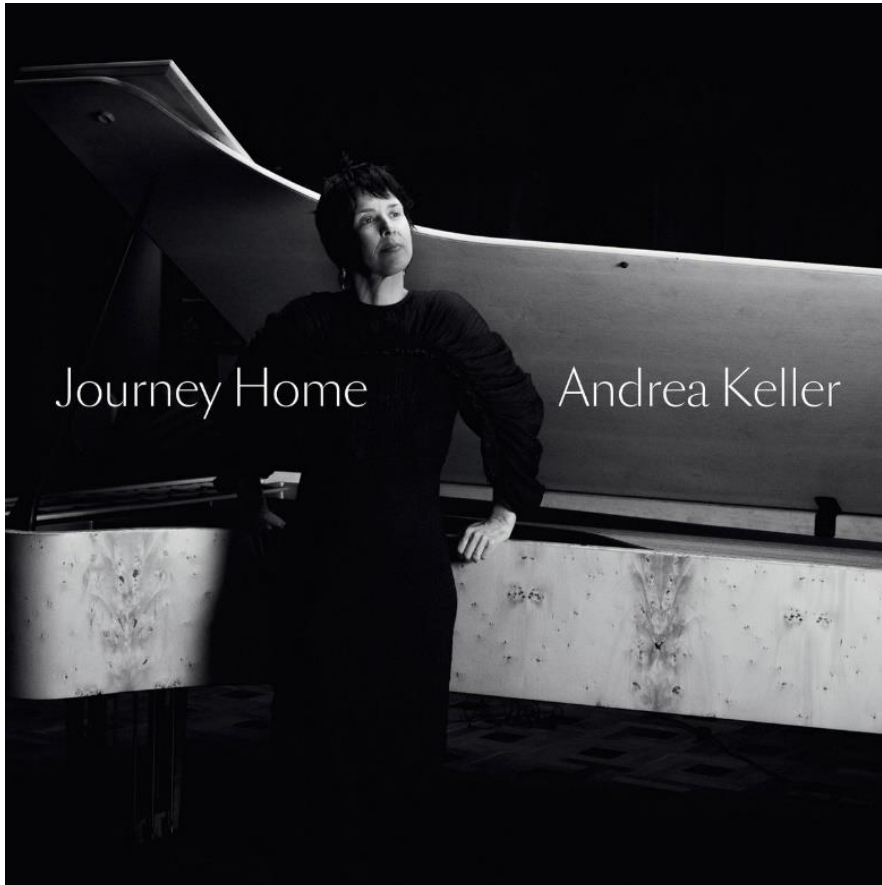


## THE BEAUTY OF ANDREA KELLER

by Ian Muldoon\*

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*Journey Home (Andrea Keller), AK 0009, Soundtrack by Keller, piano, to a film. CD.*

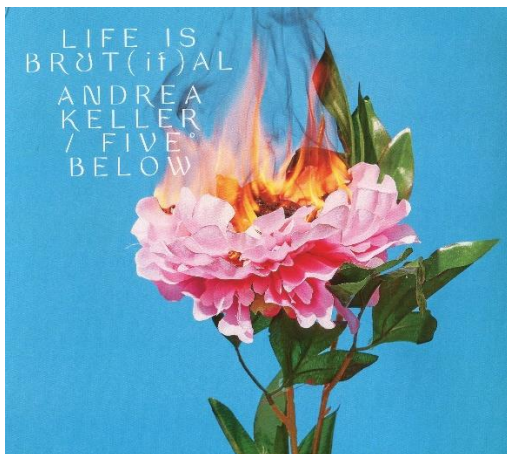
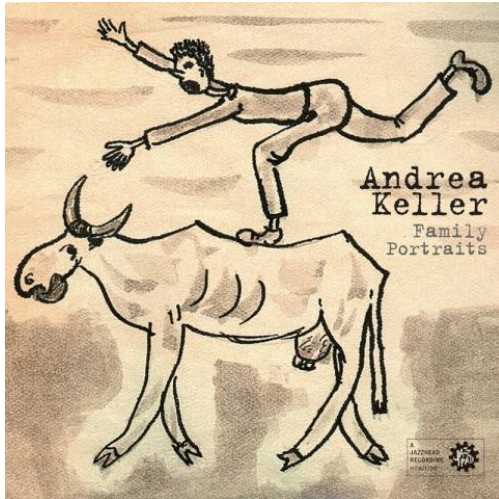


**T**his Andrea Keller document features a formal black and white cover photo of the pianist dressed in black, looking confidently up to her left. She is backed up at waist height against one of the three Australian made Stuart & Sons pianos used in this programme of nine solo piano works performed on 12th January and 25th February 2020 and recorded on location at Tempo Rubato, Brunswick & Beleura, Mornington by Jim Savage.

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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.*

I mention this because this is a departure from many of her documents, one of which had the cover of a comic character standing upright on his left leg on a comical cow drawn by father Erik Keller of *Family Portraits* (Jazzhead, 2012); another had a brilliant pink flower burning against a blue background of *Life is Brut(if)al* (Andrea Keller, 2020); and another had lively, sunny and colourful drawings by her six-year-old son Jim of *Angels and Rascals* (ABC 2002/3).



*Journey Home* is perhaps intended to be considered more seriously, more formally, than previous recitals and certainly the present world circumstances may be as existentially threatening as any in our history. All the compositions are by the pianist, created and performed in an accompanied response to a film by Hayley Miro Browne, daughter of the late renowned jazz musician Allan Browne.

An earlier (superb) document by Keller associated with film was her homage to composer/pianist Krzysztof Komeda whose groundbreaking work in film jazz is much admired (*The Komeda Project*, ABC 2014, with music arranged by Keller and Miroslav Bukovsky).\*



*The ensemble that recorded “The Komeda Project”, back row L-R, Evan Mannell (drums), Erkki Veltheim (violin), Ben Hauptmann (guitar & mandolin), Andrew Robson (alto & baritone saxophones), James Greening (trombone). Front row, L-R, Jonathan Zwartz (double bass), Andrea Keller (piano), Miroslav Bukovsky (trumpet)...PHOTO COURTESY LOUDMOUTH*

But all the work I have encountered by Keller, live and recorded, I consider “serious”, however light the mood. And it is true to say that much of Keller’s work has a sort of *joie de vivre* feeling which reflects generosity of spirit, the perspective of young

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\*Editor’s note: see Ian Muldoon’s essay “Some Brief Comments on Jazz in Film”, in which Ian deals at length with “The Komeda Project”. That essay can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-66>

motherhood, and love. Her pianism has qualities of tone and touch that rival that of Bill Evans; her musical intelligence rivals that of Paul Bley; and her discipline and use of space, that of the brilliant Frank Kimbrough, who passed away on December 20, 2020.



*Keller: her pianism has qualities of tone and touch that rival that of Bill Evans; her musical intelligence rivals that of Paul Bley... PHOTO COURTESY ABC JAZZ*

To my ear, Keller creates some of the most beautiful piano music I've heard. Her work on *Journey Home*, though darker, is no less beautiful because of that. Perhaps even more so as she explores the dark end of the piano which Lennie Tristano and Cecil Taylor have done but where few others venture. She was helped by the range of the Stuart pianos which have been extended from 102 to 108 keys so you can just imagine the power of the bottom end. What also is striking is the reach she demonstrates in some pieces where the bottom is in conversation with the top - it's so special and such a thing of beauty to hear a great artist playing on such fine instruments. Furthermore, the quality of recording by Jim Savage and mastering by Lachlan Carrick is as good as I've heard amongst my thousands of examples of recorded piano which I listen to on \$40,000 high fidelity playback equipment.

What is beauty? The Greeks (always check them out first) saw beauty as symmetry, balance, form, proportion - that has persisted as an idea of perfection for thousands of years, including our understanding of music. The music called jazz brought serious music back to earth, so to speak, at a time around AD 1900 when churches, museums, concert halls and opera houses were flourishing especially for the upper and burgeoning middle classes. Many would still contest that the adjective "serious" should be used in the context of jazz which is seen by many as music for clubs, pubs,

and casinos. And for “serious” music an audience should politely listen and pay attention.

Well, sorry, but Andrea Keller has always brought out the loud and passionate Irish in me, making me stand, and yell, leaving my English ancestry blushing in another part of my consciousness. Additionally, the university lecturer who told me that she leaves enthusiasm in criticism to the amateurs I say, well, we should be grateful we're alive to bear witness to the beauty of the pianism of Andrea Keller, improvising artist, whose unique musical response to the world is more telling than any perceived ideal of beauty, in academia or otherwise.

Thematically *Journey Home* is a profound musical exposition of her response to images made by her father Erik of the Czech Republic and Australia in the 1970s and 1980s - the old and the new, so to speak; the memories of tradition, interiority, culture, and the barbarity of war on the one hand perhaps, and the hedonistic hope of the new, of things not thoughts, of beaches and sunshine and hope. The old world of deep culture and philosophy and art climaxed in the hate and horror of WW11. The new seems consumed with material consumption as nature rebels and an existential threat looms.

The titles of the individual works condense the sense of Keller's response: *Solitary, Broken Reflection, Consequentially, Life is Brut(if)al* et al which brings me to one major thematic concern as it seems to me: the beauty of simplicity, in life and in art. Bebop music was concerned with fast complex gyrations, perhaps trying prove how skilled one is? Perhaps bebop was a rebuttal to the status of “classical” music which continually seems to overshadow “jazz”, as if to say “look, we can play faster, with more complicated runs, louder, and with more feeling than you might ever muster.”



*Charlie Parker & Dizzy Gillespie: bebop as the new music reflected the complexities of living in the 20th century....*

The bebop evolution of jazz brought complexity, speed and dexterity into a music whose multifaceted origins included especially the blues whose essence was simplicity and feeling. Bebop as the new music reflected the complexities of living in the 20th century. But there was another reaction to that complexity in art and music which was Minimalism. In art it was something of a dead end but nevertheless

influential. In music Steve Reich and Terry Riley were leaders both of whom saw jazz as influential to their musical vision.



*Minimalists Steve Reich (left) and Terry Riley (below) both saw jazz as influential to their musical vision...*



In jazz piano Ahmad Jamal was perhaps the most significant artist using repetition and space (which he called discipline) in his music. Repetition has been a powerful musical force in all music as it is in nature - rain, waves, heartbeat, birdsong - and Keller uses it to magnificent effect in *Journey Home*.

The aether seems perpetually saturated with clatter, chatter, traffic, Twitter, TikTok, which may be seen and heard at its most busy on MTV which condenses the popular into a perpetual motion pastiche of colour and noise and pornography, dance and music, that seems as shallow as it is dreamlike and scattered. *Journey Home* therefore may be experienced as the exquisite and beautiful relief of sculptured sound made art infused with the deepest feelings of one our finest artists. There is inter alia a ravishing exploration of the lower end of the piano. The programme is meditative, joyful, self-reflective, and perhaps a reaction to noise, and suggests a deep respect and love for the sounds of music, its essence and seed, as experienced on the finest instruments.

The opening notes of the programme and the introduction to *Solitary* (Keller) have echos of *Little April Shower* (Churchill/Morey) from the 1942 film *Bambi*. I refuse to acknowledge that Keller consciously or otherwise did not reference that sweet song. And is it coincidence that sentimental *Bambi* has a focus on motherhood, environmental destruction of forests, and the evil of men and their guns, not to mention the loneliness of the motherless child?



*The film “Bambi” has a focus on motherhood, environmental destruction of forests, and the evil of men and their guns, not to mention the loneliness of the motherless child...*

*Solitary* creates a mood of hope over despair, with the dark battling the light, and hope prevails. *Broken Reflection* (Keller) a ballad, is the apogee of beauty in this programme and sings with joy. *Horizon’s Cusp* (Keller) may be *larghissimo* and is thoughtful, resonant, exquisite, and meditative. *Coalescence* (Keller) is positive, feisty if not defiant in mood. *Home* (Keller) seems climactic with pronounced repetition and is expressed with considerable power. *Generations of Leaves* (Keller) another very slow piece makes one lean forward to listen to the notes - so entrancing, so enchanting in its sound beauty.

*Consequentially* (Keller) is a battle between the darkest and lowest, and the sweetest and highest - light prevails. The final piece *Life is Brut(if)al* is also the title of Keller’s album she recorded with a septet (Jim Keller is voice on one track) and in her solo take on it on *Journey Home* there is an ambiguity of mood, at once ruminative, with solemn dark chords, but philosophical and gentle and with the bell-like flutters at the high end of the piano, which end the recital, seem to sing with joy.

This 49.04 recital is not going to stray very far from my player along with other essential classics, such as Miles Davis, Haydn, Brad Mehldau, and Beethoven.