

## LINDA MAY HAN OH, THE DOUBLE BASS, AND ME

by Ian Muldoon\*

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It was around 1990 that Lloyd Swanton's double bass playing got me, a confirmed atheist, going back to "church". The recital was at a little Chapel, of sandstone and beauty, on the grounds of Sydney University organised by the indomitable Peter Rechniewski whose name was enough to get me to part with some of my hard-earned cash in a performance by a band I'd never heard of called The Necks.



*The indomitable Peter Rechniewski: his tastes and mine seemed to be in perfect synchronicity...*

Rechniewski's name was enough for me because his tastes and mine seemed to be in perfect synchronicity. Through his efforts over many years I was introduced to some outstanding music and groups, and the programme he organised always seemed great value for money.

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*\*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.*

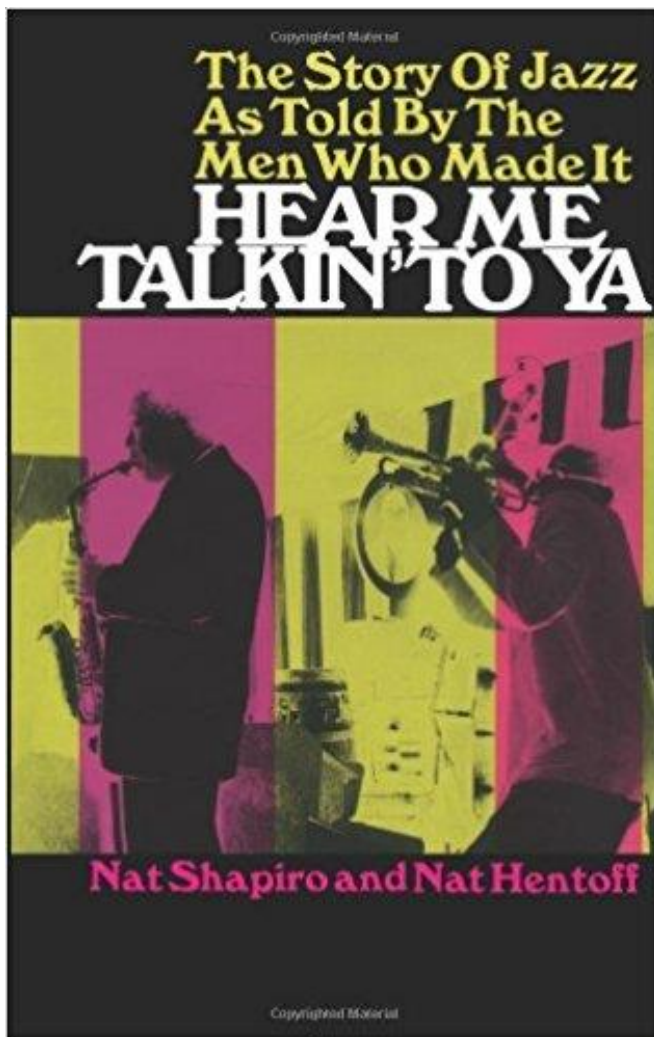


*The Necks, L-R, Chris Abrahams, Lloyd Swanton, Tony Buck: the rich, woody sound of Swanton's instrument swept me away...*

This performance by The Necks at the Sydney University "little chapel" was a revelation for a number of reasons. I realised what a great venue churches were for music but also I had reaffirmed what a glorious instrument the acoustic bass really is when given the opportunity to be heard as it should be. I was eventually also drawn to St Patrick's Cathedral at the Wangaratta Jazz Festival at every opportunity, but more of that later.

I thought about venues, the astonishing power of the sound of the double bass, and how this music more than any other has such an impact on me. And it's not as if I don't enjoy Montserrat Caballé, or Daniel Barenboim (especially the early Beethoven sonatas), or Bach, or Bob Dylan, or Frank Sinatra. It's just no other music has that magic balance of the rhythms of the throbbing heart, so to speak, with the seemingly infinite inventiveness of exploratory improvisation. I understand now when I read a quote by Charlie Parker in a book I bought in 1955 called *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya* by Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff when Parker said "There's a boundary line to music, but, man, there's no boundary line to art." I get it Mr Parker.

When Lloyd Swanton plucked the first notes of his bass I knew I was gone. The combination of the silence of the audience perhaps in respect to the former role of the venue, the acoustics of the Chapel, and the complete clarity and beauty of Swanton's playing of the rich, woody sound of his instrument, swept me away. The Necks trio, Swanton on double bass, Chris Abrahams on piano, and Tony Buck on drums, took us on a simple journey in terms of structure, repetition, and the style of minimalism which is proto-modern and definitely part of the zeitgeist of Modernism. The performance was an intriguing and emotional one.



*The cover of the classic jazz book “Hear Me Talkin’ To Ya”:* Charlie Parker said “There’s a boundary line to music, but, man, there’s no boundary line to art.”

I realised that although the piano remained my favourite instrument it was the acoustic bass that evoked the deepest feelings in me. My prospective bride whom I’d brought to this performance telling her it was of major cultural significance, being improvised music played by fine musicians, wondered where I’d gone. When I returned, so to speak, she looked at me and remarked that I was flushed, glowing, happy. “Is it because I’m with you?” she queried. “Of course,” I lied. So there was another thing - what is it with this phenomenon of being unable to control my feelings, to sit frozen whilst tears stream down my face, as the musical sounds wash over me? This been a lifelong source of embarrassment. But it also intrigued me. What is it about jazz that evokes such strong feelings? And why was the acoustic bass the trigger?

Music is not unique in the arts for evoking powerful emotions. Similar strong feelings can arise in me, and I’m not alone, by the poetry of (say) Elizabeth Bishop, or the prose of (say) Primo Levi, or the voice of (say) John Gielgud in a speech from *King Lear*. Indeed I recall when Gielgud performed the *Ages of Man* in Sydney in 1959 many in the audience were wracked with sobs during his Lear speech over the death of Cordelia.





*I sat frozen with tears streaming down my cheeks, as I listened to the bass as it was played by Linda May Han Oh (above)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

And it is necessary to distinguish between the sentimental and this response to art. To my mind the playing of the national anthem, feelings generated by large crowds at concerts or sporting events or the manipulation of feelings by those engaged in advertising or the film industry, are of a different kind. The former has to do with a complex cultural, intellectual and emotional response to beauty, and connecting with another, whilst the latter is similar to the Pavlov experiment with dogs or the dynamics of group behaviour.

Additionally, drugs and alcohol can condition response. As Kurt Elling told an audience at Chicago's Green Mill Cocktail Lounge "Drink up folks! The more you drink the better I sound." Thus any opinion herein I offer on performance is with the assurance I was not under the influence of any substance whatsoever. But I should also reveal I don't play an instrument and cannot tell the difference between a pentatonic scale and a blue note. I offer a humble opinion and a note about my feelings regarding some performances.

I do see parallels between the idiom of jazz and the English language in that both have evolved and blossomed through borrowing, adapting, wherever and whenever. Just as a deep knowledge or understanding of grammar is no guide to outstanding communication in the language, speaking, writing, singing, knowing the difference between the pentatonic scale and a blue note is no guide to communicating/playing music or being able to feel or appreciate it. Indeed, an emphasis on “correctness” in writing may in fact be an impediment to effective communication, let alone writing at an “artistic” level as the likes of William Faulkner, literary Nobel prize winner, was very well aware.

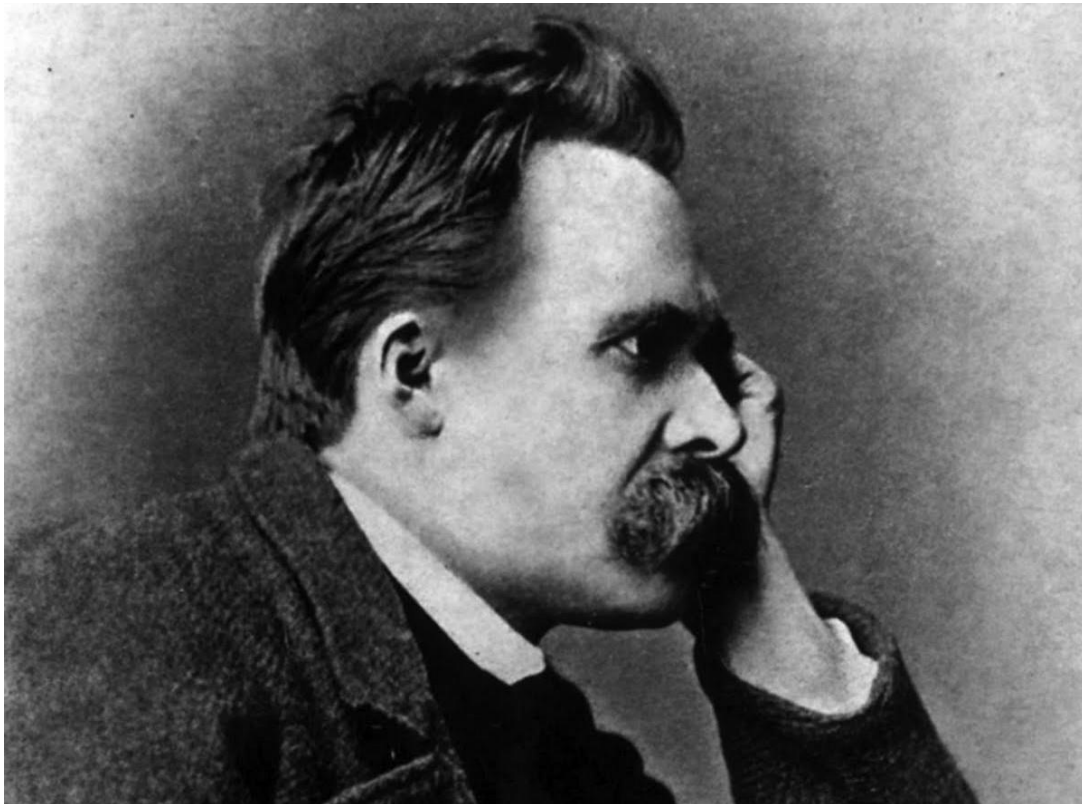
Similarly, some of the greatest jazz musicians were self-taught, Erroll Garner, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk among them. Nevertheless just as the advances made in teaching English over the past 100 years have been all to the good, so the emergence of jazz into the curriculum in a great number of schools and universities has much to commend it particularly in terms of expanding the possibilities of composition, range and sources.



*Some of the greatest jazz musicians were self-taught, Erroll Garner (left) and Dizzy Gillespie (below) among them... GARNER PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK; GILLESPIE PHOTO CREDIT LEE TANNER*



My grandmother Ethel May Bruce, the woman who raised me, did not know the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and Nietzsche did not know her. Ethel had been a factory hand when single and a homemaker when married. There were no bibles in our home, no religious paraphernalia like in my friend Bobby Chalmer's place where images of the bleeding Christ adorned the walls. The only reference to religion at all in my home was if I brought a friend to visit. My grandmother had a knack of quickly determining if there was any hint of Catholicism about them. If detected, it soon became clear that there was something unsavoury about my friend's personal habits, or looks, or character.



*The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: my grandmother Ethel May Bruce, the woman who raised me, did not know him...*

However, Ethel May Bruce attended a church of sorts - a house of saints peopled by music, theatre and film - which got me wondering about ideas attributed to Nietzsche, which is to say finding in the arts a substitute for the spiritual side of humanity, the so-called "soul of man". I have to say that the only raw emotion my grandmother displayed, joy or grief, was in the cinema, or theatre. Sitting alongside her in the dark of the cinema as her body shook with sobs or as she shouted with laughter was sometimes in alarming contrast to the dour, Presbyterian, disciplined ways she demonstrated in the confines of our home.

Is it possible that my unleashed feelings at the music of Lloyd Swanton et al was related to my childhood association with my grandmother and her response to the arts? Or is there something universal in humans that responds in this way? Is the "ecstasy" of St Teresa sexual, religious, or has she been listening to a motet by Nicolas Gombert? What I was constantly drawn to was the double bass.

The opening to the most famous album in jazz history, *Kind of Blue*, features a musical figure by Paul Chambers which most jazz fans can hum off the top of their heads. Again the opening repetitive notes by Paul Chambers, of *Someday My Prince Will Come* from the album of the same name, are simply compelling and arresting, and set up the subsequent performance by the Miles Davis sextet (featuring John Coltrane on this track alone) as a great one.



*Paul Chambers: most jazz fans can hum off the top of their heads his musical figure which opens the most famous album in jazz history "Kind of Blue" ... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

Although I recall with great fondness Slam Stewart humming along to his arco playing, or Jimmy Blanton on *Jack the Bear*, and *Big Noise from Winnetka* by Bob Haggart, some of my most powerful memories of this music on records have arisen following the introduction of the LP and especially the CD with its ability not to be constrained by tracking concerns that can arise with the demands on the stylus on vinyl records. Jimmy Garrison's solo on *Live at the Donaueschingen Music Festival* with Archie Shepp; or Cecil McBee on *Streams* with Sam Rivers; or Mingus and his opening to (say) *Haitian Fight Song* from *Pithecanthropus Erectus* were quite spellbinding to me. As has been Peter Ind in backing Lee Konitz on *Motion*.





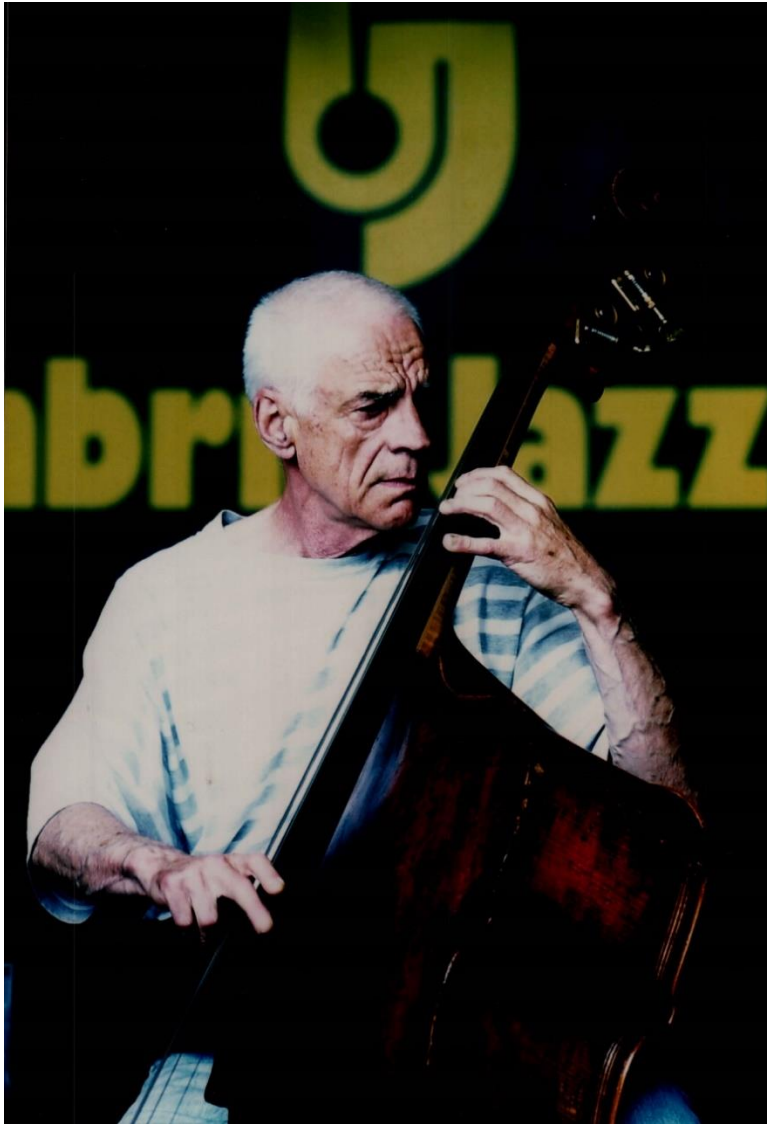
*The Ornette Coleman Quartet, L-R, Don Cherry, Charlie Haden, Coleman, Ed Blackwell: Coleman's greatest music was with Charlie Haden in support...*  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

I also believe Ornette Coleman's greatest music was with Charlie Haden in support. But it is the piano trio where I believe the greatest impact has been felt in helping to elevate some elements of the music to greatness. Although I can appreciate the genius of Art Tatum I am more intrigued, moved and drawn in by the Ahmad Jamal Trio and the playing of Israel Crosby. Similarly, whatever the fascination might be with Keith Jarrett's solo *Sun Bear Concerts* or even *The Koln Concert* which I love, it's his work with Gary Peacock which is the more satisfying and compelling. As for solo performances, Peter Kowald has done astonishing work on FMP records which benefits from a good high fidelity system set up in the home.

Although I am severely limited in my exposure to live music compared to those who reside permanently in a major city, I have heard Reggie Workman, Bob Cranshaw, Sam Anning, John Patitucci and quite a few other bass players, live.

Still, I was unprepared for my experience at the 2011 Wangaratta Jazz Festival where Barre Phillips was performing in St Patrick's Cathedral and Gian Slater was going to have a go at the Great American Songbook supported by a bass player I had not heard, or heard of.





*Whatever the fascination might be with Keith Jarrett's solo albums, it's his work with the bassist Gary Peacock (pictured above) which is the more satisfying and compelling... PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE*

Barre Phillips gave an intriguing, spellbinding performance where he demonstrated the amazing range of possibilities open to a master musician using the double bass - percussive effects, arco, plucking, sliding- all was second nature to his artistry on this instrument, a solo performance given in the glory of the acoustics of a cathedral. Then I was off to the WPAC Hall, a less promising venue, for a Saturday 29th October 2011, 4.30pm vocal performance by Gian Slater. No big deal but a reminder about the enduring legacy of the so-called Great American Songbook.

I was completely unprepared for one of my embarrassing displays where I sat frozen with tears streaming down my cheeks as I listened to the bass as it was played by Linda May Han Oh. I'd never experienced such playing - more or less a continual 40 minutes sometimes by itself, sometimes with vocal by Ms Slater, where the intonation, execution, attack, rhythm, sheer beauty of sound was so sweetly overpowering... be still my breathing heart! This was improvised music (jazz) at its glorious summit, high art manifest.



*Linda May Han Oh, pictured at the Wangaratta Jazz Festival in 2009: not just a great musician but also a great artist... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Four years later I embraced Ms Oh who returned with the American trumpeter Dave Douglas, gushing “You are not just a great musician. You are a great artist.” As Charlie Parker (again I quote Mr Parker) “Jazz performance is in the air, a moment, then it’s gone.” (Perhaps I misquote, but you get the meaning). Well, it’s gone but some performances are etched and chiselled onto the heart and into the mind, and Linda May Han Oh did it for me.

Jazz musician and teacher Garry Lee has opined from evidence at her Perth, WA, degree recital circa 2002, that Ms Oh apparently was influenced by the great Dave Holland. Fans might note that in the 2018 *Downbeat* Jazz Critics 66th Annual Poll, Linda May Han Oh tied with Dave Holland with 128 votes. Christian McBride won with 186.



*Self with Linda May Han Oh on October 31, 2015, at the Wangaratta Jazz Festival...*