

THE BEST AUSTRALIAN JAZZ VOCALIST

by Ian Muldoon*

Who's the finest Australian jazz voice, of any gender, presently performing in Australia? Chris McNulty that's who. Who's the finest Australian jazz singer ever? Chris McNulty (I'm 84 and there may have been someone from the 1920s or 1930s or 1940's better, but I doubt it.)



Chris McNulty: a refined musical intelligence, deep understanding, leadership and communication skills, mastery of the bebop idiom... PHOTO CREDIT MANDARINE MONTGOMERY

**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 & Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Melbourne. In 2021 he published a collection of essays on jazz subjects, entitled "My Jazz Odyssey: Confessions of a Lifetime Enthusiast".*

Like many other classical lovers I enjoy Luciano Pavarotti, Nicolai Ghiautov, Maria Callas or Huguette Tourangeau and they are great musical masters but they do not stir me like the voice of Louis Armstrong, with its rhythmic genius, sound and emotional wallop. It was Armstrong's voice, mirroring his trumpet playing - phrasing, rhythm, improvisation - which made him the most influential artist of the 20th century, more influential than Picasso.

Australian jazz voices like Michelle Nicolle, Vince Jones, Gian Slater, Joe Bebop Lane, Kristin Berardi, and Jo Lawry, may stir us too, but McNulty has a refined musical intelligence, deep understanding, leadership and communication skills, mastery of the bebop idiom after the likes of Vaughan, O'Day, and Carter, diction that rivals Sinatra's and a warm sweet tone *sans* any sign of nasal intrusion which seems to affect female singers, and complete control of the ballad with an emotional wallop of lived experience. Indeed it was her take on *How Are Things In Glocca Morra* (Lane/Harburg) at the 2013 Wangaratta Jazz & Blues Festival with *inter alia* bassist Ugonna Okegwo, that revealed her powerful beauty of sound to the lucky audience - Sunday morning at 10am too! The tune was a favourite of Sonny Rollins, no Irishman he, just a musical legend.



German-Nigerian bassist Ugonna Okegwo, who accompanied McNulty at the 2013 Wangaratta Festival of Jazz... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

When a 25-year-old sings *Strange Fruit* (Meeropol) or *Lover Man* (Davis/Ramirez/Sherman) or *When Your Lover Has Gone* (Swan) it's an absolute minefield of historical and emotional references which such singers may have no idea about - words are not just words. Points of silence in rendition can also hold great emotion. One can admire Jazzmeia Horn a lot for her superb mastery of the form, but when it comes to the emotional wallop, she's yet to acquire that.

Sheila Jordan may have lost flexibility, range, and strength, but her singing in her mature years was, some may consider, as powerful if not more so than in her younger days. Billie Holiday's "ruined" voice in her final years was still emotionally powerful. In short, the jazz voice in its apparent imperfection oozes feelings. But when you add to that the musical intelligence and tone of McNulty you have one of the greats. Forget the label canary - this is another instrument of the band, and not just any instrument, it is unique, personal, and rich in overtones and complex rhythms. But please allow me to disabuse you of any notion that I hold to the view that "real" art is an outcome of the lonely artist in a bare room battling consumption after abandonment by a lover and overwhelmed by drug dependency and domestic violence. Duke Ellington is Exhibit A in my defence, Ella Fitzgerald Exhibit B and Andrea Keller, exhibit C.



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Hearing McNulty in 2013 is one thing, because unreliable memory can deflate or inflate experiences, so I wondered if my memory had failed when I kept talking about the impact she made on me at that time. Having heard live performances of Vaughan, Mark Murphy, Betty Carter, as well as the Australian jazz voices I mentioned above, I was very pleasantly relieved to see and hear that, if anything, she was better now than 2013.

She performed for an audience of 50 which included my sober self at Jazzlab, Brunswick, in Melbourne on Remembrance Day Saturday 11th November 2023 between 9.30pm and 11.00pm. Apart from McNulty and her instrument (voice) two other things may have made that night outstanding: the material chosen to perform and the arrangements of them, and the accompanying musicians: Brett Williams, piano, Matt Hoyne, guitar, Ben Robertson, bass, and Lewis Pierre, drums. This quintet had only two hours rehearsal but you would never have known that from their work at this gig.

On the former, there was a judicious choice of ballad standards: *East Of The Sun* (Bowman), *How Little We Know* (Carmichael/Mercer), *I'm Old Fashioned* (Kern/Mercer), and *Little Girl Blue* (Rodgers/Hart). The first has been covered by Diana Krall. Billie Holiday also did a version but it's a somewhat easy melody that needs a good workover and McNulty gave it that at mid-tempo. *How Little We Know* really swung. The much recorded *I'm Old Fashioned* was invented one imagines for the likes of Blossom Dearie. Tinged with humour McNulty does an up-tempo version which really swings and draws notice to Robertson's superb walking bass behind the voice and great solos from both Williams and Hoyne. Williams tends to be a percussive pianist and sometimes deploys or echoes the locked hands style of Milt Buckner. Even so, he has a delicious touch as well and is a great ballads accompanist. Louis Pierre was the engine room of the group with his sensitive driving percussion pushing others. It was a noteworthy rhythm section overall, and to say that of Jazzlab is to say something, because Jazzlab is the Village Vanguard of Australia at the present time.



*Ben Robertson:
superb walking bass
behind the voice...*
PHOTO CREDIT
ROGER MITCHELL

Nina Simone did her self-accompanied version of *Little Girl Blue* live (with bassist Jimmy Bond and drummer Albert 'Tootie' Heath rhythm!) in 1957 which has been cemented into vocal jazz legend ever since. It was the title track of Simone's first live album. McNulty, supported only by the piano of Williams, makes it her own. *Sentimental Journey* (Brown/Homer/Green) was immortalised by popular singer Doris Day, and rightly so. McNulty spreads the wealth in her version with a great swinging vocal matched with solos by pianist Williams and guitarist Hoyne. It

was here that I thought on the night “how long has this band been working together?” Answer: two hours.



Guitarist Matt Hoyne in action with the Chris McNulty band, Jazzlab, Melbourne 11/11/23... PHOTO CREDIT IAN MULDOON

Anthony Newley’s *No Such Thing As Love* (he of *Who Can I Turn To?* and *A Wonderful Day Like Today*) was memorable for McNulty’s great ability to tell a story, with perfect diction, engaging tone and expressive range. It was quite a performance. My favourite version of *Surrey With The Fringe On Top* (Rodgers/Hammerstein) is Mel Tormé with the Marty Paich Dektette and it remains so but McNulty gave it a nudge with a triumphant up-tempo performance - her scattling between solos of the others was like a warm welcoming introduction for each in turn. It was opened with the enticing guitar sounds of Hoyne. I think it was an original *New Day* (McNulty) where the harmony of voice and piano was sweetest and Robertson gave a rivetingly beautiful bass solo. It also showed just what a very fine musical instrument McNulty’s voice is.

Another original, inspired by the “white nights” of St Petersburg, called *Roaming* (McNulty) had a particularly noteworthy arrangement and showed McNulty’s improvised scattling at its most satisfying. *Alter Ego* (James Williams) was really in the pocket and a delicious study of the power of rhythm. Freddie Hubbard’s *Red Clay*, one of those tunes written when fusion was the sound *du jour* closed the evening. The late great Mark Murphy (1932-2015) wrote the lyrics.

But the highlight of the evening was *Passion Dance* (McCoy Tyner/Roseanna Vitro). I was startled by the power of this performance - the harmony, the rhythm, the energy of the band playing like their lives depended on it, the melody - it was one of THOSE moments, you know: like seeing Thelonious Monk play *Blue Monk* in *Jazz On A Summer's Day*; hearing Gil Evans' version of *Straight No Chaser* (Monk); hearing the Duke Ellington Orchestra live; or the Sydney group Mingus Amongst Us live and in full flight at Foundry 616; or hearing Paul Furniss or John McCarthy on clarinet or Bernie McGann get a hole in one on a coda!



L/R Brett Williams, piano (partly obscured); Matt Hoyne, guitar; Ben Robertson, bass; Chris McNulty, voice; Lewis Pierre, drums... PHOTO CREDIT IAN MULDOON

Melbourne on Remembrance Day 2023 during protests about existential climate change, Palestine and Israel discord, immigration detention, Trump turmoil, China foreboding and.... domestic rental stress, will also be remembered for the creative light shone on we lucky few by the Chris McNulty-led quintet at Jazzlab. We imperfect examples of local Australian humanity grab beauty and love where we can!

It was a programme chosen with such care and intelligence - old, new, popular, classic, original, standard, swing, ballad - it was like a degustation of jazz vocal at its most inviting and satisfying. Thank you to all involved, including manager Jeremy of Jazzlab.

The following article on this website may be of interest:

Winthrop Bedford, "Chris McNulty: Vocalist", *Jazz Improv*, Vol 7 Number 1, Winter 2007, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-65>