

THE MOST HUMAN OF HORNS

by Ian Muldoon*

You know those days when a thing, some idea or event or object or image, appears in your head and won't say no? It comes *Out Of Nowhere* (Heyman/Green) and it does *Linger Awhile* (Rose/Owens). With songs it's called an earworm but with jazz instruments? With me right now it's the trombone. For instance I'm at an album launch of Mat Jodrell's *Grateful* (Nicholas Records, 2019) with Jodrell trumpet; Carl Mackey, saxophone; Jordan Murray, trombone; Andrea Keller, piano (sitting in for Miki Yamanaka); Sam Anning, double bass; and Ben Vanderwal, drums (sitting in for Jimmy Macbride).



L-R, Andrea Keller, Jordan Murray, Sam Anning, Mat Jodrell, Carl Mackey, Ben Vanderwal (face obscured by cymbal)... PHOTO CREDIT IAN MULDOON

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

This group is afire and cooking and in the pocket this Monday mid-winter night in suburban Brunswick July 17, 2023 and the place is packed - standing room only. Jodrell is a fine democratic leader and a jazz artist of considerable stature whose six compositions form the basis of the release *Grateful* (Nicholas Records) 2019. Another three works make up the programme of nine originals: Jimmy Macbride's *More Than A Muffin*, Carl Mackey's *Hello Jim*, and Jordan Murray's *UnMacbridled*.



Jordan Murray: why is his single composition and performance on “UnMacbridled” to me the artistic, emotional and most satisfying work of the gig?... PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS

Jodrell's classic technique is one of clear articulation, upper register control, clarity of tone, and breadth of expression - *Allegators* is a great instance of his playing in which *inter alia* he comfortably and regularly explores the upper register. See also *Echoes of Harlem* (Nicholas Records 2015) where Jodrell's brilliance at up-tempo is on full and satisfying display on *The Bee Hive* (Jodrell) in a quartet with masters Frank Kimbrough on piano, Jay Anderson on contrabass and Lewis Nash on drums. In contrast, from the *Grateful* programme *Song For Siban*, with its long opening bass solo, is a harmonic delight with an especially beautiful Jodrell solo. He is no slouch and a real pleasure to listen to. The members of his sextet on this might be considered Jodrell's peers. In short, it's a superb evening of great music.

So what gets me wondering is why Jordan Murray's single composition and performance on *UnMacbridled* is to me the artistic, emotional and most satisfying work of the gig? A tad faster in tempo than Pete La Roca's exquisite *Lazy Afternoon*, a resonant and memorable ballad from his 1965 Blue Note album *Basra*, *UnMacbridled* is a real gem. And the highlight is the trombone solo. But it's not just mastery of technique: it's the sound, the structure, the humanness and warmth of the

performance. But Murray swings on *More Than A Muffin* (Macbride) recalling J J Johnson at high speed - dextrous, logical, yet maintaining a sweet tone. And perhaps it's here that the personal preferences loom. For all the technical brilliance of Wynton Marsalis, for example, or James Morrison, the clinical austerity and definition of their playing seems to be..... what?.... distant? Too perfect? Lacking rhythmic subtleties? Let me digress briefly to the French Horn.

Robert Northern (1934–2020) aka Brother Ah, was part of the Monk tentette which recorded *Thelonious Monk Orchestra At Town Hall* (Riverside) in 1959. He studied at the Manhattan School of Music and at the Vienna Academy. He was good enough to be selected by Monk along with Donald Byrd, trumpet; Phil Woods, alto saxophone; Pepper Adams, baritone saxophone *et al*, as part of the orchestra but couldn't quite "get" his part which was piano music for horns. Monk's intervals were difficult. They were rehearsing *Little Rootie Tootie* (Monk) and all had gone to lunch except Monk and Northern. Monk stood up and danced the French Horn player's part. Northern played it like Monk danced it andfinally"got it". Northern played extensively with Gil Evans, Sun Ra, Coltrane, Tyner, and Kirk.



Robert Northern aka Brother Ah, pictured in 1997: he played it like Monk danced it andfinally"got it" ... PHOTO CREDIT MICHAEL WILDERMAN

Sometimes the trombone seems to me to be the quintessential jazz horn. The trombone. Tricky Sam Nanton and Jack Teagarden and Grachan Moncur 111; Stan Kenton's five trombones; whether it's a Rugolo arrangement of Ellington's *Solitude* or The Four Freshman's best-selling record they ever made, *Four Freshman and Five Trombones*, or more recently players Steve Davis, Steve Swell,

Shannon Barnett, Callum Mintzis and Glenn Ferris - trombones abound. I remember Kenton's *Interlude* (22/12/47) by Rugolo and Russell with a *five* trombone section and rhythm only.

And we consider that without the trombone of James Greening, The catholics would be a different beast altogether. Just take one instance from one track on one album from that great band: *Penumbra* from *Gondola* (2006) - exotic rhythms open the 15-minute piece echoing the languid mood of *Caravan* (Ellington, Mills, Tizol). Acoustic bass adds melodic lines and the work slowly ingrains itself into our consciousness building from guitar solo, to the trombone - a voice, almost human, distinctly Greening in its energy and variety, expresses a range of sounds, of feelings.



James Greening: a voice, almost human, distinctly Greening in its energy and variety, expresses a range of sounds, of feelings... PHOTO COURTESY ABC JAZZ

But a trombone voice I'm embarrassed to say I hadn't heard of before, is Glenn Ferris, who provides a stunning and beautiful sound to Chris Cody's group Coalition on the album *Conscript* (Nocturne) recorded June 2006, rereleased in 2007 by Sony (Austria) and available from Cody and Birdland, Sydney.

One possible answer to the relative obscurity of Ferris, resident in France for years, is that Americas are marketing masters, Europe not so much, though ECM has a large profile, as Steeplechase, Enja and MPS tended to have in years past. Another is the trombone itself which has had mixed success since the bebop revolution. Our loss. But the programme of music on *Conscript* by Chris Cody is a revelation. All 11 works are originals by Cody. Each features Ferris extensively, but Cody's contribution makes a worthy partnership to this outstanding CD. His harmony, supportive rhythm, solos, rich melodic writing make this a perfect partnership. Bass and drums are unobtrusive but add colour, bottom and adhesive to what is a very fine outing.



Glenn Ferris: he provides a stunning and beautiful sound to Chris Cody's group Coalition on the album "Conscript"... PHOTO CREDIT RAINER ORTAG

As a Professor, Ferris once taught at Conservatoire de Paris. He has played with Stevie Wonder, the Beach Boys, the Brecker Brothers, Tim Buckley, Harry James, Art Pepper, the Average White Band, James Taylor, Billy Cobham, George Duke, Buddy Miles, Don Ellis and Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention. He is fluent as a cellist, another instrument of beautiful sound. Even on the somewhat pedestrian *Horizontal Tango* (Cody) Ferris makes the piece worth hearing for his contribution alone. The longest work *Touch* (Cody) at over ten minutes *adagio*, allows room for Ferris to really show his gentle, emotionally powerful, expressive side leavened by the lighter piano of Cody who closes the programme with a most affective solo. Quite beautiful.



American trombonist Steve Swell: sometimes the trombone can be smooth as butter or it can be as startling as an angry shout or intimidating growl...

Or take a listen to the opening to up-tempo *Eternal Beginning* (Cody) with its rich melody, pumping rhythms and lower register piano overlain with swinging wildly expressive trombone. Then there's the development of the trombone solo,

lower register, vocal effects, tension building so it all comes together for the best lift off of any piece in the programme when the piano enters. It's a superb arrangement and one of those moments of bliss when everything works to make a seeming perfect whole of four artists so different and completely now as one, in the pocket even if the resolution is a little less resounding, perhaps the sound of regret that the moment has passed. So to another trombone player, Steve Swell.

Swell was mentored by Roswell Rudd and has played with Cecil Taylor, John Zorn, Tim Berne, Elliott Sharp et al. His group Fire Into Music (2004/5) was a quartet: Swell, trombone; Jemeel Moondoc, alto saxophone; William Parker, double bass; and Hamid Drake, drums. His 3CD *For Jemeel Fire From The Road* (Rogue Art) has a 55-minute improvised performance recorded live at the El Dorado Ballroom, Houston on 2nd October 2004. This piece has the logic and structure of composition yet was made in the moment and is a remarkable instance of musical creativity. Sometimes the trombone can be smooth as butter or it can be as startling as an angry shout or intimidating growl. With three hours of music, all recorded live, it's a worthwhile investment.



Canadian Hillary Simms, the first female trombonist to be employed at Julliard...
PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER

Perhaps, its relative low profile is changing as there is movement at the station: Julliard, in July 2023, employed their first female trombonist, Canadian Hillary Simms. The trombone is a profoundly human horn and may have a far better exposure in months and years to come. The trombone makes the best of human sounds in the art of jazz when electronics and AI, MTV and slush, white noise and the clanking of modern life, seem everywhere in our soundscape.

The following article on this website may also be of interest:

Ian Muldoon, "Oh Trombone, Trombone, Wherefore Art Thou Trombone?" at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-77>