

UNIVERSITY OF JAM

by Ian Muldoon*

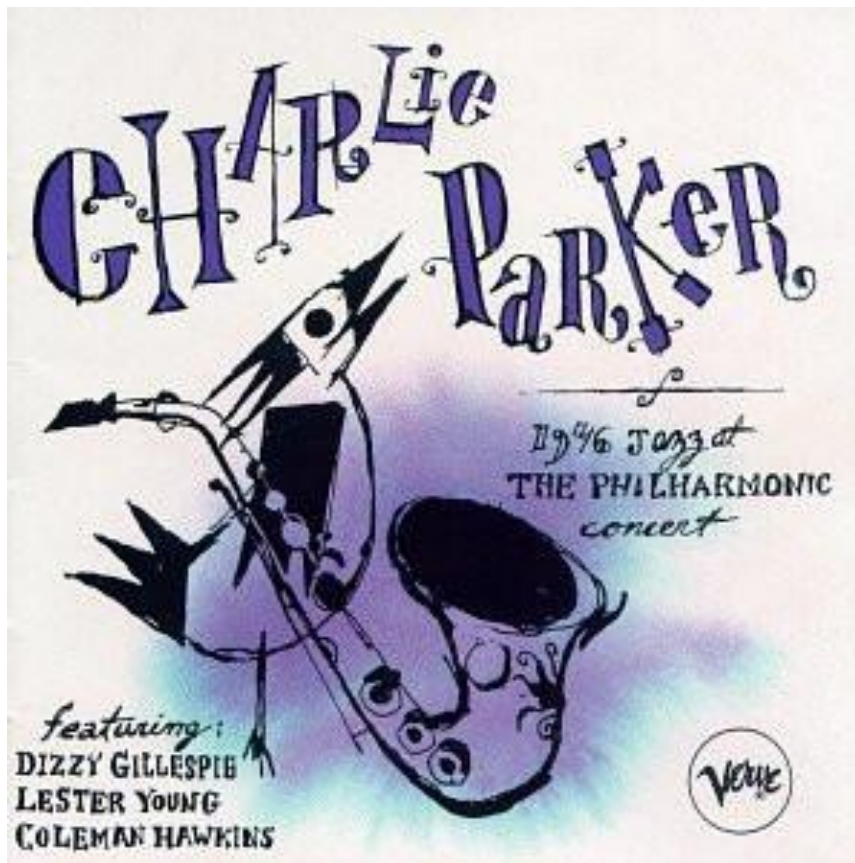
Jam sessions, so called, have been part of the music scene way back to when Billy Bantu was banging a log along with his uncle and buddies after hunting and now waiting for the wildebeest to be prepared. In more recent times, in the 20th century, it was a common experience in jazz, after gigs around town, for musicians to foregather in an agreed space, to have a “blow” unrestrained by the strictures expected of them in paid jobs - usually entertaining the paying customers. Jamming is a moment of testing - who is the “best” tenor player? - but it was and is a great feeling of fun, of the joy of expression, without time constraints and with an open door policy for anyone with the guts to step up and show what they can do. Importantly, perhaps most importantly, it’s a university of sorts where young players can learn from old masters - the University of Jam.



The heyday of the jam session was probably those organised from 1945 by Norman Granz (pictured above)... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM P GOTTLIEB

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

The heyday (from the German meaning prosperous) of the jam session was probably those organised from 1945 by Norman Granz and the introduction of the Long Playing record around 1949 and the US economic boom post WW2. Standing at a packed Pacific Hotel, Manly, NSW, bar in the early 1950s (women not allowed) I would see the occasional patron bring in a 10" LP of the latest *Jazz At The Philharmonic* concert featuring *inter alia* Flip Phillips, Charlie Parker, Oscar Peterson, Buddy Rich, Ella Fitzgerald *sans* "classic or traditional jazz".



Granz became famous *inter alia* for mixing old stalwarts of the swing era with the new bebop lions. Jazz stalwarts like Louis Armstrong or Duke Ellington were not featured, though some of his alumni may have been. I was never a fan of screeching saxophones, long drum solos and wailing trumpets so my recollection is badly coloured by my first impressions of these works which tended to feature transitional musicians from swing bands like Buck Clayton or recent bop innovators like Charlie Parker letting loose.

Reaction to bebop was visceral and spawned what came to be called "revival jazz" centred on England. England had a reputation of preserving the "classics", including the pound sterling, a Monarchy and the polyphonic jazz music of New Orleans and its legendary players: Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, and Jelly Roll Morton. A most vocal opponent of the new music was in New York and he owned a club. His name was Eddie Condon who responded to the new music by getting together some of the great artists from the classic and swing era and making an album called *Jammin' At Condon's* (1954 CBS).



The album followed on from his 1944/5 radio show which was described as "the only unrehearsed, free-wheeling, completely barefoot music on the air." The 12" album *Jammin' At Condon's* featured 13 players, including greats Edmond Hall, clarinet, Bud Freeman, tenor sax and Walter Page, bass. It is one of the finest examples of "Dixieland" of the Chicago School ever recorded. But Condon was fighting a losing battle. The music had moved on, and it had moved on with a vengeance. This was evident in the media when the premier and popular weekly news magazine *Time* featured Dave Brubeck on its cover (1954) followed by Thelonious Monk a decade later (1964).



Dave Brubeck was on the cover of Time magazine in 1954, followed by Thelonious Monk a decade later in 1964...

But Rock and Roll entered the arena at the same time via doo wop and the blues in huge numbers to provide plenty of screeching, wailing and long unstructured solos for the entertainment of the punters, whilst the new jazz began its journey into the homes of the aficionados through greatly improved recording technology accompanied by the emergence of “high fidelity” home sound systems led initially by Britain (Quad, Wharfedale). The music departments of the schools and universities gradually followed suit - but, the freewheeling jam session stayed alive. It is a continuing practice even a new “tradition” of, for example, the Melbourne International Jazz Festival through the facilities of Jazzlab Brunswick, Victoria, for established masters to turn up for a blow with a new generation of artists including the brilliant young lion Tessie Overmyer (maybe that should be ‘lioness’?).



Brilliant young lion Tessie Overmyer; maybe that should be ‘lioness’: at the JazzLab in October, 2023... PHOTO CREDIT IAN MULDOON

The Jazzlab jam session is promoted under the auspices of The Rookies who are: Greg Sher, alto sax; Tom Sly, trumpet; Joel Trigg, piano; Oscar Neyland, double bass and Chris Cameron, drums. The Rookies were born in the spring of 2014 at The Rooks Return, in Brunswick, Melbourne where every Wednesday night they recreate elements of the spirit of the jam session. On the 26th October 2023, at 11.30pm they got the music roiling with no screeching, no boredom with long wandering solos, no wailing - just good music played with consummate skill, sometimes a classic Monk piece, often originals.



Tenor saxophonist Hector Harley with bassist Monty Schnier in the background, at the jam session held at Jazzlab, Brunswick, Melbourne International Jazz Festival, 26th October 2023... PHOTO CREDIT IAN MULDOON



Julien Wilson (left) on tenor and Ross Anderson on bass, at the same jam session... PHOTO CREDIT IAN MULDOON

Over the next few hours, after The Rookies set the scene, Hector Harley, Oscar Bruten, and Julien Wilson, tenor sax; Monty Schnier and Ross Anderson, contrabass; and Kade Brown, piano were among the musicians contributing to the jam. Drummer Chris Cameron did extra duty that night. A jam session is a wonderful coda to a Festival and a delightful crucible for young players to show their stuff. Long live the University of Jam.