

THE COMMUNITY OF A JAZZ CLUB

by Ian Muldoon*

There's definitely something going on. This I say to myself as the band disperses after warming up and each player leaves the cluttered tiny space, to climb the narrow steep stairs behind the stage, which angle sharply upwards right to left, floor to ceiling, disappearing into the upper regions which serves in this venue as "backstage". Stage lights generate heat. There is no air conditioning and the warm muggy air prefigures a Spring storm. Welcome to a jazz club, the Jazzlab, this one in Brunswick, Melbourne, where some very fine artists are about to perform - artists of a world standard presenting elements of an art which is the most significant musical revolution since Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). There are no Princes in the audience. No industry leaders or stars of stage and screen, just a hundred or so music lovers.



JazzLab owner Michael Tortoni is seated on the piano stool making a phone call...

**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. In 2021 he published a collection of essays on jazz subjects, entitled "My Jazz Odyssey: Confessions of a Lifetime Enthusiast".*

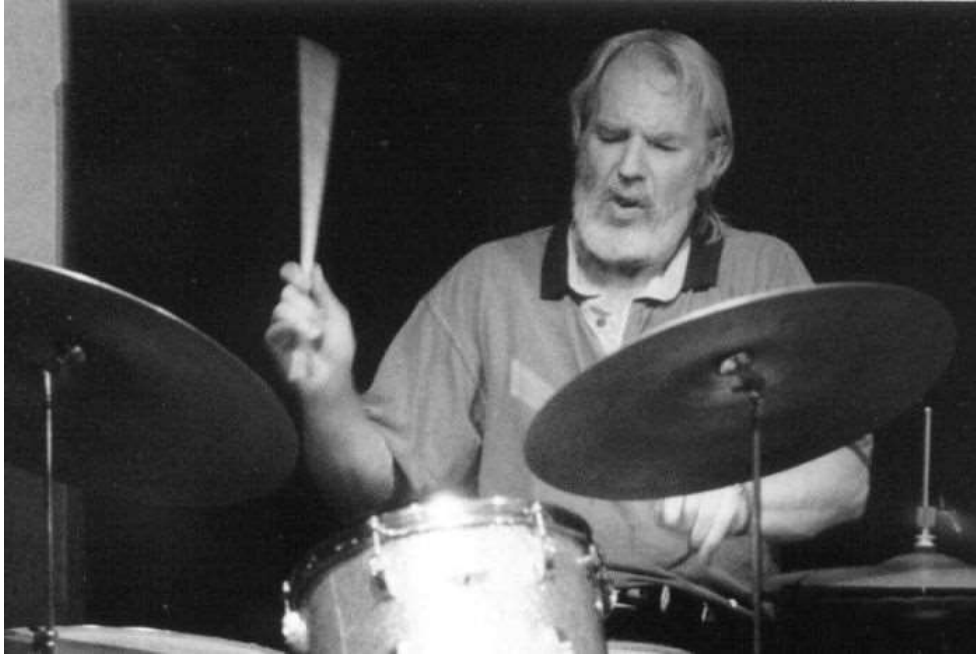
On the stage, from left to right, a vibraphone waits, a double bass rests on its side, a trumpet sits in its stand, a soprano saxophone and an alto saxophone lay side by side and a drum kit is foregathered expectantly. A quintet of instruments.

Each of those instruments represents ghosts of past masters and around each is an aura, an almost sacred presence of *inter alia* Bobby Hutcherson or Milt Jackson or John Sangster on vibes; of Paul Chambers or Freddie Logan on bass; of Johnny Coles or Don Cherry or Bob Barnard on trumpet; of Lee Konitz (still alive at 92 in 2022) or Bernie McGann on alto or Steve Lacy on soprano saxophone; or John Pochée or Paul Motian on drums. The real owners of some of these instruments, like vibes player Miro Lauritz and bass player Helen Svoboda look about 16.



Ghosts of past masters might include Bobby Hutcherson (left) or John Sangster (below) on vibes...HUTCHERSON PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER; SANGSTER PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN





Other ghosts of past masters might include John Pochée (above) or Paul Motian (below) on drums... POCHÉE PHOTO COURTESY LOUDMOUTH; MOTIAN PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN





The real owners of some of these instruments, like vibes player Miro Lauritz (above) and bass player Helen Svoboda (below) look about 16.... PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN



The anthem of those enamoured of the 1960s "love and be loved 'revolution'" may be Jimi Hendrix waving his freak flag high, singing *If Six Were Nine* (Hendrix) on the soundtrack to *Easy Rider*, as Wyatt, George and Billy rode their choppers across the bridge, but the real anthem for those times was Sonny Rollins and his *Freedom Suite* and *A Night at The Village Vanguard*, this latter recorded in 1957 at a jazz club called The Village Vanguard which is still open today.

Sonny Rollins said that in clubs the audience was another member of the band. In Carnegie Hall, at an oval or a stadium, or coliseum, that description does not apply. In October 2022, before a performance at club Jazzlab, Jonathan Zwartz said to the audience that they should not applaud until the end as they are playing his *Suite Suomi* straight through, with Zwartz (double bass), Iro Haarla (concert harp), Julien Wilson (tenor saxophone), Phil Slater (trumpet), Ben Hauptmann (guitar) and Hamish Stuart (drums). A table member of mine said that these comments immediately turned him off from engaging with the music and were “anti-jazz” comments.



Sonny Rollins (left) said that in clubs the audience was another member of the band... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS; at Jazzlab, bassist Jonathan Zwartz asked the audience not to applaud until the end, as they were playing his “Suite Suomi” straight through...ZWARTZ PHOTO PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



Needless to say, the idea of being connected to the music and its artists and to the community of the club in performance is a very real and powerful one, aesthetically, intellectually and emotionally. The performance of *Suite Suomi* went uninterrupted and at its end I was so struck with the outstanding bass solo by its composer I had to say so to him - and to say how beautiful the whole suite was as played with committed brilliance by all concerned. To what extent applauding solos would have improved the performance I don't know but it surely would have soured the musicians somewhat when a direct request had been made by the leader and composer not to applaud.

In 1951 jazz artist Quincy Jones (composer, trumpet, pianist, arranger) relates that he went to clubs five nights a week from 2am to 6am then attended Berklee. In educational terms it might be claimed that Jones, like a doctor, plumber, actor, was learning half the time by doing and learning theory the other half. In essence, Quincy Jones was a jazz artist who in time has garnered more nominations for Grammy Awards than any other artist regardless of genre.



Quincy Jones (on the right), seen here with Dinah Washington, relates that he went to clubs five nights a week from 2am to 6am then attended Berklee... PHOTO FROM THE ALBUM DINAH WASHINGTON & QUINCY JONES: THE COMPLETE SESSIONS

**Sittin' in: Jazz Clubs of the 1940s and 1950s, Harper Design, NY, 2020, Jeff Gold, p 92.*

So what may have been in the past - music in the street, music in halls, music in drawing rooms, music in the opera house - coalesced, in jazz, into music in clubs. This spatial revolution in performance closed the gap between artist and audience to the great benefit of both. As just one example, I recall in the 1950s a chamber group of classical musicians performing in white tie on a stage as if at a diplomatic reception or a State occasion. These uniforms and the space distanced the music, removed the players, alienated the listeners (visually, physically, in terms of status even) but fulfilled the idea of music as ritual.

Industry leaders, politicians and the “aspirational” are keen attendees at these rituals for reasons other than the music. And companies exploit those reasons for commercial benefit. It’s not any fault of the companies that they want their product associated with the ritual.

"If you ever wondered how jazz and blues are related then check this – there’s got to be humour, virtuosity, passion and commitment”, says Perth musician Garry Lee. “Too often I think we in Australia are trying to make jazz too cerebral. My mates in jazz in Australia like pianist Bob Sedergreen, drummer Ted Vining and fellow vibes player – the late Alan Lee – are about having fun in jazz on the bandstand but sure as anything we are all serious in practising the craft to help make it the artform.”



Perth vibist Garry Lee, pictured in 2015: Too often I think we in Australia are trying to make jazz too cerebral... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Here Garry Lee is echoing many jazz musicians and fans and even producers who have voiced similar concerns over changes that occur naturally in the strikingly evolutionary nature of this music. But jazz (improvised) music is like a Jackdaw, like the English language, and steals any music, indeed any sound, from anywhere if it serves the art. Jazz refuses to be pinned down, hobbled or restricted by what “should” be, or what is “correct”. Just as some tried to set in aspic polyphonic New Orleans music as the “standard” or “true” jazz, and then complain that big band swing was “anti-jazz”.

Garry Lee and many others express frustration at the recent move away from “fun” or the blues to a more “cerebral” music. The European influence which has been notably documented in Editions Of Contemporary Music (ECM) probably exemplifies this more “cerebral” approach Lee refers to. A perceived emphasis on sound, tonal explorations, and harmony and less emphasis on rhythm may define this influence. Yet jazz moves on, indifferent to the ways and wherefores and predispositions and likes or dislikes of its artists or aficionados.

Even bebop, a music once seen as cerebral and difficult, and not much fun, is becoming tired, and its format, its licks, are starting to feel rote, and some artists like Canadian pianist Kris Davis see bebop as confining. Indeed, Davis is exploring the music’s rhythmic, harmonic and percussive possibilities in a masterful, long form, exploratory way at a level that brings to mind the genius of Thelonious Monk and others such as fellow Canadian Paul Bley. There are hints of the great Spanish composer Maria De Alvear in her approach to this jazz. Davis has honed her skills in clubs such as Manhattan’s The Jazz Gallery (est. 1995).



Canadian pianist Kris Davis: she sees bebop as confining and is exploring the music’s rhythmic, harmonic and percussive possibilities in a masterful, long form, exploratory way... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Clubs played a pivotal role in the evolution of the music, away from academia, away from entertaining fun music, from the ritual of performance for the aristocracy or the wealthy, away from the formality of opera houses, or schedule, or programme as occurred in classical music. A club is an environment in which the audience is indeed another member of the band, responding to the music in a direct and emotional way but wanting much more than fun and entertainment. Just as the art advances so do the demands of listeners. Clubs are democratic venues and some have become legendary.

The Cotton Club in Harlem from 1923-1935 hosted the greatest stars in African American music - Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, Jimmie Lunceford - but its audience was exclusively white. Apartheid was alive and well in this club. Even so, it served as a seminal training ground for one of the music's greatest artists - Duke Ellington. He expanded the tone palette of the music and created a new harmonic language which was his own.



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Connie's Inn on 7th Avenue was integrated with Fats Waller as a frequently featured artist. Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra starred as did Carroll Dickerson's Chicago Orchestra featuring Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins and Rex Stewart. Small's Paradise, also on 7th Avenue, Harlem, opened in 1925 and closed in 1986 and is not to be confused with Small's Jazz Club in Greenwich Village, established in 1994. The

original Small's was renowned for offering a 6am breakfast to guests. It was owned by an African American, was integrated and became the longest running and most popular club of all Harlem clubs. Jamming with the house band was popular with artists including Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey who went on to lead their own bands. Billie Holiday undertook her first audition at Small's Paradise. W E B Du Bois celebrated his 83rd birthday there in 1955 with guests including Albert Einstein and Paul Robeson. Some clubs are seen as birthplaces of modern movements in jazz, such as bebop.



The Dorsey brothers, Jimmy (left) and Tommy (right) liked jamming with the house band at Small's Paradise, while Billie Holiday (below, aged 19 in this photo) undertook her first audition at this club...



Much of the reason for the emergence of bebop as a movement came about because of a wartime cabaret tax that levied a 30% charge on receipts “of any venue that served food or drink, featured singers, or allowed dancing.” (*sittin’ in*, *ibid.* p.50). Within three weeks, 5,000 performers were out of work. But with a focus now on the music as opposed to entertainment or dancing, adventurous musicians like Thelonious Monk found work.

The Onyx, 35 West 52nd Street; The Hickory House, 144 West 52nd Street; Famous Door, 35 West 52nd Street; Three Deuces, 72 West 52nd Street; Kelly’s Stables, 137 West 52nd Street; and Tondaleyos, 18 West 52nd Street (owned by African American Wilhelmina Gray) were the centres of this new music. It was usual in any club for the musicians having to compete with the clinking of glasses and chitchat, laughter and general noise of an audience. Once Three Deuces introduced a policy of one hour of silence so Art Tatum could play but the policy failed. Even so, the intensity, complexity and thrill of the new music made listening more compelling, even more hip. The tension between audience and musicians, may be positive or negative, and is fluid, and much like musicians creative feelings ebbs and flows, so to have a fixed rule or policy about how an audience ought to react, serves not the art well.



African American Wilhelmina Gray, who owned Tondaleyos, at 18 West 52nd Street... PHOTO CREDIT CHARLES “TEENIE” HARRIS

In modern times it's useful to recall that some of the greatest music in this art has been documented in clubs: The Village Vanguard, NY, with Gerry Mulligan, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins and Bill Evans among them. The Plugged Nickel, Chicago with Miles Davis. Ronnie Scott's, London with Yusef Lateef, Dizzy Gillespie, Buddy Rich, Count Basie, Ben Webster, Chet Baker, Stan Getz, Freddie Hubbard, and Ella Fitzgerald. Studio Rivbea was a club with no drinks or food meaning the music was free of extra-musical concerns that would be present in a nightclub or concert hall situation - a short-lived unrealistic but noble effort by Sam Rivers which produced a five LP compilation masterpiece of jazz, circa 1976, called *Wildflowers*, a time by the way when jazz was considered almost finished by rock and roll and other popular music.



Sam Rivers on flute, performing at Studio Rivbea, a club with no drinks or food meaning the music was free of extra-musical concerns...

Audiences that I have been part of in Australia in clubs in the recent past, have a sensibility and sensitivity that serves both art and audience well, albeit these are specifically jazz clubs, such as Jazzlab in Melbourne.

In Sydney, the El Rocco, The Basement, The Sky Lounge, Jenny's Wine Bar, Foundry 616, Seymour Centre (SIMA), Side-On Cafe and Soup Plus are some I've patronised, whilst in Melbourne Bennett's Lane was, and now Jazzlab is, an essential venue. Some of the best experiences of my life with this music occurred in these venues. I am not alone.

Jazz clubs ought to be venerated, supported, and acknowledged by arts ministers of governments as crucial breeding grounds and centres of excellence for this profound and important art.