpet of Williams, interspersed with solos by Carney on alto then Bigard on clarinet and Tizol on trombone. It's a cheeky, perky amusing piece which fits with its origins: Ellington's son Mercer around aged 14 suggested a melody to his dad. "Pigeons" was a reference to girls with bosom and "peppers" to big bosoms - so much for the ornithological reference! Ellington wrote a more serious homage to birdsong in his *Sunset and the Mocking Bird* (Ellington/Strayhorn) from his *Queen's Suite* (Pablo, 1976) recorded in 1959. It was performed by Tommy Flanagan at 70 years of age during a March 1997 performance at The Village Vanguard and released on Flanagan's eponymous Blue Note album in 1998. Thad Jones's tune *Birdsong* opens the CD.

One artist who has committed and dedicated herself to the ineluctable beauty of birdsong in a more complete way is violinist, zoomusicologist and composer Hollis Taylor. At Wogarno Station, Western Australia, in 2001, she had an epiphany. She explains: “ while wandering about, out of the blue, I heard a leisurely, rich-toned phrase from a jazz flautist in a tree.” It was the song of the pied butcherbird and Taylor resolved to devote herself to record its song, study its music and write human instrumental accompaniment to it. Between 2005 and 2015 she recorded song of the pied butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*) and the fruits of her labour are documented on the handsomely designed, well illustrated and thoroughly annotated *Absolute Bird* (2CD ReR Megacorp,UK, 2017).



*Holly Taylor:
she has done an
astonishing
service to
music...
PHOTOGRAPHER
UNKNOWN*

Duke Ellington would have been thrilled had he had access to such a document and it's probable that Professor George E Lewis, Professor of American Music, Composition & Historical Musicology, at Columbia University, who expressed interest in the butcherbird song whilst in residence at Monash University, has a copy. Ms Taylor has done an astonishing service to music and her efforts (at least some tiny part of them) are well presented and adopted to formal works and well preserved in *Absolute Bird*. Other field recordings contributing to the document are by: Jane Ulman, Andrew Skeoch, Jenny Beasley, Tony Baylis, David Lumsdaine, Bill Flentje, Jon Rose, Gloria Glass, Constance Scharff, David Renz, Stuart Fairbairn, and Vicki Powys et al. Performing artists are: Taylor (extensively) violin; Genevieve Lacey, (extensively) recorder; The Song Company; Joanne Cannon, bassoon; Erkki Veltheim, viola; Jim Denley, flute; Rod Dunlop, bass clarinet; Claire Edwards, vibraphone; James Cuddeford, violin; and Daniel Yeadon, cello. I was heretofore unaware of Ms Taylor as a performer. I was and am aware that the other contributing artists may be considered part of the present world's cohort of distinguished composers and performers of modern and experimental music eg, Ms Lacey with Andrea Keller et al; Mr Veltheim with Andrea Keller et al; and Jon Rose.

But Ms Taylor has been quoted in *New Scientist* (“Swinging birds play with rhythm like jazz musicians”, 14/7/17) by musician and author David Rothenberg (New Jersey Institute of Technology) who claimed the birdsong of the Veery Thrush (*Catharus fuscescens*) a tiny member of the species has the most swinging birdsong of all. It sings a long note followed by a short one, and then repeats this pattern. In the narrowest sense, swing means delaying the off-beat. This means pairs of notes are played long-short instead of being of equal duration. This kind of swing is typical of jazz and related styles of music developed in the early 20th century. Rothenberg likes to play duets with Thrush Nightingales (*Luscinia luscinia*) which has subtle deviations in note timing, making it more expressive and swinging in the broadest terms. Although Ms Taylor disagreed that swing should have been used in the title of the article she does say pied butcherbirds sometimes do swing. “Some birds sing phrases that seem to momentarily swing,” she says. “If I had a jazz band, I’d let them sit in.”



Musician and author David Rothenberg (New Jersey Institute of Technology) who claimed the birdsong of the Veery Thrush (Catharus fuscescens), a tiny member of the species, has the most swinging birdsong of all... PHOTO COURTESY THE NEST COLLECTIVE

So I rush to qualify any assumption about birdsong being “far out” or unmusical - it is music of the day, of daily experience, of the world in its glorious and untrammelled natural beauty framed by some fine artists so that we note or pay attention to that beauty. It is as if Ms Taylor is in her way calling out to us, like her musical collaborators the butcherbirds, “just listen to this! Have you heard? May I share this beautiful music with you?” What’s also notable throughout in her writing accompanying the music is the humility of her tone in the face of such beauty: is it the ‘heart of wonder’ in a reminder of E O Wilson’s phrase? Or is it that simple heart swelling joy we all of us experience hearing Nature’s sweet music and the feeling of reverence for such beauty?

Regarding Ms Taylor's compositional intentions she aims to commend and showcase birdsong not to "improve" their vocalisations. She is using birdsong itself in my view in satisfying musical structures to highlight the beauty of birdsong. Amazingly (I thought at first listening) there is no intrusive element in the music making, and the works are integrated with finesse, intelligence and grace. The final piece *Bird-Esk for string quartet* was recorded 14 years ago on the morning of 5th June 2008 in Esk, Queensland and may come to be thought of as a major work. James Cuddeford and Taylor are on violins; Erkki Veltheim, viola; and Daniel Yeardon, cello. I perceive the work to be in three parts, with the first filled with dance and a sense of joy. The second part is quieter then rumbling suggesting stormy weather approaching with the yearning solo voice of a violin. The last part develops from a quiet reflective section into perky harmony and up-tempo swinging rollicking harmony backed by pizzicato cello.



Erkki Veltheim is on viola in the piece "Bird-Esk for string quartet" which was recorded 14 years ago on the morning of 5th June 2008... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Field recordings were made over many years and works composed/transcribed and paired with those field recordings. Instruments used include violin, vibes, recorder, bass clarinet, bassoon, flute, bass, string quartet and choir. In the event 41 works are presented on *Absolute Bird* and mainly but not exclusively based on field recordings of the pied butcherbird. Startling sounds of music in nature's venue has a powerful impact in the (mainly and relative) silence of the outback.

Some remarkable (always musically relevant) impressions include the whirring rhythmic background of cane toad sounds (*Georges Six*); road traffic sounds (*Macadamia*); achingly beautiful human voices (*The Song Company*) and bird ensembles (pied butcherbird) (*Ten Hockets: Bribie Island*); deep bass sounds almost didgeridoo in feeling, made under a full moon(!) (*Ormiston Gorge*); violin conversation with birdsong of cockatoo and pied butcherbird (*Bowen At N'Dhala Gate*); bassoon and birdsong (*Tocatta*); and the violin based on butcherbird song joined by duelling tawny frogmouth birdsong bass rhythm (*Night Shift*). Soundscapes include tree frogs, flies, and a crow in startling contrast to the violin all in a series *Riffingbird 1-4* which is something of a highlight of the programme.

Two solo pieces work exceedingly well - *Solo-Esque for violin and field recording* with Ms Taylor on violin; and *Alice Springs: Gosse @Sturt for Ganassi recorder and field recording* with Genevieve Lacey on recorder. The first is like a concerto for violin backed by a polyphonic birdsong chorus which gently increases in volume. In this regard it is notable how simple, clear and “whole” that presentation is. The latter works as well with the spotted owl providing a rhythmic base for the expressive recorder improvisation.



On “*Alice Springs: Gosse @Sturt for Ganassi recorder and field recording*”
Genevieve Lacey (above) is on recorder... PHOTO COURTESY MUSICA VIVA AUSTRALIA

Cracticus nigrogularis is an ordinary even scruffy looking little fella. No bright coloured plumage for him or her. In fact, in the bird department, either girl or boy may be very well *overlooked* yet they will never be passed by if *overheard*. Similarly, there is nothing rich or superfluous about the country depicted in the landscape photos - the sparse shrubs in delicate green, the orange/yellow ground, and the pale blue sky. One startling photo is of The Great Wall Of China, near Hall's Creek, Western Australia where 4/5 of the image depicts a hot yellow wall deepening into orange as it rises to the cold blue sky. Yet it was here that Tony Baylis recorded pied butcherbirds about which Ms Taylor remarks "The rapid fire phrases of the Hall's Creek bird betray strong timbral contrast and strong rhythms that sit somewhere between genres of the Baroque and jazz." (Notes to *Absolute Bird*).



Cracticus nigrogularis (pied butcherbird): an ordinary even scruffy looking little fella. No bright coloured plumage for him or her...

Great love and fierce dedication and leadership have undoubtedly fuelled Ms Taylor's ambitions, musical and scientific, and she has been ably supported by collaborators of considerable artistic stature. The very well-produced document *Absolute Bird* in its cardboard sleeves graced with the simple visage of a pied butcherbird awaits your music system before it reveals the great beauty within, nature's beauty and humanity's beauty. Professor Lewis I expect already has a copy and undoubtedly it will remain a useful resource and telling example of the satisfying art possible through intelligent and sensitive engagement with nature, an example that has some illustrious musical forbears. It also stands as a reminder of the power possible if we are at one with nature instead of it constantly serving our base greed.

One artist who has passionately engaged with the natural world is Barney McAll. Of contemporary artists McAll is a singularly passionate, philosophical, mystical, spiritual, and gifted artist who reminds me of McCoy Tyner's take on this music as "serious as your life."

Following some comments I made about an outstanding performance of his in the Wangaratta Cathedral in 2013, McAll wrote to me, saying "as a child I knew that I needed music to make sense of earth and reality ...music speaks of life and its sad mystery ... you can flow with that.."

Atypically for an Anglo-Saxon male McAll exhibits powerful feelings unashamedly. His close connections to working with African Americans in their churches in New York may have been a sympathetic environment and embraced this openness. Birds have proven an inspiration for his art. The cover of his work *Mooroolbark* (2015, ABC Jazz) features a photo of the head of an owl and two works in the programme reference birds: *Jendhi* (McAll) an eagle; and *Mooralbark* 1974 (McAll) magpies. The cover photo when inverted shows a shimmering image of Manhattan pre- 9/11 with twin towers in the foreground. But it is his major orchestral work *Zephyrix* (Extra Celestial Arts) recorded at Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music, Monash University in May, 2016 with the Monash Art Ensemble in which birds are central to his imagination and the work created.



The six works in the suite are *Black Crow*, *White Swan*, *Peacock*, *Pelican*, *Zephyrix* and *Phoenix*. *Zephyrix* is out of McAll's imagination, a fusing of the Greek God Zephyr with the mythical Phoenix. Zephyr is dressed in a business suit with the left foot a claw, and the right upper body a large wing with the head of an eagle representing Phoenix. Phoenix can symbolise renewal and the exceptional man.

McAll sees the symbolism as the struggle between the base urges of man and “the liberating creative expression of our true selves.”

Where alchemy in medieval times was the “chemist” transforming base metals into gold, in modern times it’s the creative artist making artistic “gold”. The base urges of man are all too evident and are being passed down to the younger generation - white 18-year-old Payton S Gendron undertook a massacre of African Americans in a Buffalo, NY, supermarket on 14th May 2022 motivated by race hatred. It was the most serious of 200 gun massacres in the USA twelve months past. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine where thousands of civilians are dying continues unabated. McAll is one artist who continues to express the best of humanity.

Black Crow, White Swan, Peacock, Pelican and Phoenix are the five landmarks in the transmutation of matter, each representing a progressively deepening encounter with our inner being. The Language of the Birds, also known as the Green Language, was a type of communication that allowed people across different centuries and cultures to understand and share ideas about the universe as well as cosmic or transcendental experiences. So what do we artistically make of *Zephyrix*?



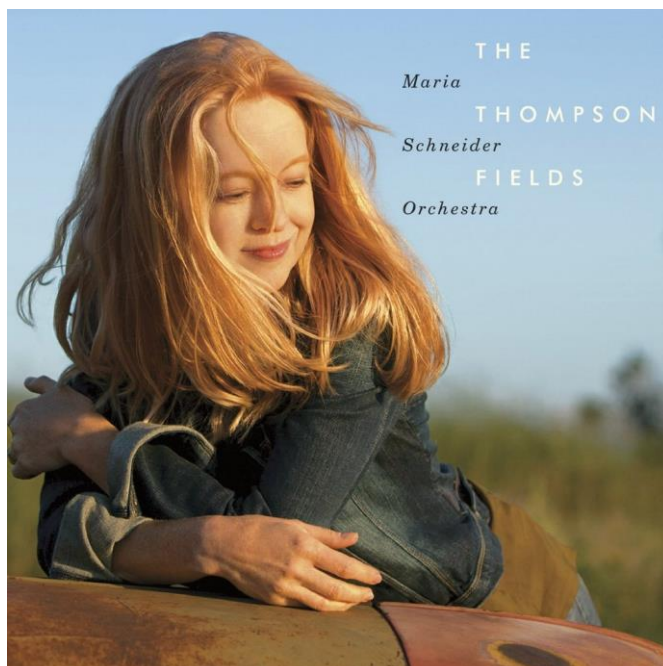
18-year-old Payton S Gendron (above) undertook a massacre of African Americans in a Buffalo, NY, supermarket on 14th May 2022 motivated by race hatred...

First of all *Zephyrix* is a major orchestral work with no clear breaks between its six parts, each segueing into the next. Secondly, percussion and rhythm play a prominent part with McAll’s piano and Chucky (which involves miniature hurdy-gurdies, kalimbas, glockenspiel and recording devices that enable it to loop in snatches of percussion, music boxes and bird whistles, creating a dreamlike layer of sound that jangles and chimes alongside his piano playing) three percussionists and contra bassist which make up over a third of the 15-piece orchestra. Thirdly, there is a fine balance between soloists and composition and orchestral structure. To summarise, it’s an ambitious, major work, rich in colour and swing which reveals its great beauty over repeated listenings.

Black Crow features a range of orchestral colours, cascading bird-like sounds, conversation between trombone and trumpet and features the contra bass. *White Swan* is a swinging up-tempo piece with a majestic trumpet solo from Eugene Ball, and hints of South American rhythms. *Peacock* is lighter in tone, with sparkling vibraphone and dancing violin, and a delicate repetitive motif, and some quite beautiful voicings with the contra bass playing a distinctive role. *Pelican* opens with a drum solo, swings, and has some enchanting concluding piano which segues into the slow tempo *Zephyrix* with its melodic, lyrical orchestral voicings and bell-like notes of piano. The final joyful *Phoenix* concludes the suite. It's a major work from one of our finest artists. The orchestra consisted of:

Paul Grabowsky, director
Barney McAll, piano, chucky, electronics and voice
Paul Williamson, trumpet
Eugene Ball, trumpet
Jordan Murray, trombone
Josh Bennier, trombone
Robert Burke, tenor saxophone, bass clarinet, clarinet
Jonathan Cooper, tenor saxophone
Mirko Guerrini, alto saxophone
Lachlan Davison, flute
Estelita Rae, violin
Hugh Stuckey, guitar
Philip Rex, double bass
Matthias Schack-Arnott, percussion, vibraphone
Ray Pereira, percussion
Kieran Rafferty, drum kit

The common denominator in the genre for all big bands is that they swing. Barney McAll's *Zephyrix* swings but like the very best - Ellington, Evans, Mingus (*Epitaph*) - it does so much more which makes it a deeply satisfying work.



*Maria Schneider Orchestra's
"The Thompson Fields":
another contemporary big band
swinging work, with nature
and birds as the thematic focus...*

Another contemporary big band swinging work, this time with nature and birds as the thematic focus, is *The Thompson Fields* (Artist's Share) 2015 by the Maria Schneider Orchestra. I can't remember a CD document (designed by Cheri Dorr) which combines the arts of music (Schneider), literature (Ted Kooser), illustration (Audubon), cartography (Nicolette 1843) and photography (Briene Lermite) in such a compelling and beautiful way. It seems to evident a cry of passionate creativity for the beauty of life itself faced with eminent extinction, birdlife loss being literally the "canaries in the coal mine of the world". It's a product that clearly announces the worth of the arts it celebrates as well as aspects of nature which inspire those arts, especially birds. Vivid full colour Illustrations included are the Magnificent bird-of-paradise (*Cicinnurus magnificus*); the Western Parotia (*Parotia sefilato*); the Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*) whose flutelike melody was the most influential birdsong of Schneider's childhood; The Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferous*); and the Bobolink(*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) all illustrated by John James Audubon and reproduced meticulously in their rich colours. Plant illustrations include Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) by P J Buchos; photos include Monarch Butterfly by Briene Lermite; quotes from *The Living Bird* by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology including this by John W Fitzpatrick:

All over the world, birds have the universal power to connect us with nature in ways that no organism can. We love them, we want to live with them, and...we cannot bear the idea of living without them. For this reason, it is birds' ability to help us gauge the state of the natural world that takes our simple wonder to another level. (from his essay "Beacons of Our Planet").

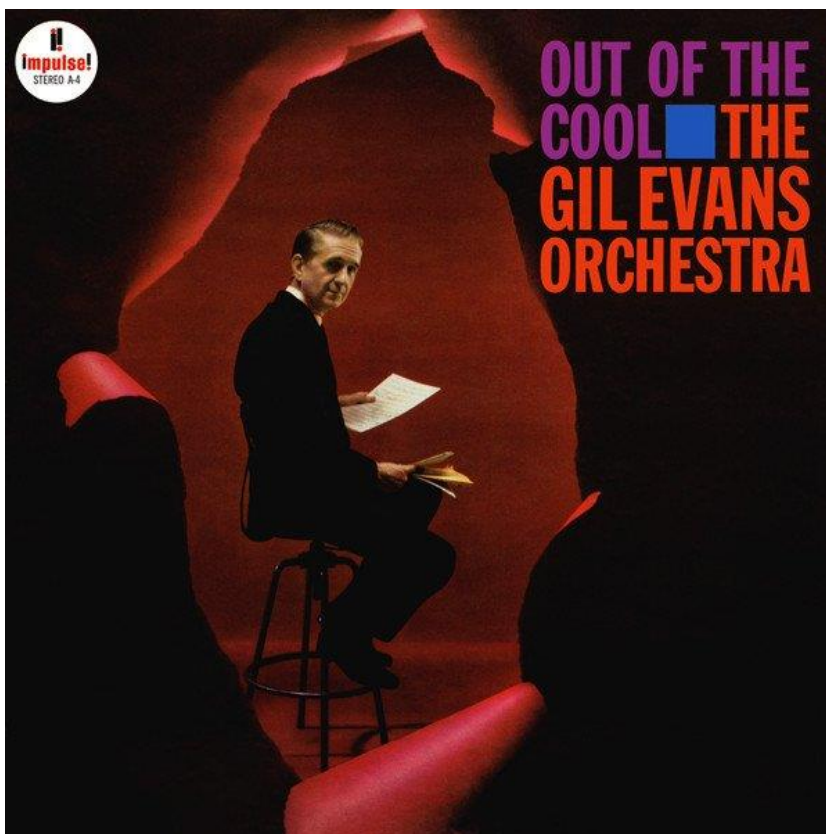
There are eight compositions all by composer and conductor Schneider, the longest being *Arbiters Of Evolution* at 13:59. It's an apropos title when we consider the inspiration for Darwin's theory of evolution began by him observing birds of the same species and the varying length and shape of their beaks depending on their food source, eg, oysters. The soloists are Donny McCaslin, tenor and Scott Robinson, baritone.



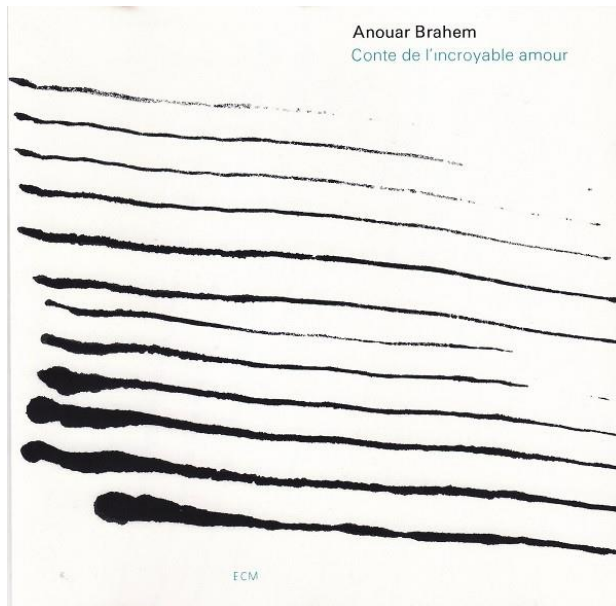
*Donny McCaslin: a dancing tenor solo excitedly beating away as if the sax is a bird working hard to gain height...
PHOTO CREDIT MARK SHELDON*

The work structurally is in three parts. It begins up-tempo with percussion and repetitive piano phrases and a joyful, singing quality from the orchestra overlain by a dancing tenor solo excitedly beating away as if the sax is a bird working hard to gain height. Once in that higher register the tempo changes to the second part and serenity where the bird drifts on a lyrical updraft floating on sweet clouds of orchestral harmony. The third section at ballad tempo with baritone saxophone low down building over time to an ecstatic high backed by some exotic voicings (piano/guitar/percussion?) to a swinging collective orchestral shout of joy. One can't help but listen to this beauty with images of Russian tanks rumbling into the magnificent plains and fields of Ukraine shadowing one's mind.

One of the great orchestral works of the 20th century of any genre is that of Gil Evans and *Out Of The Cool* (Impulse, 1996) recorded November and December 1960 in New Jersey. It was so esteemed on its release that the US Government distributed it as a diplomatic cultural weapon of soft power through its propaganda arm the United States Information Service (later United States Information Agency). Two of the compositions are by Evans - *La Nevada* and *Sunken Treasure* - with the programme completed by his arrangements of *Sister Sadie* (Horace Silver); *Stratusphunk* (George Russell); *Bilbao Song* (Weill/Brecht); and *Where Flamingoes Fly* (Courlander/Thea/Brooks). This last is taken at a stately tempo largo, and features a very fine plaintive trombone solo by Jimmy Knepper. What distinguishes Evans in his works are orchestral rhythmic power with stunning voicings - eg, piano/flute/guitar on this piece- lifted by individual solo brilliance. He claims his arrangements are like "ordering chaos" because he allows much room for individual improvisation and changes during performance.



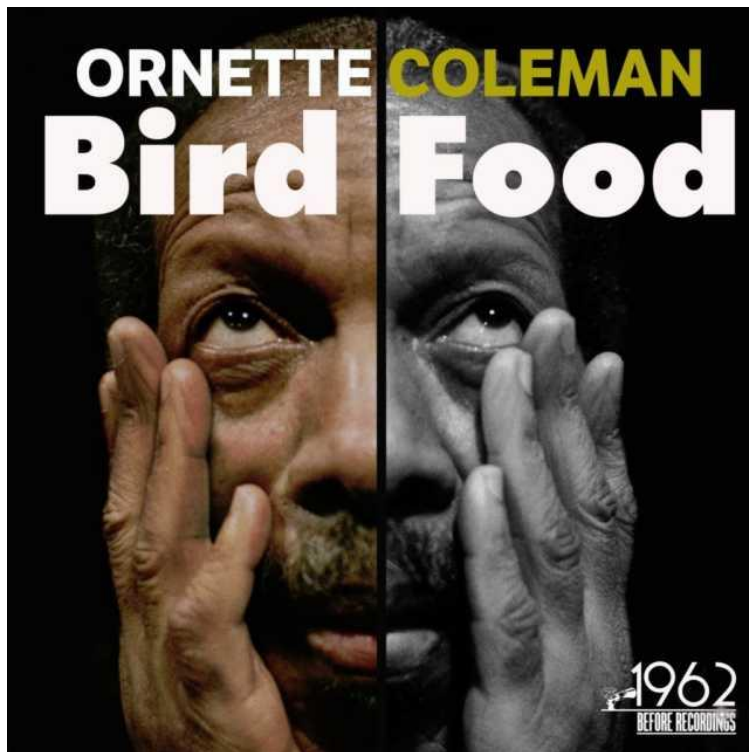
On Conte de l'incroyable amour (ECM, 1992) Anouar Brahem performs a dozen of his original compositions on Oud supported by Barbaros Erkose on clarinet; with Kudsi Erguner on Nai; and Lassad Hosni on Bendir and Darbouka. *L'oiseau de bois* (not to be confused with *L'oiseau des bois* (Doppler)) which translates to wooden bird or perhaps bird of the wood is a joyful, up-tempo, dancing, skipping solo by Brahem.



Percussionist Rajiv Jayaweera on his *Pistils* document (Earshift Music, 2020), a programme of nine of his original compositions, features a bird on *Malkoha Bird*. This bird is native to the composer's ancestral home of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Musicians on this gentle waltz are Chris Cheek, soprano saxophone; Aaron Parks, piano; Hugh Stuckey, guitar; Sam Anning, double bass; with leader Jayaweera on drums, cymbals, thammattama, and caxixi.



Percussionist Rajiv Jayaweera features a bird on his composition "Malkoha Bird" on the album "Pistils"...



Other individual contributions include Ornette Coleman's *Birdfood*, an up-tempo swinging number with singing horn harmony and trumpet mimicking bird calls - parrots perhaps. Actual recorded bird sounds feature as part of the stunning improvisation by masters Muhal Richard Abrams (piano, bell, bamboo flute, taxi horn, percussion); George Lewis (trombone, laptop); and Roscoe Mitchell (soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, percussion) on the 16-minute exploration *Soundhear* from their document *Streaming* (PI Recordings, 2006).

Muhal Richard Abrams / George Lewis / Roscoe Mitchell

Streaming



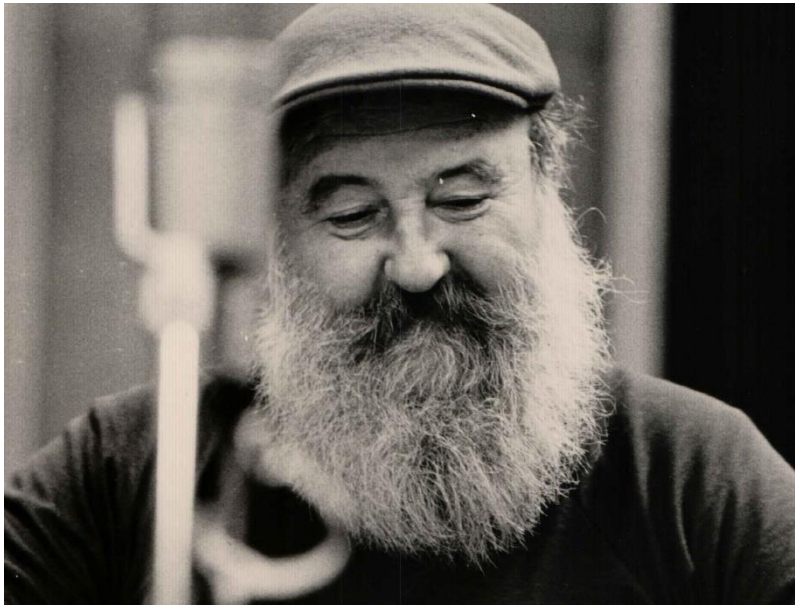
Acoustic Chicken is a free improvisation by saxophonist Koichi Matsukaze, drummer Ryojiro Furusawa, and bassist Koichi Yamakazi (*At the Room 427*, ALM Records, 2021). It was recorded on 21/11/75 and is a 20-minute mid-tempo delight of swinging percussion including long bass and drum solos perhaps reminiscent of a lively chook dancing in a yard.



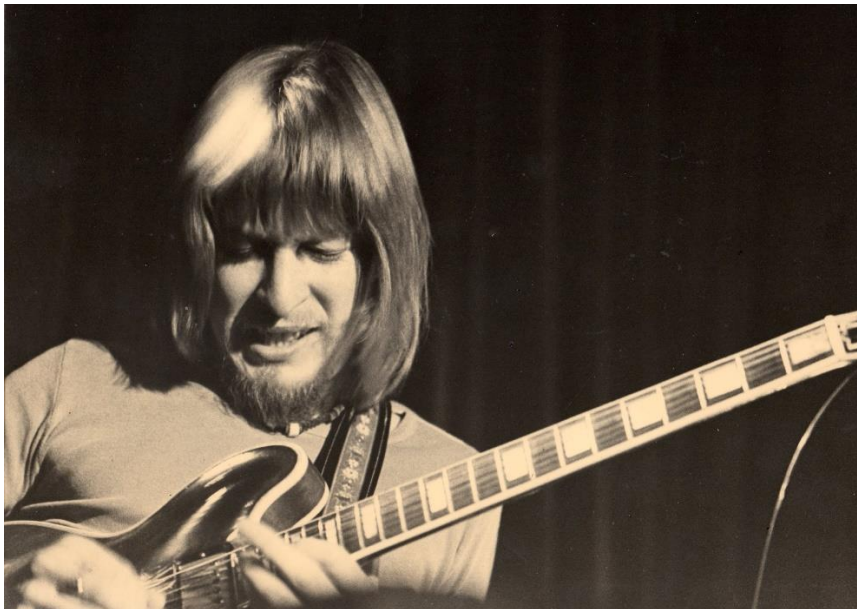
On this album, “*Acoustic Chicken*” is a free improvisation by saxophonist Koichi Matsukaze, drummer Ryojiro Furusawa, and bassist Koichi Yamakazi...

The Peacocks (Rowles) with fluttery melody phrases, was recorded by Bill Evans (*But Beautiful*) 1974; Fred Hersch (*Sarabande*) 1986; and Esperanza Spalding (*Junjo*) 2005. *Bye Bye Blackbird* (Henderson/Dixon, 1926) in which a separate verse refers to a bluebird is most likely of ornithological origins despite its association with Eddie Cantor and his blackface performances. It has been recorded by Miles Davis (*Round About Midnight*) 1956; John Coltrane (*Bye Bye Blackbird*) 1962; and Albert Ayler (*My Name is Albert Ayler*) 1963. Whilst *Skylark* (Carmichael/Mercer) has been recorded by many including Lee Konitz (*Lee Konitz at Storyville*, 1954); Michael Brecker (*Two Blocks From The Edge*, 1997; Mark Murphy (*Once To Every Heart*) 2002; Freddie Hubbard (*The Body and the Soul*); John Lewis (*Grand Encounter 2 degrees East - Three degrees West*); and Keith Jarrett (*At The Blue Note*). *Look At The Birdie* (Shorter) which may at first seem a homage to Woody Woodpecker but turns the humour to something beautiful in a performance on 12/2/61 with Shorter, tenor sax; Lee Morgan, trumpet; Bobby Timmons, piano; Jymie Merritt, bass; and Art Blakey, drums.

John Sangster's favourite musical bird was the Satin Bower-Bird (*Ptilinorhynchidae Ptilinorhynchus*) which has an utterly nonsensical cry appealing very much to Sangster's whimsy and sense of humour. The composition dedicated to this bird is called *The Omblomphious Dolomphious Ptilinorhynchus* (Sangster) referencing Edward Lear's writing by using two of Lear's words in the title. It's a waltz and features Jim Kelly on guitar and the bass clarinet of Martin Benge from *Uttered Nonsense (The Owl and the Pussycat)* John Sangster, (Move 3321, 2CD, 2008).



*John Sangster (left): the composition dedicated to his favourite musical bird, the Satin Bower-Bird, is a waltz featuring guitarist Jim Kelly (below)...
SANGSTER PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR; KELLY PHOTO COURTESY JULES KELLY*



Another humorous song *Up With The Lark* (Jerome Kern-Leo Robin) was featured in the 1943 musical comedy of the same name. But it has been rescued from obscurity by pianist Bill Evans in an achingly beautiful live performance in *l'Espace Cardin* Paris 26/11/79 accompanied by Marc Johnson on contra bass. It makes a fitting moment to now retire and reflect on the beauty that has been inspired by mankind's love of these wondrous creatures.