

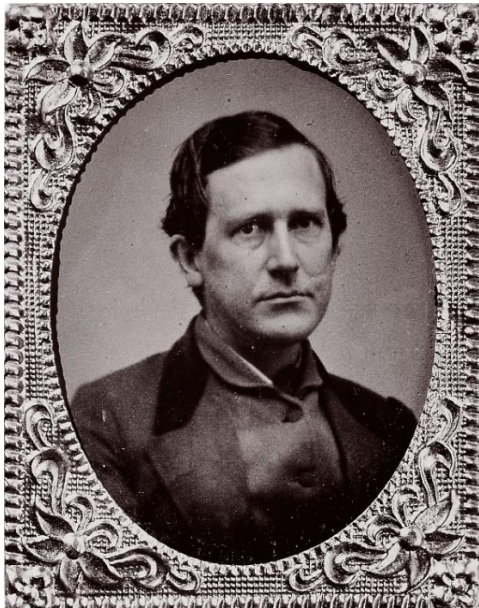
LLOYD SWANTON'S CATHOLICS: THE SERIOUSNESS OF JAZZ

by Ian Muldoon*

[This piece arrived from Ian Muldoon on Saturday, August 17, 2019.]

Music does not exist in a vacuum. It brings with it connotations, denotations, cultural baggage, and history. The listener brings with him or her, attitudes, influences, history, and personal experiences. When I was aged eight my Manly West Public School teacher Mr Furzer had us listen to, then sing and understand, a song called *Old Black Joe* written by Stephen Foster:

*Gone are the days when my heart was young and gay
Gone are the toils of the cotton fields away
Gone to the fields of a better land I know
I hear those gentle voices calling, "Old Black Joe"
I'm coming, I'm coming
For my head is bending low
I hear those gentle voices calling, "Old Black Joe"*



Stephen Foster, composer of 'Old Black Joe'...

**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.*

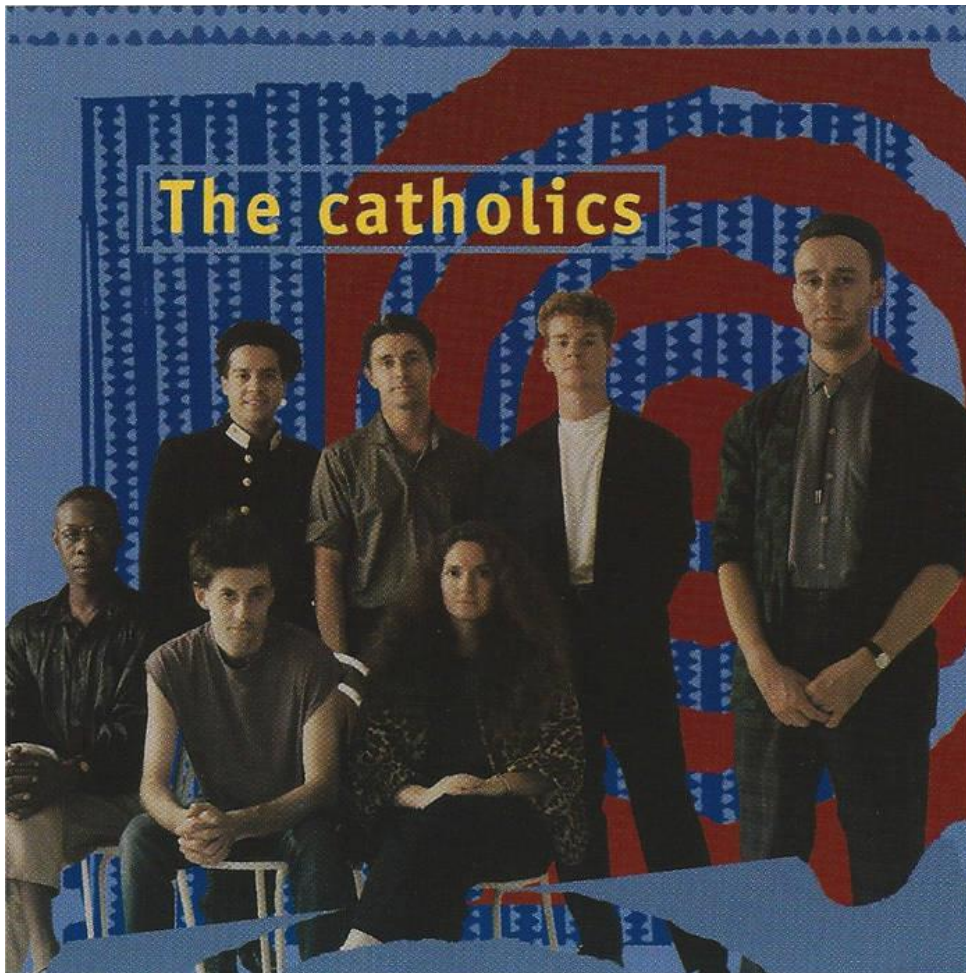
*I'm coming home (I'm coming home)
I'm coming home (I'm coming home)
Oh-oh my head is bending low
I hear those gentle voices calling, "Old Black Joe"
Old Black Joe, Old Black Joe, Old Black Joe
Why do I weep when my heart should feel no pain?
Why do I sigh that my friends come not again?
Grieving for forms now departed long ago
I hear their gentle voice calling, "Old Black Joe"
Where are the hearts once so happy and free?
The children so dear that I held upon my knee?
Gone to the shore where my soul has long'd to go
I hear their gentle voice calling, "Old Black Joe"*

To some, this song may seem maudlin and sentimental, but to us eight-year-old boys, it had a sweet melancholy feel. Singing the learned song to myself as I walked alone through the bush at the back of Manly dam caused deep feelings to well up. Some words and simple ideas and a simple tune and so much power to move the child. Stephen Foster was white and wrote Old Black Joe just months before the outbreak of that American tragedy, the American Civil War. In my home, the music of Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong or the Mills Brothers or Fats Waller enriched my listening experience, one that was blind to the context of the music's roots. These songs had a common denominator, powerful rhythms. Simplicity and powerful rhythms are features of the music of the group The Catholics, led by bass player Lloyd Swanton.



The music of Duke Ellington (on the right) or Louis Armstrong (on the left) enriched my listening experience...

Along with music, another emotional awakening happened through books. In the 1940s and 1950s, F R Leavis was an influential literary critic who (famously) argued that through reading and studying fine literature one was made a better person. As opposed to the “technical” analysis of literature promoted by the New Criticism, Leavis argued: “A real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn”. Such interest led to an understanding and increased *empathy* for the “other” - the opposite sex, the foreigner, the aged, indigenous people, nature, the African American slave. Therefore, when in 1993 I bought a copy of the eponymous CD *The catholics* (1992) which had the opening track *Why the Caged Bird Sings* and having read Maya Angelou’s book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and being aware that a major theme of that seven-volume series suggested that a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma, I said to myself: talk to me Swanton. He did and I listened.



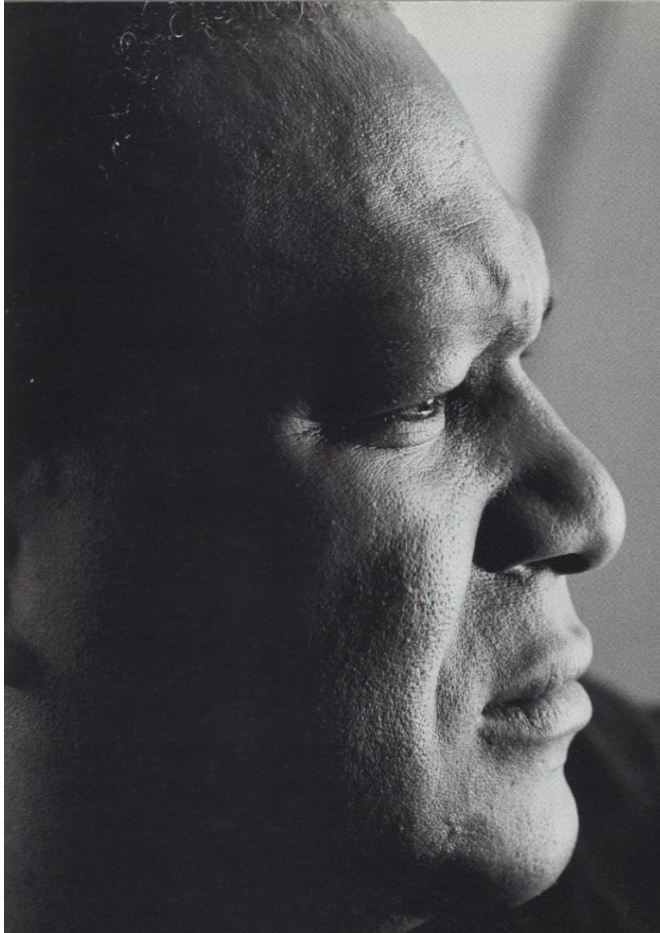
It’s been a compelling and rewarding journey culminating in the magnificent *Ambon* of 2015 which is an original work of jazz, steeped in a particular aspect of Australian history which musically parallels in some ways the evolution of jazz itself, and is a worthy contender for consideration as a masterpiece. *Ambon* exemplifies the serious role this music plays in our cultural life. The seriousness of “jazz” - really?



In a world hell-bent on its rush to uniformity prefigured in literature by writers such as George Orwell in his work *1984* (a major theme of which was the ability of society and its government to crush independent thought) and manifested not just in post-totalitarian states like modern China, but also in the rise of modern corporations in capitalist societies, such as Facebook and Amazon, the role the arts plays in countering this uniformity, in questioning the status quo, in embracing the different and the original, and the eccentric, has an urgency about it. This is because, to repeat the acknowledged cliché one more time, the good health of a society, its drive, imaginative resources, its wealth, even its mental health, depend on the strength of the arts within it. As the great modern artist Ai Weiwei has said: “An artwork unable to make people feel uncomfortable or to feel different is not one worth creating. This is the difference between the artist and the fool.” The arts helps vaccinate us against becoming a nation of fools. And jazz is a serious player in this, the holiest of grails. The catholics’ music is original and sometimes eccentric, sometimes swinging, sometimes funereal, sometimes ringing with such beauty your heart aches, and in its variety and accessibility and inclusiveness, deeply Australian.

This essay is an attempt to provide a small acknowledgment of the role Lloyd Swanton and the jazz group The catholics have played in bringing to our culture a celebration of difference, a joy through music, a very fine expression of one of the most challenging and difficult musical forms extant - improvised music played at the highest technical and artistic level. It is music, I hope to show, that is thoughtful, demanding consideration, and sincere. In short, it is serious music riding in on a motivation springing from generosity of spirit, love and hope.

*The general public, I feel, are swayed by a lot of different things. They're persuaded by a lot of different elements around musicians without really understanding what music is supposed to mean. It's a personal thing, it has a lot of meaning to it. Music's not a plaything - it's as serious as your life.**



McCoy Tyner: music's not a plaything - it's as serious as your life... PHOTO CREDIT JOHN REEVES

As Serious As Your Life is also the title of an album by Joe McPhee (Hat Hut 1996) in which he traverses, solo: reeds, pocket cornet, piano and electronics. It is an overview by him of jazz including the blues, Miles Davis and Coltrane.

As Serious As Your Life, by Valerie Wilmer, the English author, is one of the better books about the “new” jazz and helped prompt a consideration of what jazz music actually means to its practitioners. There's no real living let alone riches to be had as a jazz artist. It highlighted how some younger musicians in particular felt about jazz and considered the reaction of younger musicians to the radical social changes that were occurring in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. It exposed a clear shift in attitude towards this performing art by its musicians - it was to be an agent for change.

*McCoy Tyner, quoted in “*As Serious As Your Life*”, by Valerie Wilmer, Quartet, London, 1977, p 258.

Davis and Coltrane “had come of age musically when the United States entered the war against fascism. It was also a time when black Americans exposed the hypocrisy of a nation fighting against racial supremacists abroad while supporting Jim Crow laws at home. If the Germans waged war and genocide in the name of white supremacy, the United States continued to be a nation steeped in similar ideology: The everyday lives of black people were testament to this sad fact”.*

Jazz, its very name, suggests fun and entertainment. Indeed, its blossoming in the brothels, “speakeasies” of the American prohibition era, dance halls and clubs, demonstrated the direct connection early jazz bands had with sometimes illegal and often immoral activities - a connection which became firmly entrenched in the minds of the public. Many musicians, especially those involved in what is known as traditional jazz, may have overlooked its connections with church music, march music, and much else. The stage persona of Louis Armstrong, the alcoholism of Bix Beiderbecke and the open drinking and drug taking of many (an occupational hazard in the industry), the jolly fat man of entertainment Fats Waller, the stage antics of smiling Cab Calloway added to this impression, notwithstanding the serious and

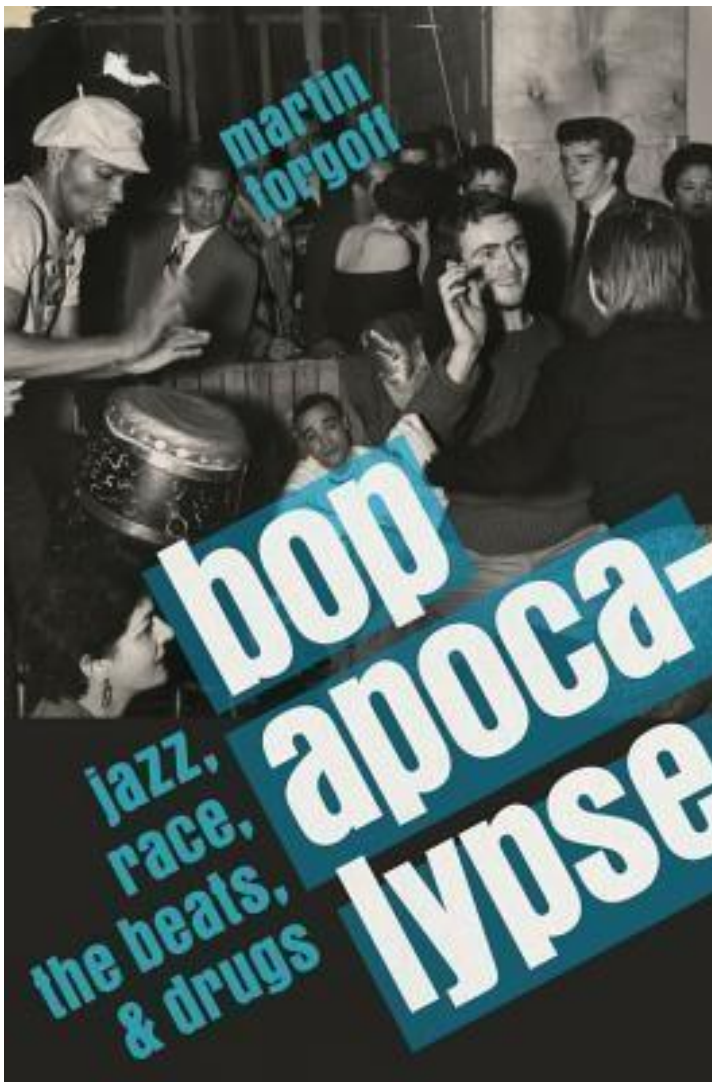


The stage antics of smiling Cab Calloway added to this impression...

brilliant music these musicians were creating - their music was seen as party music, fun music, not intended for the recital hall, concert stage or opera house and certainly not be considered in the same light as “classical” music. It was not, in short, “serious” music. Its depiction in movies too, draws the association between it and sex, violence, gangsters, and “happy times”. Thus the image of jazz becomes established in the minds of many as music of the down-and-out seedy classes.

**Clawing at the Limits of Cool*, by Farah Jasmine Griffin and Salim Washington, St Martin’s Press, NY, p 56.

In modern jazz, there were notorious instances of musicians continuing the perceived tradition of drug taking, but for them the favoured drug was heroin. Miles Davis, Philly Joe Jones, Art Pepper, Chet Baker were some of the more renowned users. Charlie Parker, as one of the leaders and revolutionary figures in the evolution of the music, led some followers to believe heroin was central to his creativity, but Parker made it clear to those he caught using or those who asked - Red Rodney is a famous example - that when you use you play worse not better.



Martin Torgoff in his book “Bop Apocalypse” (above) draws a causal relationship between Bird’s heroin use and his startling creativity...

Some subsequent writers like Martin Torgoff in his book *Bop Apocalypse* draw a causal relationship between Bird’s heroin use and his startling creativity. Who do you believe? Bird or Torgoff? Needless to say, the general public had a perception that jazz musicians were pre-eminent drug users, when research actually revealed that *by occupation*, musicians were way down the list, with the most common users those who had ready access to drugs, such as doctors, nurses etc. Still it was difficult to change a belief when famous musicians who used were in the spotlight.

Thus the connection between jazz and creativity and so called “good times”, or “party times”, was seen by many as a connection between alcohol and drug taking and the music to the extent that some musicians celebrated that connection in their approach to the music. Eddie Condon was a prime example of this where a “fifth” was a normal accompaniment to a gig, recorded or otherwise (a fifth refers to 1/5 of a US gallon which was a standard for a quantity of gin or spirits).



*Eddie Condon (left) with British trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton: a connection between alcohol and drug taking and the music...
PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES*

Some Australian traditional jazz musicians too, viewed the music as enjoyable entertainment not to be taken too seriously. The late Dick Hughes laughed at my suggestion that the music should form part of the fine music curriculum in universities. There seemed, and perhaps still seems, a general concern about appearing to be “po-faced” about what was just “pub” music. Jazz, in short, is to be distinguished from “serious” music, or as a major form of artistic expression - an “art”. It is not to be taken seriously. Swanton, like the “normal” Australian, dreads the thought of seeming pretentious or being seen to be taking himself too seriously.



The late Dick Hughes: he laughed at the suggestion that jazz should form part of the fine music curriculum in universities...

Swanton himself talks about the music of The catholics as enjoyable and simple, and his goal is trying to make it accessible and comprehensible, with the implication it is thereby not serious enough for the “jazz purist”.



*Swanton: he talks about the music of
The catholics as enjoyable and simple...*
PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ REAL
BOOK

He even issued a CD title *Simple*. Yes, I reply in response, simple like one or two notes plucked on a bass unleashing a torrent of feelings in the listener. The simplicity of *So What* (Miles Davis, a bass riff, a two-note motif for the horns, played over a harmonic framework that itself includes only two chords). Like the simplicity of a flower. Or birdsong at eventide:

*When the chichchika (bird) replies to the crying grasshopper,
Aranyani is exalted, resonant, as with cymbals.*

*It is as if cows were grazing, and it looks like a dwelling, and
Aranyani, at eventide, as it were, dismissed the wagons.*

*This man calls his cow, another cuts down the timber,
tarrying in the forest at eventide, one thinks there is a cry. Rig Veda, X.146. 1–6*

**A few thoughts on reaching The catholics’ 10th Anniversary, Swanton, Pamphlet accompanying CD “Choice” (2000).*

The listener to The catholics can be easily misled because such “simple” groovy performances as *Chant*, a 7’31” track on their eponymous inaugural CD, and which appears on the compilation of their music *Choice*, a selection from their first four albums, can be a delight when heard live. It can establish itself in the mind's ear, as The catholics’ sound. And it is true that many of their performances feature a strong rhythmic platform of variously drums, percussion, bongos, congas, bass, dobro, Hammond organ, pandeiro, and guitars bringing the relaxed groove of songs such as *Palomino* (Hevia, *Gondola* CD 2006) or the sprightly dancing tempo of *High Times* (*Barefoot* CD, 1999) or the bass-led *Doin’ The Darwin Walk* (Swanton, *Yonder* CD, 2013) which swings.

But it is also true that there is considerable variety in their compositions and performance. For example the meditative and atmospheric *Glory* (Swanton, *The catholics* CD, 1992), the measured and lovely ballad *In Love* (Swanton, *Barefoot* CD, 1999) and the impressionistic and stately *Oaxaca* (Swanton, *Gondola* CD, 2006). And the haunting exquisite beauty of the masterpiece *Meniscus* (Swanton, *Gondola* CD) - there is greatness in these 10 minutes and 30 seconds of sound recorded so brilliantly and warmly by Ross A’hern which catch the subtleties of guitar, percussion and bass so effectively in support of the soloists. The soloists! Prepare yourself for *Meniscus*.



The CD “Gondola”: it includes “Meniscus”, one of the finest musical experiences of my life...

I consider *Meniscus* one of the finest musical experiences of my life. The music is constructed like an awakening, with a soprano sax over bass hinting at the sounds of India, drums emerging as the solo continues, then the guitar echoed by the saxophone, segueing into a trombone solo of restrained expressiveness and in the final notes a haunting beauty. The work is distinguished by two things, I believe: the first is that the artists are playing with restrained power of emotion - by holding back their power in expression, the music is more effective in conveying deep

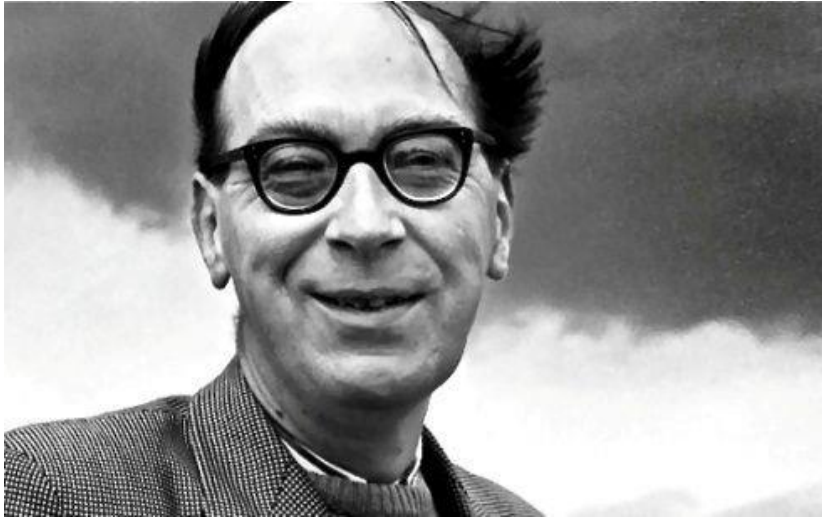
passion. The second thing is respect for sound, as if the players themselves are listening and hearing their own sound for the first time, and paying homage to it. This piece is a rare beast of sustained beauty, that I imagine artists often strive for but rarely attain. It is art manifest of the highest musical standard.

The 20th century revolution in the arts has certainly upended what is understood to be “art”. Art’s meaning in a standard definition is “the skilful execution as an object in itself... imaginative skill applied to design as in paintings... pertaining to the use of such skill”. Modernism and post-modernism in the visual arts has led to definitions of art being redrawn to the extent that, if something is displayed in a space designated as a gallery, and the something is labelled, then that something is “art”. Duchamp’s urinal (*Fountain* 1917) is perhaps the first famous example of this redrawn understanding. Tracey Emin’s “*Unmade Bed*” of the 1999 Turner Prize finals, and recently on display in the Art Gallery of NSW, is a more contemporary example.



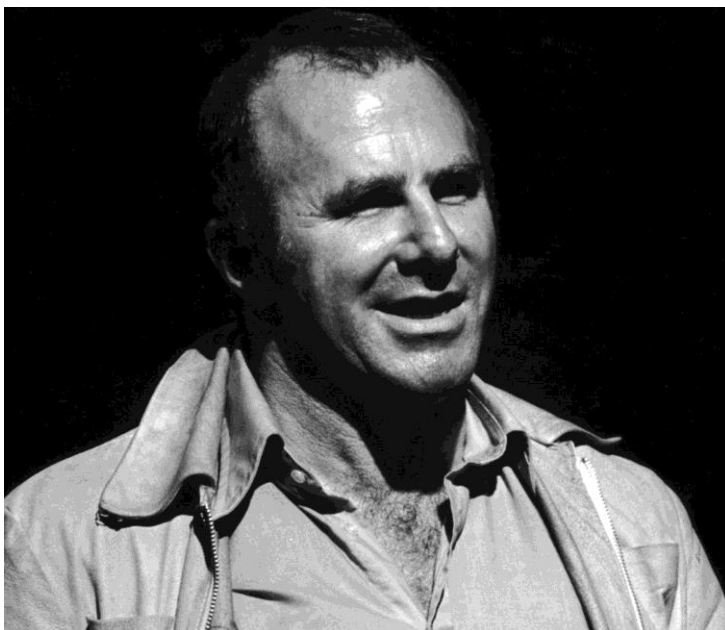
Duchamp’s urinal: perhaps the first famous example of this redrawn understanding...

In literature, modern poetry may be a series of words outlined and structured on a page devoid of rhyme or other formal qualities, and *Finnegan’s Wake* is an extreme example of the evolution of the novel. In music, the contrast between a ballad by Coleman Hawkins and the playing of Albert Ayler could not be starker - the latter just so much noise in the ears of the likes of poet laureate Philip Larkin. To Larkin the new music, that of Charlie Parker for example, was no longer a “happy” music as Parker’s tone was “shrill” and thin.



Philip Larkin: to him the new music, that of Charlie Parker for example, was no longer a “happy” music...*

Clive James was also hostile to modern jazz. But jazz, modern or otherwise, has never been hostage to post-modernism - the craft and skill of mastering a musical instrument of choice is a given in jazz (improvised music). Performing the equivalent of an unmade bed (cf Tracey Emin) will attract few listeners, and someone else listening is the point and purpose of making music.



Clive James: he was also hostile to modern jazz...

**All What Jazz by Philip Larkin in Reading Jazz, Ed, Robert Gottlieb, Pantheon, NY, 1996 pp798-809).*

Charlie Parker was one of the most significant leaders in the new music which brought with it new *with attitude* musicians. These came of age in the 1940s and 1950s and included Sonny Rollins (born 1930), Max Roach (1924), Archie Shepp (1937), and Albert Ayler(1936).



Charlie Parker on the cover of LIFE: one of the most significant leaders in the new music which brought with it new 'with attitude' musicians...

Obviously the social context of the time played a role but there was a heightened awareness by the practitioners themselves about the nature of the music and its role in their lives. A colleague of mine had a drink in Paris with Johnny Hodges in the late 1950s and in the course of their talking Hodges made it clear he saw himself as a “court jester”, playing for the “court”. The new breed of musician revolted against this attitude at the same time as experiments were occurring in the music subsequently labelled bebop, a revolution essentially African American in its genesis.



Johnny Hodges: he saw himself as a “court jester”, playing for the “court”... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

The change in attitude was fuelled by the realisation arising out of WW2 in which the African American soldier, whether recruited or having volunteered to defend their country, soon realised attitudes had not changed and Jim Crow was alive and well, inside and out of the military. In terms of modern jazz, Uncle Tom was dead and buried. This was overtly made clear in the attitude and music of Charles Mingus in works such as *Hog Callin’ Blues* (another version of *Haitian Fight Song*) and *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (depicting the rise of man from his hominid roots to an eventual downfall owing to "his own failure to realize the inevitable emancipation of those he sought to enslave, and his greed in attempting to stand on a false security".)

But it also became evident in the way players approached the music and the audiences. Hostile reactions to the new music, including by musicians themselves such as Louis Armstrong and Eddie Condon, only emboldened the new players. The music “seemed to embody the sense of urgency and unrest of the time... it was abstract and idiosyncratic.... melodies were complicated and serpentine with sudden shifts and turns... the rhythms were often as jagged as the leaps in melodies,

and the tempos were lightning fast. The improvisations doubled the already quick tempos of the rhythm section and were as harmonically advanced as they were melodically intricate”.*

What emerged from this musical revolution was a kind of *cult*. What had been before a music of *inclusivity* whether associated with and arising from church music, or the blues, or street music, or dance music, modern jazz became *a music of exclusivity*. It was extremely difficult to master; it emphasised improvisation; its practitioners were black; and it did not play down to the audience. Added to this was a new language and new dress: bamboo frames for dark glasses worn at all times including in darkened clubs (Thelonious Monk); lip beards (Dizzy Gillespie); weird instruments (trumpet with vertical horn); poetry and jazz. In short, jazz became music seemingly alienated from its audience and proud to be so.



Thelonious Monk with dark glasses...
PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM P GOTTLIEB

Miles Davis is probably the pre-eminent example of a jazz musician who went full circle so to speak, from playing with the greatest bebop practitioners and recording some of the most highly developed difficult jazz, through to an emphasis on drumming, percussion and rhythm. After Parker's bebop quintet, Davis arranged, led and composed for a nonet which was innovative and influential in its use inter alia of polyphony, then led his own bebop quintet, then explored modality, orchestration in big band collaboration with Gil Evans, and then with bands which had an increasing emphasis on percussion and "groove". His turning towards "pop" music generated criticism that he was caving in to white culture. At the height of his fame he would often turn his back on the audience. But in the later stages of his long career, his connection with the audience was manifest. Not all modern jazz

**Clawing at the Limits of Cool, ibid p 55*

musicians followed that trajectory. Nevertheless, the attitude of giving an appearance of aloofness in performance, of being hip, of belonging to a special kind of musical cult was one that persisted for a long time. If you were serious about jazz, then you played hard and fast difficult music, with attitude. The genuine modern jazz musician was a cool and hip individual, and Miles Davis epitomised the essence of cool. The cover photo of Davis on his album *Milestones* displayed the coolest of images, as opposed to the stereotype black pimp with his large hat, yellow jacket, fur coat, shoes with heels, outlandish jewellery etc.



Miles Davis: he epitomised the genuine modern jazz musician, a cool, and hip individual...PHOTO CREDIT DON HUNSTEIN

Lloyd Swanton is decidedly not cool. A balding, healthy and fit everyman, with a friendly even sunny disposition, the coolest thing(!) I've ever seen him wear in performance was a baseball cap a la Lleyton Hewitt. And he loves to connect with an audience. Moreover, The catholics frequently have a decisive style of a deep rhythm platform over which solo artists, usually saxophone, trombone or guitar, improvise solos of considerable depth and beauty, sometimes of extended length. In pugilistic terms, his apparent or typical modus operandi is to draw you in close, lull you, sometimes with hypnotic, seemingly African rhythms, sometimes Caribbean, or South American, then through Evans, or Greening, or Brewer, or Reid, or Pease, deliver the sucker punch with some brilliant improvised musical explorations.



Swanton: a balding, healthy and fit everyman, with a friendly even sunny disposition...

Thus, in looking at The catholics' legacy, I hope to show that "simple" does not mean inelegant, or shallow. And I want to refute that an emphasis on rhythm is somehow not as meaningful or potent as a three-horn bebop-based front-line being paid homage to, by a rhythm section of piano, bass and drums.

It's useful to recall at the outset that Swanton produced, organised, led, and composed the programme of nine works, as well as playing electric and acoustic bass on the remainder, on the first document released by the group in 1992, the eponymous *The catholics* (Spiral Scratch). This group was a pianoless septet as was Beethoven's 1802 Septet in E-flat major, Opus 20.

What then are The catholics, a term made in reference to "universalism" (as opposed to the "universalist" or member of the Catholic church)? To be "catholic" is to be

broad-minded, tolerant, all-embracing, of wide sympathies. Swanton took a long time making up his mind on the line-up of his group (cf CD *Choice*) but settled on a septet, comprising Waldo Fabian (congas, pandeiro [Brazilian hand frame drum with a crisper sound than the tambourine] electric bass, surdo [Brazilian bass drum]; Dave Brewer (guitar, drums); James Greening (trombone); Lloyd Swanton (acoustic bass, electric bass, cowbells, clave, piano, shakers); Sammila Sithole (congas, bongos, timbales); Tony Buck (drums, timbales); and Sandy Evans (tenor and soprano sax)*.



Swanton's (original) group The Catholics in 1990: Front L-R, Sammila Sithole, Swanton, Sandy Evans. Rear L-R, Waldo Garrido, Tony Buck, Dave Brewer, James Greening... PHOTO CREDIT ROMAN CERNY

The septet format has remained the same but instrumentation and personnel have varied. The Catholics cannot really be called “a little big band” as some groups larger than a sextet might be described, rather, perhaps, a quartet augmented with extra rhythm. Nevertheless, the septet format of The Catholics provides for considerable flexibility as is revealed right from the first CD where four tracks are by the septet, two by a sextet, one by a quintet, and two by a quartet, thus allowing considerable variety in the programming. There is no “sameness” about a typical Catholics programme of music and in this regard, a blindfold test in *Downbeat* of The

**This instrumentation lists the players who are heard on the CD, rather than the players who are listed on the back cover of the CD case.*

catholics' music would be an interesting experience for some musicians being "tested". And over the life of the group the music has changed and grown but not to the extent that it is unrecognisable from its beginnings.



James Greening on trombone: an instrument that can whisper, croon, shout, bellow, roar, or sound as mellow as a French Horn... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

What about the line-up? First the trombone of James Greening, who also plays pocket trumpet and composes. The trombone is an instrument that needs considerable skill to keep under control - an instrument however, that can whisper, croon, shout, bellow, roar, or sound as mellow as a French horn (cf Tom Varner) as delicious as fresh cream and as inviting as a kiss. Whitney Balliett comments:

*The slide trombone is a bully, because of its wayward tone and the constant challenge of finding the right notes with the slide, and it has dominated many of its players. Fighting back, they have cracked frenzied jokes on the instrument, making rude noises, and elephantine slurs. Or they have attempted to tame it by making it sound limpid and honey like (Tommy Dorsey, Lawrence Brown).**

In my mind's ear the trombone sound of James Greening is one of exuberance, joy, beauty, humour and surprise through improvisation, and is a bedrock component

**American Musicians 2, 72 Portraits in Jazz, OUP, NY, 1996, P 416, Balliett.*

of The catholics' sound. On improvising on the trombone, consider these remarks by Jimmy Knepper (cf Charles Mingus) one of the greats of that instrument:

*Improvisation is a great mystery. You play something, and you play an answer to it. Then you play something to wrap it up. Nothing is going through your mind: you're not thinking of anything. Every now and then, you surprise yourself. Where did that come from? ... I don't learn lyrics. They just get in the way... I try not to think about the chords. I learn them then I forget them.**

Needless to say, The catholics provide a stunning platform for Greening's unique voice.

Sometimes Greening on trombone manages an ominous sound as when he is featured on the first part of *Suite: Betty's Beat* (Evans, *Life on Earth* CD 1997). Or suggests fun, as on *Margarita Thing* (Evans, *Life on Earth*), and live on the double CD *Inter Vivos*, 2009, or an eerie atmospheric on pocket trumpet, on his own composition, the impressionistic and quite beautiful ballad *Mossman* (Greening, *Barefoot CD*, 1999). His pocket trumpet echoes and responds cheekily to the sounds of the soprano sax.



Greening on pocket trumpet: a brilliant example of his inventive and accomplished playing... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIANJAZZ.NET

Even so, along with the passionate solo of Sandy Evans on soprano sax, his playing on the atmospheric, impressionistic, funereally beautiful composition *Oaxaca* (Swanton) on the second CD of their live performance at the Sound Lounge in September 2008, is a brilliant example of his inventive and accomplished playing on

*Balliett, *ibid.*

the pocket trumpet. With intriguing and beautiful bass backing, this track is to my mind the high point of the evening, even bearing in mind the beautiful *Mahal Kita* with a very interesting soprano sax solo of quiet delicacy and beauty by Sandy Evans.

In contrast there is the buttery trombone sound Greening achieves on another ballad *In Love* (Swanton, *Barefoot*) or the authority of his sound on *El Beso de la Vida* (Swanton, *Life on Earth*). Or the variety and winsome beauty of sounds he creates in the concluding solo on *Meniscus* (*Gondola* CD, 2006) as great a trombone solo as I can recall ever hearing.

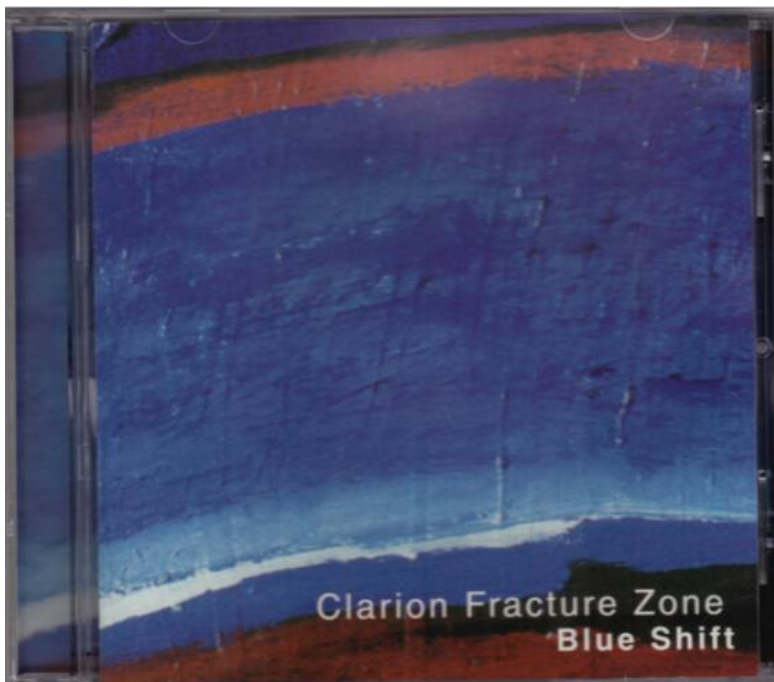
A significant constant throughout the life of The Catholics has been reed player Sandy Evans. Interestingly, on her Wikipedia entry The Catholics is not included as one of her associated acts when clearly she has played a central role in the group's life. Is this because The Catholics is not to be taken as seriously as Women and Children First or Clarion Fracture Zone? A curious but possibly accidental omission.



Sandy Evans: a great modern jazz artist (composer and player) of the tenor and soprano saxophones ...
PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

I've heard Sandy Evans playing with the Australian Art Orchestra, in clubs, in concert halls, in the Sydney Opera House, and playing at a wedding. It is hard to quantify the comfort, the enrichment, the pleasure that Dr Evans' music has brought to (my life) our lives, but it has been considerable. She has always brought all of herself to the music in performance and on record. Her chosen instruments of tenor and soprano sax are those of John Coltrane. One can't help recognising the influence of that master in her playing, as well as his dedication to the art for which Coltrane was renowned. I've not witnessed her practising between sets as Coltrane did even at the height of his fame, but it would not surprise me to learn that she does so.

To give an idea of her standing in the musical world consider, if you will, that 30 years ago an album under her co-leadership of Clarion Fracture Zone and on which she performed with inventive brilliance called *Blue Shift*, was awarded five stars by the prestigious jazz magazine *DownBeat*. Her playing and composing have only got better since those heady days. She is simply a great modern jazz artist (composer and player) of the tenor and soprano saxophones. (I think we should be past the forelock tugging cultural cringe attitude where we have to add 'world class' any time we wish to acknowledge an Australian artist as if our evaluations are made on a background confined exclusively to these shores.)



Clarion Fracture Zone's "Blue Shift": five stars in the prestigious jazz magazine DownBeat...

Improvised music is a social musical event par excellence. In order to thrive it needs listeners to exist, and musicians with big ears. Sandy Evans has big ears and is a musician who in her manner in performance, reveals her love for the music and for her fellow musicians. She wears her heart on her sleeve so to speak, and I'm sure this element contributes to the group's integrity of performance. It also emboldens the audience to listen with their hearts as well as their heads.

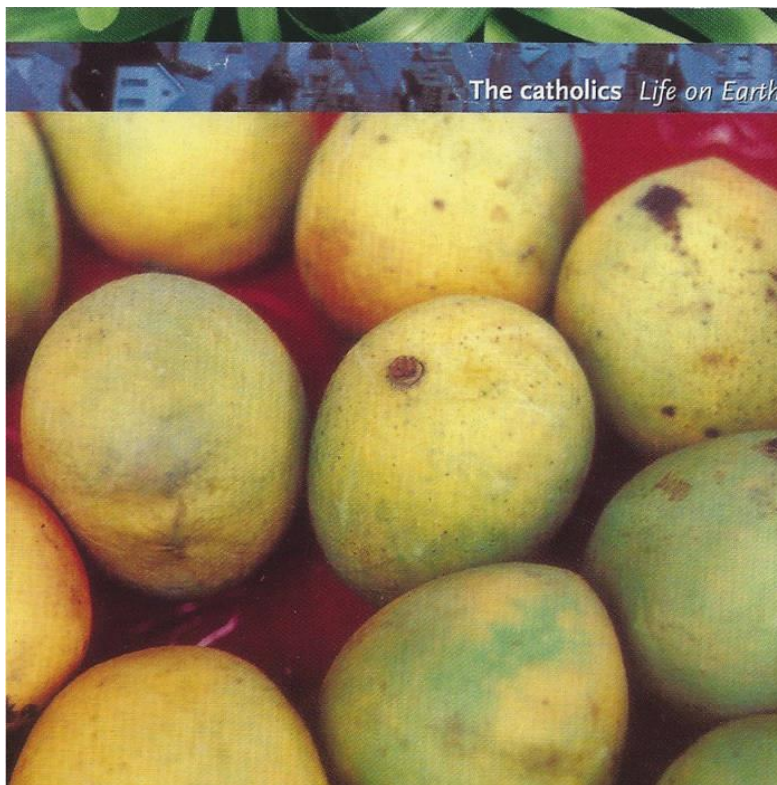
Similarly her long association with Lloyd Swanton must be based upon a powerful, human and artistic respect each for the other, with a belief in the artistic goals and motivation that Swanton holds dear. Sandy Evans has what I call “integrity of performance” (cf masters like Dolphy and Coltrane). Evans and Swanton must have a deep bond that has come from pursuing together the (noble) goal of artistic excellence within the bounds of improvised music. Evans’ commitment to the collective good of this group, her humility in the face of this great art to which she has chosen to dedicate her life, is revealed in the documents beginning with the eponymous 1992 *The catholics* CD all the way through to *Ambon*.



Sandy Evans (foreground) & Lloyd Swanton (background): a long association based upon a powerful human, and artistic respect each for the other...

Take for example the (5.35") work *That's It*, a quartet piece from *The catholics*' inaugural CD. This recording has a beautifully balanced sound where Buck's outstanding brush work holds its own with the bass. Backed by this strong brush work and responsive bass figures, it begins with a confident, swaggering, enchanting trombone solo extravaganza (so to speak) and segues into a brilliant tenor saxophone solo in response, a solo which could charm the leaves off the trees. Moving from happiness at the beginning to conclude with a deeper joy, the composition as performed is a sweet and beautiful five minutes of music.

The catholics' CDs document a considerable range and variety in Evans's performances. *Afternoon Haze* (10.03) from the suite *Betty's Beat* (*Life on Earth* CD) has an extended soprano sax solo over an insistent rhythm of congas, bass, percussion and drums, and her playing hints at Indian music. (Coltrane's *Impressions* album may have been influential in this regard). Her solo on tenor on *El Beso de la Vida* (Swanton, *Life on Earth* CD) reveals an unusual tone and a surprising and exciting variety of sound, underpinned by churning South American rhythms. Or on *Glory* (*The catholics* CD) she generates a tone on the tenor approaching the soprano, producing a meditative and impressionistic, atmospheric solo of considerable beauty.



The "Life On Earth" CD: it documents a considerable range and variety in Sandy Evans' performances...

Sometimes on soprano sax her tone reminds one of Jane Ira Bloom who is renowned for the beauty of her sound on that instrument - for example on *Mossman* (Greening, *Barefoot* CD). On the swinging *Chant* (Swanton, *The catholics* CD) her tenor solo, from a delicate hesitant beginning, builds to an electrifying climax in chorus with the joyous trombone of Greening. Or the conclusion of *Penumbra* (Swanton, *Gondola* CD, 2005) where there is a heartbreaking delicacy of sound from her tenor, backed just by Swanton's acoustic bass. This whole CD indeed is a tribute to the sheer beauty of sounds that can be created by the band. It's as if their woodshedding in the St Scholastica's Chapel in Glebe, NSW, had them *rehearing* each other - apart from the inventiveness, the range, the control they each possess - rehearing the beauty of their sound, both individual and collective. Similarly, Evans manages to create on the relaxed tempo of *Mahal Kita* (Swanton, *Gondola* CD) a soprano sax solo of yearning beauty, a cry even, that grips the listener.

With Evans and her work, on some pieces it is hard to put into words what it is she creates, the nature of its beauty. There is a glory which seems to be the expression of the human spirit at its finest. I'm especially thinking of a work such as *Meniscus* (Swanton, *Gondola* CD 2006) where she plays soprano sax. On the inaugural CD of the group (1992), she plays tenor on seven tracks, and soprano on two. The sheer expressive beauty of her playing on the opening of *Meniscus* and her construction of that soprano sax solo of restrained beauty and power, is a wonder to hear. Her development on that instrument which she seems to be favouring more and more, adds a great deal to the sound and success of The Catholics. Over that 14-year period there seems to be a drift to her using the soprano sax more often, though it may be a more difficult instrument to master in producing a beautiful sound. Her playing on that instrument is surely an inspiration.



Sandy Evans on soprano sax: her playing on that instrument is surely an inspiration... PHOTO COURTESY SIMA

On the *Simple* CD there were Evans (saxophones), Greening (trombone), Sithole (congas & timbales), Brewer (guitar), Swanton, (acoustic & electric bass); Michel Rose (pedal steel guitar); and Toby Hall (drums, replacing Buck).

The third document *Life on Earth* (1997) has Swanton, Brewer, Evans (add flute), Greening, with Toby Hall (drums) replacing Buck; Fabian Hevia (percussion) replacing Waldo Fabian; and Michel Rose (pedal steel guitar, dobro, mandolin) replacing Sammila Sithole. The dobro is a resonator guitar tending to produce a banjo-like sound familiar to bluegrass music. The voices on “*and she walked*” are: James Greening, English; Fabian Hevia, Spanish; Michel Rose, Mauritian Creole; Nina Tuason, French.

The line-up on the fourth CD *Barefoot* (1999) was Swanton, Brewer, Evans (delete flute), Greening (add pocket trumpet); Hevia, with Bruce Reid (national steel, lap steel guitar) replacing Michel Rose, and Hamish Stuart (drums) replacing Toby Hall. The group was supplemented by Chris Abrahams (Hammond organ), Toby Hall (drums), Jonathan Pease (guitar), and Michel Rose (pedal steel guitar).

Gondola (2006) has Swanton (delete electric bass), Evans, Greening, Hevia (add acoustic guitar on *Palomino*), Reid (add dobro, hand whistling), Stuart (add hand whistling) and Pease (electric guitar) replacing Brewer.

Inter Vivos (2 CDs 2009) has Swanton (acoustic bass); Evans (soprano and tenor saxophones); Greening (trombone and pocket trumpet); Hevia (percussion); Pease (guitar); Reid (slide guitars) and Stuart (drums).

Yonder (2013) has Swanton, Evans, Greening, Hevia (add tres, which is a guitar-like three-course chordophone of Cuban origin. ... In the 1930s the instrument was adapted into the Puerto Rican tres, which has nine strings and a body similar to that of the cuatro); Pease (electric and acoustic guitar); Stuart; and Gary Daley (accordion) replacing Reid.



Ambon (2015) has Swanton (double bass); Paul Cutlan (bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, B Flat clarinet, recorder); Evans (tenor and soprano saxophones); Greening (trombone, cornet, baritone horn, tuba); Alex Silver (trombone); James Eccles (viola); Chuck Morgan (ukulele); Jonathan Pease (guitar); Michel Rose (pedal steel guitar); Fabian Hevia (cajon, percussion); Ron Reeves (kendang, percussion); Hamish Stuart (drums, percussion); and Jess Ciampa (glockenspiel on *Ambon Waltz* only).



The Ambon ensemble, back row L-R, Michel Rose, Fabian Hevia, Lloyd Swanton, Sandy Evans, Hamish Stuart, Alex Silver, Paul Cutlan. Front row L-R, James Greening, Ron Reeves, Jonathan Pease, Chuck Morgan, James Eccles... PHOTO CREDIT CAMILLE WALSH PHOTOGRAPHY

The musical work (I hesitate to call it a suite, meaning a series of short musical pieces, usually dance movements) called *Ambon* by composer Lloyd Swanton is one of the most important Australian musical works ever composed and performed in Australia. That statement, which at first blush may seem an overblown, inappropriate one when one considers Australian operas, or the work of composers such as Peter Sculthorpe, I intend to defend and explain. *Ambon* as a work of jazz would not come within the purview of such arbiters of what is or is not art of accomplishment, originality and daring as Leo Schofield because, in his (pretentious) view, jazz is not worthy of consideration. Such views make one wonder at the credentials of this Brewarrina-born former opinion writer and arts organiser. In its music, its narrative, its structure and most importantly in its major theme, *Ambon* is a transcendent cultural work and among the most important original musical masterworks produced in this country. And it is its theme(s) that should be the beginning of any consideration of *Ambon*.

Rightly or wrongly opera is seen as the epitome of musical achievement. Major operatic themes include a love story and the power of music (*Magic Flute*); personal sacrifice and heroism (*Fidelio*); and the “pinnacle” of opera *The Ring Cycle*, with the themes of ambition, power struggles et al. In the 20th century Alban Berg’s 1925 opera *Wozzeck* mirrors social and historical times of war and militarism, and its effects on an individual. Australian operas include one based on Patrick White’s book *Voss*, vivid with religious symbolism.

Opera is melodramatic entertainment and artifice, with high production values and themes unrelated to the lives of the living. None grapples with the great themes of 20th century life. One such theme is humanity confronting the industrialisation of war.

It’s difficult to imagine Europe as it was at the close of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, especially in Britain, especially amongst the middle classes. It was an age of innocent material indulgence and fine living. Such were the rewards of the industrial revolution coupled with the benefits from the colonial exploitation of inter alia India and Australia. It was during this period that the arms race of the industrial revolution took off especially in the race between the English and German navies for the biggest ship(s) and exemplified in the launching of the Dreadnought battleship and climaxing in a catastrophic World War. Consequences included the rise of Fascism, WW2 and the establishment post-WW2 of the Military Industrial Complex (cf President Eisenhower). The “Arms Bazaar” (Anthony Sampson) has blossomed ever since. War is extremely profitable for business and a serious driver of capitalist economies.



American President Dwight D Eisenhower: he warned about the Military Industrial Complex...

Faced with the war machine, humanity has suffered the loss of hundreds of millions, burned, crushed, blown apart, starved, gassed. Two of the enduring images of the 20th century, showing the meeting of the war machine and the human, are those of the napalmed naked girl on the road in Vietnam, and that of the archeology student holding a plastic shopping bag in each hand facing a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square. This meeting of the human with the inhuman if you will, is the major theme of *Ambon*. Moreover, that it is the story of an ordinary Australian, makes the theme even more poignant.



Enduring images of the 20th century: the archeology student holding a plastic shopping bag in each hand facing a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square (above) and that of the napalmed naked girl (below) on the road in Vietnam..



Australia was established as a gaol, ignoring the rights of the indigenous people, but it emerged over time that Australia represented a new start for the displaced generally poor of England, but especially Ireland - cf *The Real Matilda* by Miriam Dixon who argues the Irish diaspora does not parallel the African American experience, but does have echoes of it in the way the Irish/Catholics were pretty much spurned, being of the lowest class/caste and used for cheap labour.

In time Australia established itself as a parliamentary democracy in which the common man and woman had a role; after New Zealand, Australian women were the second in the world to get the franchise. Australian Edith Cowan was the first woman in the world elected to a Parliament. In other words, Australia, the “Great South Land” appeared to be a land of new hope and opportunity and ideals after European monarchies had self-destructed. It seemed to be something of an Eden. Yet, it could not be isolated from the world of which it was part, as the rise of the Army of the Greater Japanese Empire with its infantile code of honour made clear, when it proceeded to invade the rest of Asia with its goal of Japanese expansionism.



Australian Edith Cowan: the first woman in the world elected to a Parliament...

Enlisting in the RAAF in 1955 aged 15 at the insistence of my family, along with a cohort of 119 boys of the same age, for a period of 15 years, to relieve my family of feeding, clothing, and housing me, I soon became aware of the innocence, openness, and general generosity of spirit of these boys. Virgins all, most of whom had never handled a military weapon. Generally secular, suspicious of authority, having enjoyed a childhood of considerable freedom to play and explore in the sunshine of the Great South Land (in English literature, “south” is code for life, passion, release, love.)

Although the Antipodes was theoretically on the other side of the perpetual warring states of Europe, we were still connected to the civilised world. Per capita, Australia

and New Zealand led the world in their military commitments and human sacrifices made to wars and conflicts not of their making.



Lloyd Swanton's uncle, Stuart Swanton: he volunteered for the army aged 26 in 1940...

Stuart Mill Swanton volunteered for the army aged 26 in 1940 after a number of years of Christian charity work amongst the indigent of Melbourne. A little over a year later he was deployed with his battalion to hold back the Japanese invasion of Ambon. Knowing the likes of Stuart in my own experience in the military, the nature of the Australian military man, the notion of torture, of public humiliation, of being considered inferior scum (in the eyes of the Japanese soldier), of being starved and beaten, and not least being accommodated in such a way that one's own shit and piss and the shit and piss of one's comrades were in constant proximity, is to descend into a physical and moral abyss unequalled even by Dante's renowned seven circles.

Lloyd Swanton's work *Ambon* acknowledges and pays tribute to, in the most humble but most beautiful and inventive way, the role that music played in bringing the memory of life, of civilisation, of culture, to those held captive by the barbaric practices of their captors. *Ambon* also symbolises the role that art (music) plays in the life of us all: it brings with it hope, humour, fellowship, love, and feelings, light and deep.



Lloyd Swanton (bass), with James Eccles (left), pictured while recording the “Ambon” suite...

Ambon is also emblematic of the great Australian tragedy of being unable to escape the industrial war machine of the 20th century. In the way in which music was an integral part of the life of Stuart Swanton and his fellows, from church music, pop music, and making music out of modest means, *Ambon* also parallels the rise of jazz itself, where music was in the beginning a relief from the travails of unrelenting work under slavery (cf Ambon prison) and the means to make it were rudimentary, accidental, inventive, (cans, string, bottles) and then it grew in appropriating instruments, traditions, methods, idioms, and different cultures, until it merged and emerged into a vital vibrant voice of free people around the world.

The understated simplicity and authenticity of the “island” music featured on *Ambon*, which draws up images, even clichés, of Gauguin-Eden-like tropical beauty, reminds us of its loss, a loss replaced with the scream of the Zero, the roar of the flame thrower, and the beaches lined with bodies lap lapping to and fro to the rhythm of the gentle waves, the azure water now clouded pink with the life of bleeding bodies. Individual improvisation is central to jazz. Stuart Swanton noted in his diary entry on 9th March, 1943: “The Japanese say there is to be no individualism.” To the Fascist, individualism is banished. And only “approved” music is permitted.

The first part of *Ambon*, CD 1, from Hymn: Christ the King to Hymn: Blessed Holy Spirit (diary reading of Stuart Swanton) which in effect bookends the Camp Concert 1, a 30-minute suite of Island String Music (eg, ukulele) is lighter in tone, suggesting the idyllic life of the 17,508 islands that comprise Indonesia, but also the island life of the Pacific - the Hawaiian islands for example, where the steel stringed guitar is central to its music and which is featured on Camp Concert 1.

The second part of *Ambon*, CD 2, is much darker in tone sometimes, as in *Darkest Days*, mocking. It also contains the haunting, exploratory, evocative, affecting and brilliant piece *Top Brass* which alludes to free jazz (the movement) in its improvisations, but is structured and musically logical in its make-up and builds to a convincing, step by step climax. Especially noteworthy is the role of the bass clarinet (full instrument or bits thereof) by Paul Cutlan, but here are the instruments involved:

Tenor saxophone sans mouthpiece, brass embouchure;

Cornet sans crooks;

Trombone, bell section only;



Paul Cutlan on bass clarinet... PHOTO CREDIT PETER KARP

Tuba sans crooks;

Valve and key percussion, *chopsticks* percussion on body of instrument;

Hand percussion on bell of tuba;

Saxophone and bass clarinet gooseneck mouths popped on thigh, trombone bell section popped with palm of hand (thread end);

Flute with saxophone mouthpiece;

Bass clarinet sans bottom joint, bell held against bottom of top joint;

Saxophone and bass clarinet mouthpieces (with reed);

Trombone, slide section only, sans mouthpiece;

Bass clarinet sans reed;

Soprano saxophone sans mouthpiece, flute embouchure;

Bass clarinet sans top and bottom joints, bell held occasionally against bottom of gooseneck;

Tenor saxophone sans reed sung through;

Full bass clarinet played while second performer plays chopsticks on bell;

Tenor saxophone with tuba mouthpiece played while second performer holds down all keys;

Handclaps, footsteps;

Trombone with saxophone mouthpiece.

Ambon is Lloyd Swanton's musical response to his memories of his uncle, Stuart Mill Swanton, and the experiences Stuart and his comrades suffered whilst WW2 prisoners of war for three-and-a-half years under the Japanese. Lloyd used Stuart's diary as a reference and inspiration when composing. A copy of Stuart's diary is held in the Australian War Memorial (AWM).



Ben Quilty: his works are now on display at the Australian War Museum...

It's interesting to note that over recent years, art has been playing a bigger role in the War Memorial experience than has been the case hitherto. The AWM has always featured illustrations, and thousands of objects and equipment and machines, but very little art. Ben Quilty's works are now on display and that's a move in the right direction. Music has played virtually no role at the AWM, except perhaps in that of march music.

Swanton's *Ambon* seems to me to be ideally suited to the AWM experience, even to the extent of having a dedicated space to the playing of the (CD) music on a continual loop. Especially relevant is *Top Brass* from that work. This reminder of the urge of humans to create music in the most desperate of circumstances, is music at its

most poignant and beautiful, and far removed from the artifice of opera. It should be a centrepiece of our involvement in war and I would expect it, in the context of the War Memorial, to have an extremely powerful effect on the listener.

Ambon is the most recent recorded work (as at 2019) but all so far have more or less been driven by Swanton's determination in "investigating rhythm and texture" over harmonic structures and horn voicings (notes to *Choice*). Instrumentation has included electric bass, acoustic guitar, pedal steel guitar, dobro, mandolin, slide guitars, tres, national steel guitar.

For example, on *Top Brass*, (CD 2, *Ambon*) the tuba enters with a solid rhythm and hints at the sounds of that other rhythm instrument the didgeridoo. String rhythms of the islands; hand clapping; exotic jungle sounds (kendang); bongos on *Mr Crocodile*; echoes of Middle East rhythms with guitar over tabla and swinging percussion on *Permeate*; churning Caribbean accordion rhythms on *Yonder* - those three on the *Yonder* CD.



A relaxed groove of bongos and congas takes place on *Palomino* (*Gondola* CD). Note the spritely dancing tempo of *High Times* with slide guitar, guitar, bass, drums (*Inter Vivos* CD) or the swinging *Chant* which is something of a "Stolen Moment" moment. Not to mention the rare solos of the leader's acoustic bass - an exquisite heartbeat keeping everything grounded, so to speak. Sometimes the rhythm is South American as in *El Beso de la Vida* (*Life on Earth* CD). Or the foundation can recall hypnotic African rhythms. Or hints of Turkish rhythms as in *Why the Caged Bird Sings* (*The catholics* CD).

*If you can see blues
in the ocean, light & dark,
can feel worms ease through
a subterranean path
beneath each footstep,
Baby, you got rhythm.**



*Sandy Evans in 2013
holding “Testimony:
A Tribute to Charlie
Parker”...*

Swanton’s leadership, originality, appeal, communication skills, sensitivity to programming, instrumental skills, artistic excellence, photography and design, composition, performance, and fairness (wage equity for example) have all played their part and have been a significant element in the ongoing life of The Catholics - so far 27 years.

You don’t keep a diverse group of highly individual artists working together in a common cause without having some serious human qualities above and beyond artistic excellence or masterful instrumental skills.

The documentation of the group has been excellent. The recording quality has been consistently high thanks to Ross A’hern, Albert Zychowski, Michael Lynch, and Adam Chapman et al, providing a decent sound stage and balance and clarity. The works were listened to on an Australian made ME 850, NAD CD player and Duntech Marquis speakers and B&W 683S2’s. Packaging tended to get better over time with the leader providing a nifty photo for the CD *Yonder*. The double CD *Ambon* is an outstanding package including extensive notes by Lloyd Swanton, extracts from diaries, photos, personnel and production notes.

**Rhythm Method by Yusuf Komunyakaa, Jazz Poems appearing in Testimony: A tribute to Charlie Parker (E Book). Accompanying CD of music by Sandy Evans.*



Lloyd Swanton: improvised music is about love... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Music does not exist in a vacuum. It brings with it connotations, denotations, cultural baggage, and history. The listener brings with him or her, attitudes, influences, history, and personal experiences. The catholics have added considerably to the cultural richness of Australia. Their music draws upon many cultures, revealing a deep empathy for those cultures. As Swanton somewhere remarked, improvised music is about love, and the musical legacy of The catholics shows that his love, and that of the musicians who have swung along with him, is real.