

THE BEST GROUP AT THE MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

by Ian Muldoon*

The (late) Wangaratta Jazz Festival (“Wang” to aficionados) had a competition called the National Jazz Awards. These were not “awards” - it was a competition. Each year organisers named an instrument that formed the basis of the competition for the award. The trombone was categorised under the category “brass”. In 32 years there was one winner in that category: James Macaulay in 2017.



James Macaulay: the one trombonist to have won the National Jazz Awards competition at Wangaratta over 32 years...

**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”.*

A point of conversation between my colleagues would occur about our thoughts on the justice of the award, the selection process, our individual take on the performances, the qualifications of the judges, and the recognised masters of the instrument in jazz history. Our opinions would range from (during the guitar competition) from Jimi Hendrix being the greatest guitar soloist in guitar history (what about Jim Hall? or Wes Montgomery? or Charlie Christian? or Sonny Sharrock?) to rejecting any music competition as being anti-art. We would pontificate and bullshit over beer after beer. It was fun.

But it had little to do with what we may have wanted to see and hear at the festival. The awards competition was a little bit like a festival side-show. For the rest we happily would compare notes on what we enjoyed at the festival as we had differing interests and tastes - one of us was a professional jazz musician and teacher, another was an amateur guitar player, others were teachers and lawyers. Each of us would opine about the “best” gig of the festival. Starting in 2023 Wang is dead so our attention has been drawn to the Melbourne International Jazz Festival.

What was the best gig at the 2023 Melbourne International Jazz Festival (MIJF)? Yes, well, what does “best” mean? An unrecorded live performance before an audience of 100 or 1,000 is a memory and memory is notoriously unreliable. But status amongst animals (especially the human social animal) is a primal instinct. Let’s be frank - like our reigning Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, I believe Shannon Barnett has been consistently underestimated: on the evidence she’s up with the best in the genre.



Shannon Barnett (above) has been consistently underestimated: on the evidence she’s up with the best in the genre...

As I write the internationally competitive Melbourne Cup is on. It may be Australia's *sine qua non* example of competition to find out who's the best horse, trainer, owner, jockey. It involves a race, a prize, betting, the best dressed, the best enclosure, and the most exclusive spot in the Birdcage - the world's most lavish temporary facility for corporate guests and racing club members, as its puff describes it. Arguably, the Melbourne Cup outclasses Xmas, Easter, Yom Kippur or Ramadan, ANZAC day or Royal Hobart Regatta Day (que?). On average, the Australian population spends \$90 EACH wagering on the Melbourne Cup. It generates about \$450 million in spending overall. It might be fairly thought of as Australia's National Holiday. At its heart it's a competition (and a chance to get dressed up and get pissed).

But art is sacrosanct and is not a competition - well, tell that to the organisers of the competition known as The Archibald. Or the Japanese billionaires who boast about their latest Art acquisition and its worth (cost). So, my take on the best gig at the 2023 MIJF was the Shannon Barnett Quartet at Jazzlab, Brunswick, Thursday, October 26, 2023 @ 9:30 pm - 10.45pm.

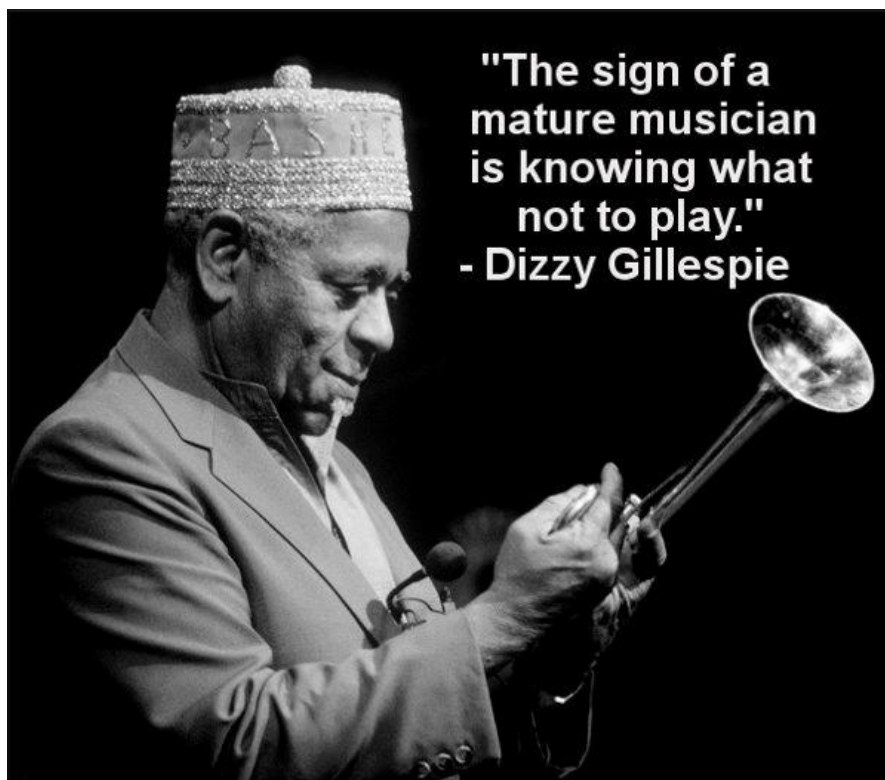


The Shannon Barnett Quartet, pictured in The Loft where their recent live album was recorded...

A festival is a celebration but it is also a way for artists to show their stuff on a bigger stage to bigger audiences to peers and to commercial opportunities. A festival is also an opportunity to celebrate old masters and welcome new blood, with tradition and experiment side by side. For audiences, it may mean seeing artists they've never heard of as the opening set preceding live artists they love.

Some of the most memorable moments for me at the 2023 MIJF included the saxophonist Chris Potter's solo during the San Francisco Jazz Collective 25th October gig; the vibraphone solo by Warren Wolf at the same gig; and Ingrid Jensen leading Monash University Jazz Futures students at Melbourne Recital Centre, Primrose Potter Salon, 24th October. Admittedly, the last was coloured considerably and enabled by seeing the young musicians passionately embrace this great art with such dedication. At the festival there was much to see and many choices to make but the gig that was the most artistically satisfying and emotionally powerful was the chordless Shannon Barnett Quartet with Barnett, trombone; Stefan Karl Schmid, tenor saxophone; David Helm, bass; and Fabian Arends, drums. The connectedness, the artistic unity, of the four musicians played a large part in its artistic brilliance.

Dizzy Gillespie made a point about unity: "If you have a group, the group is like a painting... each one of the instruments represents a specific colour, and the diversity of the colour makes it beautiful... each one should be thinking in terms of the whole, in terms of the beautification and the diversity of the instruments. Paintings don't clash, like a purple going over into another colour. They stay what they are, but it's the whole picture that makes for the togetherness. Unity." (Art Taylor, *Notes and Tones* (1993) Da Capo Press, NY, p123).



Dizzy Gillespie: it's the whole picture that makes for the togetherness. Unity...

At the 2023 MIJF Barnett's Quartet shone with this quality which defines it as a beautiful artistic creation and one of the finest pianoless quartets of the genre presently performing anywhere.



L-R, Stefan Karl Schmid (tenor sax), David Helm (bass), Shannon Barnett (trombone)... Fabian Arends (drums) is obscured... PHOTO CREDIT IAN MULDOON

Barnett was born and educated in Melbourne but found work in New York and Cologne where she's been Professor for Jazz Trombone at the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz since 2019.

Barnett's quartet was formed in 2015. Its third release is *Alive At The Loft* (2023, Klaeng Records). Although Barnett favours her original compositions the live recorded programme is one by other masters, including Ornette Coleman and Ellington. The works are: *When Will The Blues Leave* (Coleman), *Weaver of Dreams* (Young/Elliott), *Alone Together* (Schwartz/Dietz), *Heaven* (Ellington), *Hypochrismutreefuzz* (Mengelberg), and *The Ballad Of The Sad Young Men* (Wolf/Landesman).

Some of this programme was performed at Jazzlab as part of the quartet's Goethe Institute supported national tour which began in Hobart, then Melbourne as part of the MIJF, with Perth next on the itinerary along with other venues throughout the country.

The Jazzlab gig of 26th October featured originals *Bad Lover* (Barnett), *Oilskin* (Barnett), *Bad Neighbour* (Barnett), *People Don't Listen To Me Anymore* (Barnett) and *Harpit* (Barnett). Playing around with “bad” perhaps because it means something different in German (Spa).

Memorable highlights from the October 26th gig included the conversation between trombone and tenor *sans* bass and drums on *Harpit* (Barnett); a monumentally beautiful ballad performance of *People Don't Listen To Me Anymore* (Barnett) with its perfect harmony of horns, space in presentation, exquisite tone of both tenor and trombone and a wealth of felt expression by the unit; a swinging mid-tempo realisation of the Ornette Coleman composition *When Will The Blues Leave?* which was the most loved piece of the evening if the audience response was a guide; and the atmospheric, lyrical and beautiful performance of *Bad Neighbour* (Barnett). This was one of the better evenings of music I've experienced, ever.

Returning to the *Alive At The Loft* album, the opening classic - I use that word advisedly - is *When Will The Blues Leave?* The composer, Ornette Coleman, was a softly spoken, gentle individual of few words, and may not have expressed a view, but he surely would have smiled at Barnett's reworking of the original recording of his work from *Something Else!!!! The Music of Ornette Coleman* (Contemporary 1959) recorded in March 1958 with Ornette Coleman – alto saxophone; Don Cherry – cornet; Walter Norris – piano; Don Payne – double bass and Billy Higgins – drums. But like Coleman's most famous aggregation featuring Charlie Haden, Billy Higgins, Don Cherry and himself, Barnett favours a chordless quartet of two horns, bass and drums.



When Will The Blues Leave, especially Barnett's version, is tinged with humour, or perhaps creative joy, and is a great example of melodic invention and power of repetition where in the opening bars she makes a phrase, and repeats it until it's “perfect”. Or consider the coda where the lower register of her horn repeats a

phrase to the denouement. Note also the tenor and bass behind the drum solo, or when the tenor enters and the trombone departs, and the pure beauty of that transitional moment, when one graciously, empathetically, bows to the other.

Clarity of execution and beauty, swing and lightness of touch, made this an instance of creative jazz chamber music at its most glorious. Schmid, a leader in his own right, with his sweet tone, and an approach recalling Lester Young, is a beguiling and mellow complement to the more robust trombone sound of Barnett. But that sound! Even the great J J Johnson could not better that sound, that tone, but Johnson had the challenges of bebop to navigate with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie whose tone was the least of concerns for that harmonic genius.



Stefan Karl Schmid (tenor sax): a sweet tone, and an approach recalling Lester Young... PHOTO CREDIT IAN MULDOON

The melodic opening of *Weaver Of Dreams* is reminiscent of a singer singing to the listener with the trombone sound at its most relaxed - a delicate, gentle, captivatingly sweet solo from Schmid's tenor weaves into a delightful web of sound, drifting off into the air. Barnett follows with a darker and more forthright solo of wide

expression and complete control as she, prompted by Arends, builds to a climax then undercuts it with the halving of tempo, and a slurping dissonant conclusion to the work. The opening of *Alone Together* reminds us of the power of effective arrangements. When we think of the art of piano, for instance, Ahmad Jamal must be thought of as amongst the greatest due to his arrangements which continue to stand the test of time. Master soloists, Tatum, Taylor, Tyner, Powell may be admired for their unparalleled technical mastery of the keyboard, but in satisfying artistic works, Ahmad Jamal, Ellington, Gil Evans, inter alia, created arrangements which lifted the individual voices to another level of the art, in not a few instances, to masterpieces.

Alone Together (Schwartz/Dietz) with its major-minor ambiguity, has had great appeal to jazz musicians, including Artie Shaw, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Mal Waldron, Wallace Roney and Brad Mehldau. Normally a mid-tempo piece, Barnett begins at ballad tempo making a melodic statement in a darker register then with Schmid in some delicious horn harmony - listen to Arends throughout with his fills, energy and touch.



Fabian Arends: listen to him throughout with his fills, energy and touch... PHOTO COURTESY CANOPUS DRUMS

The tenor rises in agitation and tempo giving way with a return to ballad tempo by the trombone, and a quite dark serious tone, near the bottom backed by bass alone. Then seemingly revived, the horn cries out, agitates, cries out, ups the tempo backed by drums and bass, builds then quotes a familiar melody, returns to theme, drifts off, repeats theme with tension, slows, repeats melody, then the horns push forward in upper register joy to a climax. I'll say it - it's worthy of comparison with the aforementioned examples. The arrangement and trombone solo are masterful

with Schmid's haunting, poignant and soulful tenor being some kind of exquisite cherry on a well-crafted sonic cake of superb balance and proportion.

Heaven is a rare Ellington work I've only ever heard performed by Charles Lloyd on his album *The Water Is Wide* (1999) ECM. Ellington composed two thousand works and it's welcome relief to hear one outside the usual suspects. It begins at *grave* tempo with a drum roll and a delicate tenor solo, with cymbal splashes. The trombone enters in a hesitant conversational way, presents a point of view, builds in positive register, but does not waiver. A gentle sweet tenor drifts in, ponders, reflects, smiles, then drifts out to be overtaken by the calming trombone joined by the tenor, and a coda by the voices of the band in delicate harmony. A lullaby in feeling.

In radical contrast the next piece is out of free jazz icon, Misha Mengelberg (5 June 1935 – 3 March 2017), a European musician hero who played with Eric Dolphy, Anthony Braxton, Steve Lacy and the Berlin Contemporary Jazz Orchestra. I have five CDs of Mengelberg's which does not reflect his influence on the European Free Jazz scene. Barnett is part of a Free Jazz Collective. Like Dutch compatriot Han Bennink - indeed the Dutch jazz scene generally - humour is sometimes part of Mengelberg's approach to music. For example, the work *Hypochrismutreefuzz* which is the penultimate track on Barnett's *Alive At The Loft*. It is played by her team *vivace*, opening with a brief drum statement, horn harmony, then trombone at *accelerando* with complete control and clarity of expression. The tenor solo would make bebop practitioners sit up and pay attention. The horses do not escape and Schmid stays in charge of the well-structured story he tells. A drum solo, and repeat of the opening theme by all, closes proceedings.

Surprisingly, the guitar of Ella Zirina opens the last track *The Ballad Of The Sad Young Men* (Wolf/Landesman). Barnett sings the lyrics with a sweet nasal-free tone reminiscent of the ballad vocal style of pianist Dena De Rose. The support by Latvian jazz guitarist Zirina is perfect in every way and a model of sensitive accompaniment.

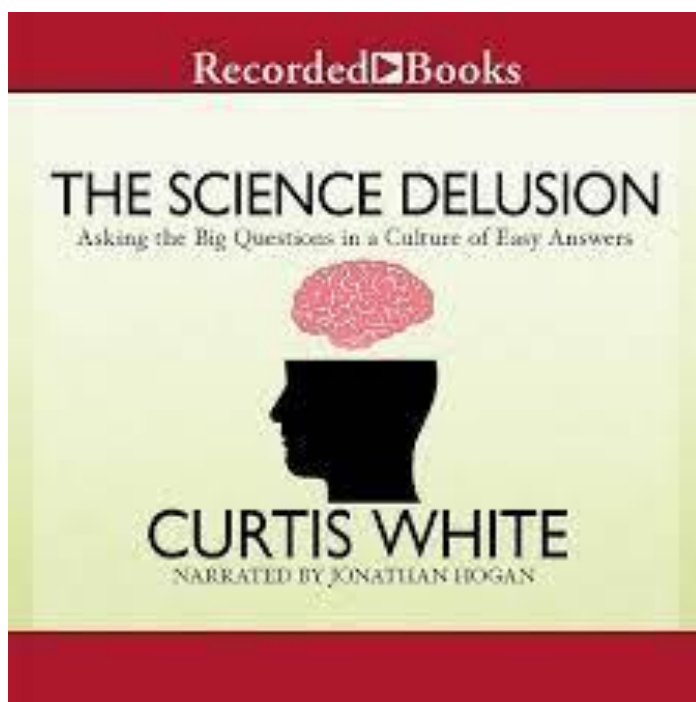


Latvian guitarist Ella Zirina: her support is perfect in every way and a model of sensitive accompaniment...

Needless I guess to repeat myself, but I reaffirm and spell out clearly that the recording and issue of this live performance is equivalent to a musical tasting menu by one of the finest artists in the genre at the peak of her powers leading an outstanding German quartet and creating an ambient warm live recording worthy of comparison with the best.

And reflecting on this, and the Goethe Institute support of an Australian national tour, I think of our export industry - coal to China, gas to Japan, artists to the world - and being sold back products and art at considerable added value. We are selling our birthright, our indigenous brothers' birthright. Regarding art and artists I'm continually surprised at the lack of Government support for many of our great jazz artists.

On chatting to the odd visitor at the 2023 Bonnard Exhibition not one was a local. I encountered New Zealand, Singapore and Chinese tourists. I didn't encourage them to visit a coal mine, our largest export. Nor did I suggest they pop along for a quick look at the Victorian College of the Arts or Melbourne University which count amongst our successful export of education and skills. I didn't suggest they visit a paddock either to see some sheep. Music, the MIJF, the visual arts, museums, even laneways filled with public art graffiti were their preferred points of engagement in our country.



I recall these words by Professor Curtis White from his book *The Science Delusion* (2013) Melville House: “Most art innovations are at first accused of being impious or treasonous or ugly or decadent depending upon the ideology that objects to it. Symbolism, Franz Liszt’s *diabolos in musica* (devil’s chord), impressionism, surrealism, twelve-tone music, *Finnegans Wake*, abstract expressionism, Mapplethorpe’s brutal but elegant photographs, and of course rock and roll from Elvis to punk and beyond, all of these artists and art forms thrived on dissonance of

one sort or another. For the artist, that dissonance feels like life itself. It feels like play and it feels like *being alive*.” Because rock and roll came out of jazz, and jazz came out of the blues and European instrumentation and the complexities of African rhythm, I beg leave to amend the reference by White to rock and roll. It should read “jazz”. Let us recall that jazz player Louis Armstrong is the single most influential artist in the world to arise from the 20th Century, more so than another dissonant revolutionary, Picasso.



Jazz player Louis Armstrong (above) is the single most influential artist in the world to arise from the 20th Century... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

We are a civil society with some of the most liveable places on the planet, so it takes a great deal for an artist to abandon us to live elsewhere where their art is loved. Linda May Han Oh, Lisa and Nicki Parrott, Shannon Barnett are such artists. But hey, we have the Melbourne Cup - the best horse race in the world.

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

Eric Myers, “Shannon Barnett Trio on Song for SIMA”, The Australian, March 11, 2020, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-16>

Eric Myers, review of Shannon Barnette Quartet album “Alive at Loft”, The Australian, August 19, 2023 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-68>