

WHERE'S THE PIANO?

by Ian Muldoon*



"It was said that the group came about because there was no piano (in 1952 when at the club Haig). That's not the case: there was a piano there, but I decided not to use it."

-Gerry Mulligan



"(Ornette Coleman) has caused more reflection and analysis than anyone since Bird, Diz and Thelonious."

-Julian Cannonball Adderley, 26/5/60

**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.*



“Charlie Parker thought of his work as art... today’s jazz musicians... play art.”

-Fumi Tomita, Acoustic Bass, Professor of Music, University of Massachusetts, at Amherst (Downbeat, December, 2020 p56)



“Ornette’s music is about melody...about singing, and talking, and about the shape of the line... it’s really pure.. more than anything else that’s the inspiration I’ve drawn from listening to Ornette’s music over the years.”

-Pat Metheny 1986



“If you take the best fake book in the world and look at all the keys, you’ll find that maybe only three or four keys are used in the whole book. So you know what that was, it was ideas placed in a key, not a key placed in ideas.... the thing that I really want to achieve in my lifetime is to inspire people to be individuals. That to me, is it.”

-Ornette Coleman 1986

The individual Bernie McGann was born into a very culturally conservative Australia. Possible motivations for Bernie's submitting himself to a musical life recall Einstein's witty comment: "One of the strongest motives that leads men to art and science is escape from everyday life, with its painful crudity and hopeless dreariness, and from the fetters of one's own ever shifting desires."

Within the jazz world he may have been something of an outsider as well, at least at first. His documented legacy and impact on music and Australian culture has been deep-seated. McGann was a strikingly individual musical voice, and I would argue that the individual musical voice is the most distinguishing feature in the music known as jazz. There may well be 100,000 bebop alto sax players who know all the changes, but not many can be identified readily by their sound. This individual music is the musical artistic response to the living times of the 20th century in all its variety, a reaction to conformity, speed of change and pace of life.



Bernie McGann (above) was a striking individual musical voice...PHOTO COURTESY BODGIE DADA & THE CULT OF COOL

In the 19th Century performances such as the 85-minute *8th Symphony* of Mahler with its orchestra of 120 musicians may have been very well attuned to the needs of exploding middle classes and the aristocracy, and their leisure activities mindset and steamship travel, but in the 20th century and today in music such as MTV, a long take is a 20-second take. In short, three minutes of Duke Ellington may be more relevant, attuned, not to mention breathtakingly beautiful, than 85 minutes of Mahler.

But to begin at the beginning. On my jazz programme on Radio RAAF Butterworth I played what I liked: Monk, Davis, and Coleman. In 1968 my RAAF neighbours in the block of six apartments at the township of Butterworth seemed to revere Beatles music which would feature at formals at the Officers Mess and was thought of as risqué fun music. One Saturday

morning I was taping an album called *An Evening With Ornette Coleman* (Polydor) 1967 as a preview to featuring it on my programme. A Mirage pilot colleague knocked on my door. “Interesting music” he said. “If you want, I’ll loan it to you,” I replied. “Nah. It’s ok,” he said and left. 50 years later he revealed that his wife Helen thought it was either our baby crying or a cat in heat because it couldn’t be called music, and go down and tell Muldoon to SHUT IT UP. Ornette Coleman was an outsider too. What was interesting to me about his music on first encounter was that the sounds of the very earliest recorded jazz, lacked the sheen, the polish, the harmony and sweetness of “normal” music: it was raw, wild, rhythmic, and different. Was Coleman taking us back to the beginnings?



Consider for example Bennie Moten’s composition *Elephant’s Wobble*, recorded in September 1923 by Bennie Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra (!) of Lammar Wright Sr, cornet; Thamon Hayes, trombone; Woody Walder (clarinet, tenor sax, Kazoo effects, clarinet mouthpiece); Moten, piano; Sam Tall, banjo; and Willie Hall, drums. The range of sounds created in less than three minutes is remarkable in response to the cornet’s lead: the kazoo talks, as does the clarinet mouthpiece, and banjo. Then consider Coleman’s document noted above with his trio, say the track up-tempo *Doughnuts*, with a grooving bass, and an alto sax solo with a keening, shallow tone that improvises with incredible suppleness and agility, often in the upper register, unlike any other saxophonist of the time, and with buzzing atonal sounds at a climax.



Bennie Moten: a range of sounds created in less than three minutes...

Part of Coleman's programme on that concert, recorded at Fairfield Hall, Croydon, England 29/8/65, included *Sounds And Forms For Wind Quintet - Movements 1-10*, a 25-minute suite with bassoon, Cecil James; clarinet, Sidney Fell; flute, Edward Walker; horns, John Burden; and oboe, Derek Wickens, as well as original compositions from Coleman's standard concert repertoire including *Falling Stars*, *Silence* and *Doughnuts* performed by his working trio of himself on alto saxophone, violin, trumpet, composer and as leader; David Izenzon on double bass; and Charles Moffett on percussion. I may have listened to that suite once but to his trio dozens of times over the years between then and now.

Ornette Coleman's influence has been artistically wide ranging. Artist Sam Gilliam's current exhibit at the Pace Gallery, New York, 2020, features large wall-mounted doughnut shapes that are dyed, rather than painted, with one from 2020 titled *Black Mozart/ORNETTE*. Coleman's composition *Lonely Woman* is now a jazz standard recorded by inter alia MJQ, Denny Zeitlin, Lester Bowie, Old and New Dreams, Branford Marsalis, John Zorn, J D Allen, Geri Allen, Curtis Amy, Fred Hersch, Horace Silver, Ran Blake, Sunny Murray and The Gabriel Algeria Afro-Peruvian Sextet.



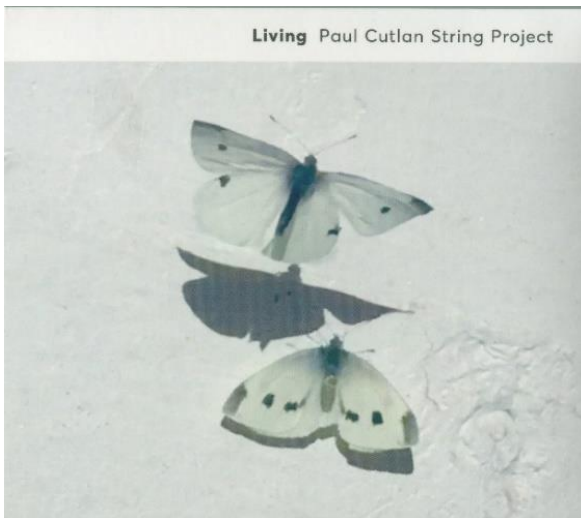
Sam Gilliam: his current exhibit at the Pace Gallery, New York, 2020, features large wall-mounted doughnut shapes that are dyed, rather than painted, with one from 2020 titled "Black Mozart/ORNETTE".

To what extent Coleman has influenced most modern jazz reed players, one can only guess, but his approach to music as *sound* - some of his documents are actually titled *Sound Museum* - and his journey from Texas blues, R&B, through to the Houston Symphony must have made many rethink the categorisations that plague the music world - even within genres.

Consider for example *Living*, by Paul Cutlan String Project (Earshift Music, 2020). Cutlan is a multi-instrumentalist and composer, trained in the tradition of Western classical music and has been a working musician with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Australian Opera and the Australian Chamber Orchestra. His involvement in improvised music projects include Swanton's *Ambon* and Coltrane's *Ascension* at Foundry 616. His document *Living* features himself on bass clarinet, clarinet and soprano saxophone; Brett Hirst, double bass; Tunji Beier cajon, kanjira and konnakol - percussion instruments of Peru, Africa, and South India; and Gary Daley, piano. In the string quartet are Lisa Pallandi and Caroline Hopson, violins; James Eccles, viola; and Oliver Miller, cello.

However accomplished the form and the musical execution of that form might be, the emotional response is the most important one. Part of Cutlan's document is a five-part suite called *The Eleventh Hour*, composed as a musical response to WW1. I love the sound of the bowed cello which is perhaps one of the most seductive and sonorous of strings - in

Desolation it was especially effective over the string section harmony - and the ominous gravity of the bass clarinet was powerful. Sometimes Bernard Hermann sprang to mind with the strings. The sound picture of up-tempo churning string cross rhythms, shells falling, howls, chattering, buzzing, crying and cross yelling punctuated by the solemn bass clarinet in *Conflict* was an impressionistic and impressive sound collage. The climax of the high cello and bass intoning *The Last Post* was a poignant and effective climax. The work is consummately performed. My emotional response however was limited to the bass work of Brett Hirst, sometimes solo sometimes in dialogue with Cutlan. Paul Cutlan has legitimacy and status in a range of musical forms and genres; his improvisatory work in a jazz context has more appeal to me.



Contemporary examples of classically trained musicians devoting their creativity to jazz, abound. Brad Mehldau may be the most obvious and accomplished example. Sometimes jazz greats dip into classical: Jarrett's Shostakovich and Bach performances. Ornette Coleman's journey, including venturing into performing with symphony orchestras, was atypical but attests to his influence. But one speculates, does an artist like Coleman seek legitimacy or musical status performing with a Symphony, or is it merely another "sound" exploration? To be "just" a "jazz" musician is so much less than being a cello player with the Tasmanian Symphony as my half-brother was, regardless of his actual talent. Coleman's greatest music though, was his small group work contained on the boxed set *Beauty Is A Rare Thing* (Rhino, 1993) of which more later.



It's strange how the mind works when it's not encumbered with a specific goal - maybe it's called "free association" (cf Freud). When daydreaming about the greatness of drummer Elvin Jones, I thought about how he could be so all over the place when playing with Coltrane, how important he was to the success of Gil Evans' albums *Out of the Cool* and *The Individualism of Gil Evans*, but how restrained and disciplined he was on the album *Motion* with Lee Konitz; how his pulse and drive and sound was so elemental to the power of that document.



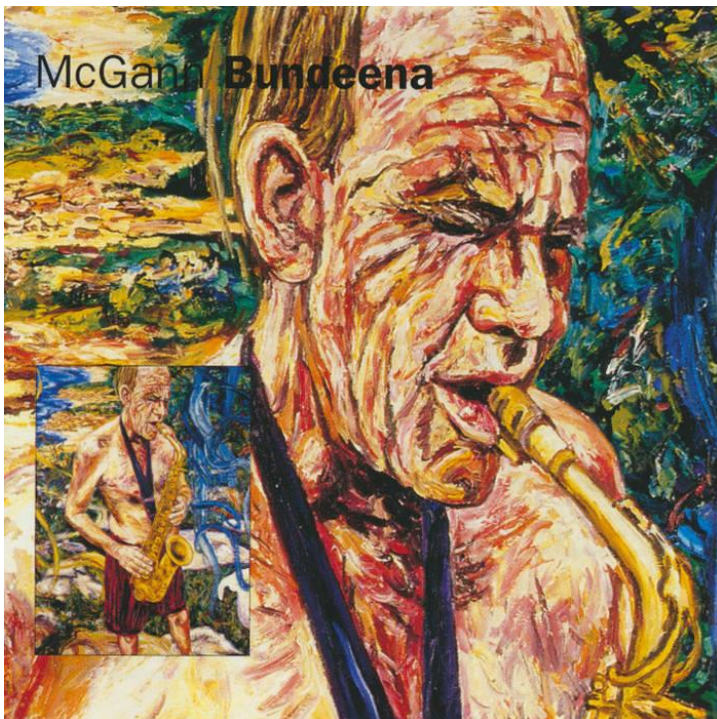
Elvin Jones: restrained and disciplined on the album "Motion" with Lee Konitz...
PHOTO CREDIT ROBERTO POLILLO

I thought about Lee Konitz and his long association with melody, in particular his solo take on *The Song Is You* on *Lone-Lee* (Steeplechase) 1975 (the 39-minute version) and how it was possible to sustain interest for so long - the melody, variations on it, and the ability to swing ... alone. Then I thought about the absence of my favourite instrument the piano from Konitz's 1961 album *Motion*, and groups where some of the most beautiful musics have been created sans piano or even guitar: Gerry Mulligan, Sonny Rollins, and Bernie McGann.



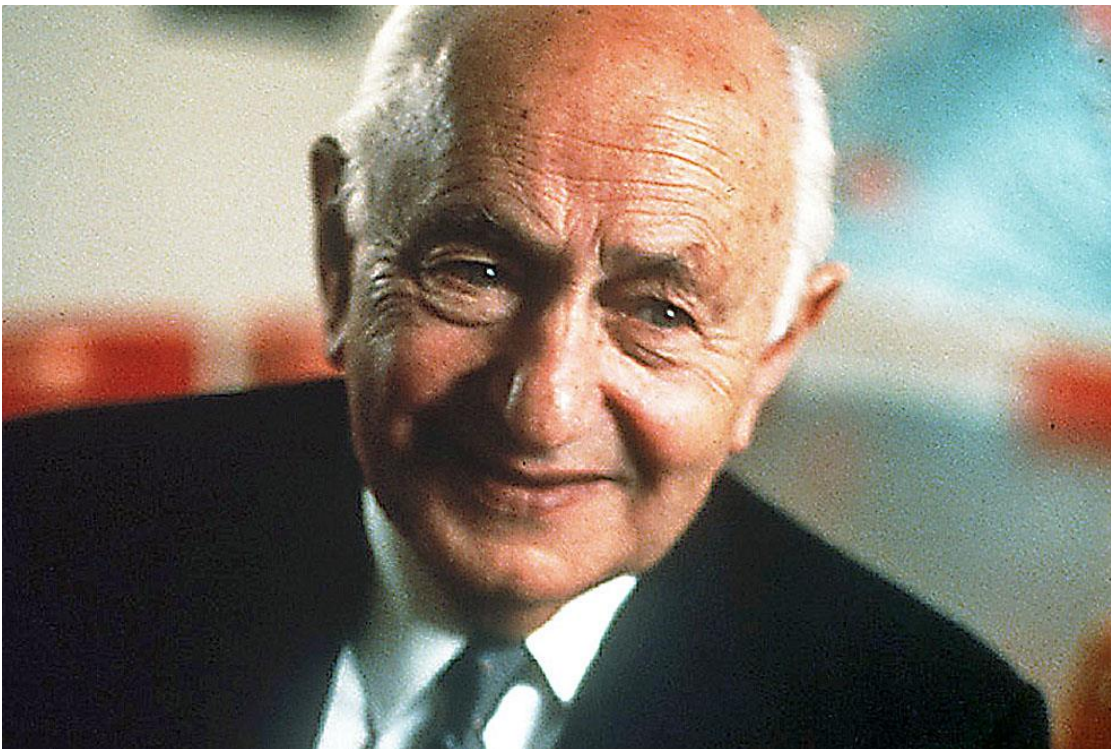
Lee Konitz's 1961 album "Motion": another album without the piano...

Bernie McGann, two years my elder, was a friend and an artist I knew (so I think) because he's of my generation. He had the persona of an ordinary bloke from Granville where I went to Tech in 1959, and he talks to me like few other musicians do - just like the musicians do in that iconic book *Hear Me Talking' To Ya* (Hentoff/Shapiro)1955. Except that Bernie's wit and conversational skills might be summed up by his praise for another musician's skills: "He's a motherfucker!" What I mean is Bernie talks to me and us through his alto saxophone. For evidence listen to his composition *Dirty Dozen* on his document *Bundeena* (Rufus, 2000) and I swear in that ballad you'll feel that Bernie is actually talking to you with such intelligence, feeling and grace, you may exclaim: "Motherfucker!" Then the work of Ornette Coleman sprang to mind. In the case of Bernie McGann he had so much to say and so little opportunity to say it, I wondered about the gap between what the artist does and what they'd like to do - the freedom to go for it, unleashed as it were.



The tension that plays out in all our lives between our desire to belong to the group and the drive to just let go and, to put it politely, express ourselves, is lifelong. The child is itself and slowly, slowly coached, enlightened and disciplined into tribal mores and rules. It is said that if the Catholic church gets a child at three, it has the child for life. Self-discipline is needed in the arts in spades. Australia's establishment as a goal, is especially evident in our powerful social mores and tribal rules which may serve us well in pandemics, but can inhibit experimentation, eccentricity, individualism and innovation, and this may apply especially in the arts. It's why totalitarian societies produce little art worth consideration, and it's why the USA remains the great beacon of possibility, despite its obvious flaws. Even though we may be called "multicultural", first generation arrivals spend much of their time and energy "fitting in". Our popular idea of risqué and experimentation in performance is Barry Humphries - essentially a guy dressed in drag like football players at Xmas parties. Added to this are tribal rules surrounding musical groups, placing teamwork at a premium, modesty and humility as standards, and whatever you do don't act like a dickhead and draw attention to yourself, cf, Bernie McGann.

When McGann and I were coming of age in the 1950s, there were two big issues: Catholicism and Communism. If you were a “good” Catholic it was impossible to be a Communist (atheist). These views were most effectively proselytised by Bartholomew Augustine (Bob) Santamaria, an alumni of North Melbourne Christian Brothers, who became a powerful political force, one of the most significant political figures in Australian history. His greatest achievement was in 1954 to divide the Labour Party, a party which was the natural home of most Irish Catholic working people and perhaps too of working class Italians (Anthony Albanese). Much of the ideology of the Labor Party was influenced by Marxism and Socialist ideals which meant to be a member of the Labor Party or a member of a Union was to be tainted with the association with Communism, when the world was engaged in both an ideological Cold War and a hot war in Korea.



Bartholomew Augustine (Bob) Santamaria, an alumni of North Melbourne Christian Brothers... one of the most significant political figures in Australian history...

It may seem ludicrous now but it was not uncommon in Australia for artists and intellectuals to be considered suspects in these ideological wars, as vulnerable to Communism. Having a subscription to *Time Magazine* was seen by some as evidence of intellectualism! In the arts, in jazz, the Port Jackson Jazz Band and the Cootamundra Jazz band were popular, and jazz was viewed very much as entertaining fun music. To teenagers such as McGann and myself, other music beckoned: Monk, Gillespie, Parker. A photo of Dizzy Gillespie in *Esquire Magazine* in 1957 with his extended cheeks and bent trumpet, or Monk in bamboo sunglass frames, were irresistible images of hipness and rebellion. The 1950s were also the time of the invention of the teenager which had momentous consequences economically and socially and ultimately politically, with the lowering of the franchise to 18 - USA in 1971, and Australia in 1973 - perhaps partly in demand for human fodder for the war in Vietnam, but more particularly the contradiction of sending 18-year-olds to fight for their country when the franchise was closed to them.



A photo of Dizzy Gillespie (left) in Esquire Magazine in 1957 with his extended cheeks and bent trumpet, or Thelonious Monk (below) in bamboo sunglass frames, were irresistible images of hipness and rebellion...



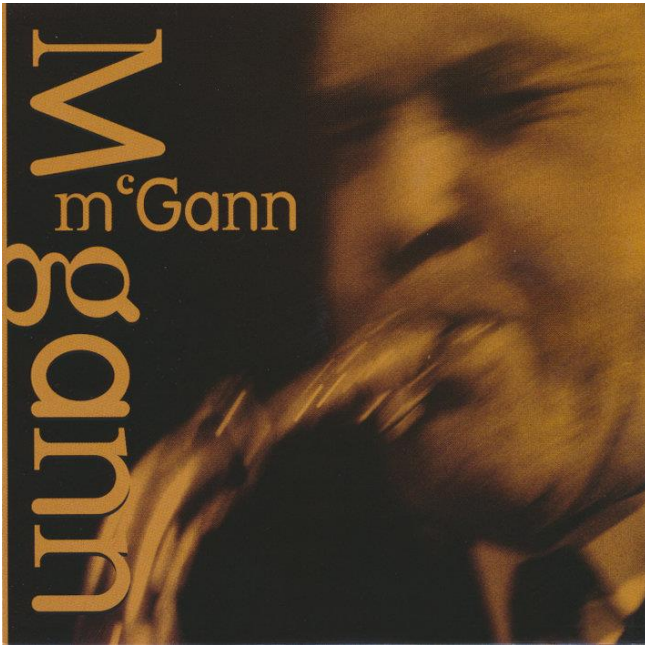
These wars, including cultural wars, were playing out during the 1950s around the world. Arthur Koestler, Hungarian Jew, Zionist, Communist then anti-Communist, who wrote *Darkness at Noon* (1940) as an exposure of the Stalinist show trials, and experienced the horrors of European totalitarianism in its Fascist and Communist manifestations, wrote:

It's true. To snatch even a single man from the gallows is very gratifying. It's the whole point of my life's path. I don't believe that the end justifies the means (cf Leninist/Stalinist doctrine). I don't believe that an individual is the result of a crowd of a million divided by a million. I don't believe anymore in humanity. I believe in the individual... the end result of totalitarianism, of fascism, of mass movements of (Trump's) populism, is the crushing of individualism." (Quoted in "Koestler: The Indispensable Intellectual", William Scammel, faber and faber, London, 2010, p 447)



Arthur Koestler: To snatch even a single man from the gallows is very gratifying. It's the whole point of my life's path...

The unique individual Bernie McGann was a major artist who looked and acted like the really nice bloke from next door, if you lived in 1940s Western Sydney. Bernie spoke more thrillingly and articulately through his axe and when he did the angels sang (to continue the Catholic reference). Consider for example the astonishing *Second Wind* (McGann) from the all-original compositions *McGann McGann* (Spiral Scratch, 1995) and the conversation between James Greening's "fatherly" trombone and McGann's pleading and keening "teenager" saxophone - this is a couple of masters underpinned by one of those rhythm sections to die for



having a riveting musical conversation which is melodically interesting, widely expressive, and swings. Yet, he may have been a major artist who artistically held himself back, so to speak, out of consideration for his musical colleagues, and because he valued being known as the “really nice bloke” and because of being a child of his time and place: 1940s, Catholic, Granville, NSW. Bernie was educated at Marist Brothers, Parramatta. To what extent does an authoritarian environment with beliefs in a superhuman controlling power, with images of bleeding figures in frames, dispersed about the home and school, impact creativity? One imagines it does, but differently for different individuals. In other words, rebelling against one’s tribe has its consequences.



McGann, pictured here with trombonist James Greening & bassist Lloyd Swanton in the background...

As a member of Bernie's generation I went to Manly West Public and Manly Boys High between 1946 and 1954. I was not caned and not because I was a "good" boy. My friend David Jones who attended Christian Brothers, Manly said it was routine for boys to be given the strap for chewing gum or for "not paying attention". I imagine corporal punishment was a feature of McGann's school, Marist Brothers Parramatta. No football for Bernie. No Maths and English or History for Bernie. No Intermediate Certificate for Bernie. No priesthood for Bernie. He and I did an engineering apprenticeship: Bernie with his Dad, me with the RAAF. But Bernie was driven by other angels. By his own admission he couldn't organise diddly and most of his greatest small group work was produced by Lloyd Swanton or, in the case of the eponymous *The Last Straw*, John Pochée. What sort of individual experimentation did he get up to when letting go on his sole saxophone wanderings when in the boondocks (Bundeena)? I remember Bernie's music, especially with the group known as *The Last Straw*.



The Last Straw L-R, Tony Esterman, piano, Lloyd Swanton, bass, Ken James, tenor sax, McGann, alto sax, John Pochée, the drummer... PHOTO COURTESY TONY ESTERMAN

That eponymous album from 1990 features a quintet iteration of the group led by John Pochée, the drummer. The other members are: McGann, alto sax; Lloyd Swanton, bass; Ken James, tenor sax; and Tony Esterman, piano. The programme consists of four compositions by jazz masters: *Dizzy's Business* (Wilkins), *Moontrane* (Shaw), *Remember Rockefeller at Attica* (Mingus), and *Gee It's Sandy At The Beach* (Mulligan), and four by McGann: *Acacia*, *Kindred Spirits*, *Mex* and *The Last Straw*. On this album Esterman's pianism is a standout - the harmony, arrangement, up-tempo swing of *Acacia* introduced by Esterman, sets the bar high. On the title track, the cascading piano notes and piano solo on this up-tempo piece, which is a fitting climax to the programme, again are a highlight; the rhythm of piano, bass and drums power the work, and melody is background.



Which brings me to Ornette Coleman and his first recorded work, *Something Else!!!! The Music of Ornette Coleman* (Contemporary, 1958) which had Ornette Coleman, alto saxophone; Don Cherry, cornet; Walter Norris, piano; Don Payne, double bass; and Billy Higgins, drums; in other words, a standard bebop lineup. After this, the piano and Ornette Coleman parted ways, and he began to record his most outstanding and accomplished and groundbreaking works.



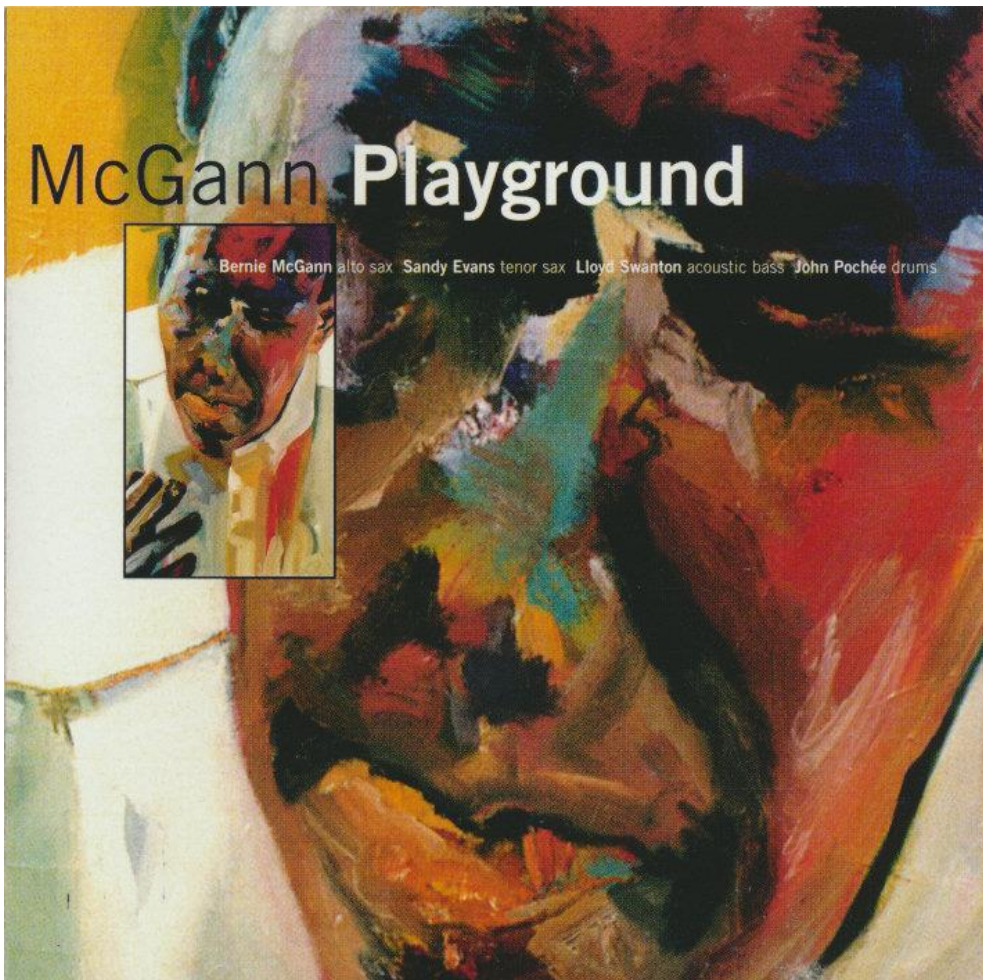
Similarly, McGann's strongest work is sans piano.

The piano can be liberating, all encompassing, a rhythm machine or an orchestra; it can fill and trill, but it can also restrict and inhibit when saxophonists like Coleman and McGann want to stretch out. My favourite instrument is the piano, but a lot of my favourite music is pianoless. For the pianist, travel is an occupational hazard for obvious reasons, not to mention the venues which provide out-of-tune upright pianos. McCoy Tyner related that he just stopped playing when Coltrane let loose. Ornette Coleman stopped using the piano after his first recording because the piano was too restricting. Walter Norris was no slouch in pianism, subsequently working with Charles Mingus, Joe Henderson and the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Band; the piano just didn't fit with Coleman's vision. In McGann's work, as in Coleman's, melodic explorations and more freedom to explore the limits of music on their chosen instrument, were compelling goals. Though Sonny Rollins, at the age of 90 (2020) is no longer playing the saxophone, his legacy is still growing. A new document called *Rollins In Holland*, with the bassist Ruud Jacobs and the drummer Han Bennink from 1967 showcases—in cuts up to 22 minutes—Rollins's freely associative artistry, liberated from studio norms and pianos.



Sonny Rollins (right) pictured here with Ornette Coleman... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS

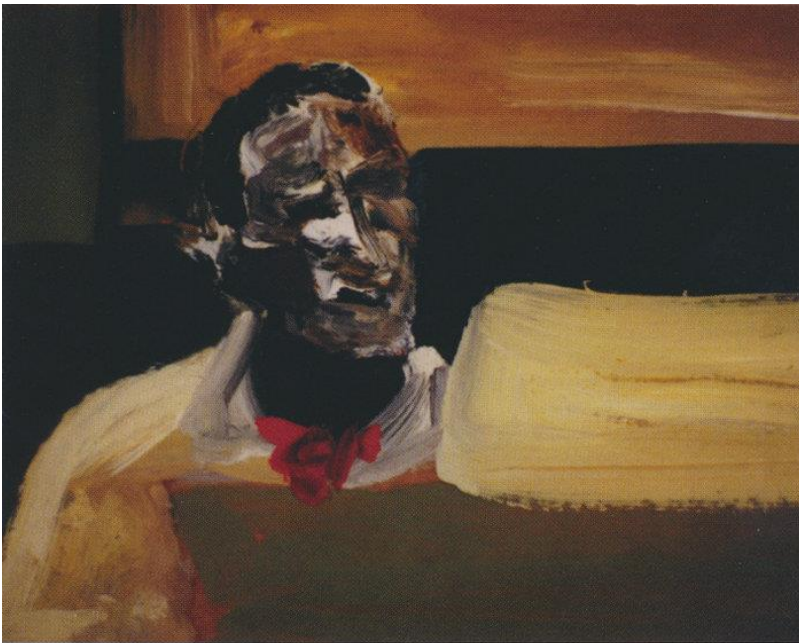
My first point of reference regarding McGann's *liberation* is his document *Playground* (Rufus, 1997) with Dave Brewer's portrait painting gracing the cover. You can buy a copy of *Playground* for A\$1,052 on Amazon. There are two saxes as on *The Last Straw* album (but sans piano) with McGann alto sax; Sandy Evans, tenor sax; Lloyd Swanton, acoustic bass; and John Pochée, drums. Nine originals, *Southerly Buster*, *Playground*, and *Sergei's Dance*, by McGann; *Snap*, *Eulogy for a Friend*, *Skedaddleology*, *Which Way Up* and *One For The Road*, by Evans; and *That's That* by Swanton. Saxophone harmony, bass and range of tenor lift the up-tempo *Southerly Buster*. *Snap* has a throbbingly ecstatic alto sax cry at the beginning of a fine solo, tenor/alto harmony, over a grooving walking bass and a very fine arrangement. *The Eulogy For a Friend* has an affecting emotional but contained alto sax solo: ballads are a real test and McGann shines in this work. The title track is distinguished by a quirky brilliant McGann solo hinting at Ornette Coleman, and a bass solo by Swanton.



This track and its title suggest the freedom of play that children more or less engage in - and with children, there is something holy, and beautiful about them, unwrapped as they are by adult and society's tribal rules, and discipline. One is aware, when listening to Ornette Coleman's voice and manner, that he exudes almost a childlike trust and innocence and "purity" and self-confidence.

The finely engineered (by Adam Chapman) document *Ugly Beauty* (Spiral Scratch, 1991) is as good as any to witness the trio iteration of *The Last Straw*: McGann, alto sax; Lloyd Swanton, bass; and John Pochée, drums. What is immediately apparent is that the leader has chosen

some especially strong melodies: *Bluebird of Happiness* (Heyman/Davies/Harmati); *Daydream* (Ellington/Strayhorn); *Without A Song* (Eliscu/Rose/Youmans) and *Barbados* (Parker) - one of Bird's strongest melodies - none of which are normally recognised as "jazz standards". In the opening track *The Night Has A Thousand Eyes* (Garrett/Wayne/Weisman) which was a big hit for Bobby Lee in 1962, McGann rips through the piece in an up-tempo shock of brilliant bebop invention, underpinned by the churning rhythm of Swanton and Pochée. It's McGann from beginning to end. Tenor versions include Sonny Rollins, Joe Lovano and John Coltrane. McGann navigates the classic bebop *Barbados* (Parker) at a slower pace than Parker, and much slower than Phineas Newborn (cf *This is Phineas*, Atlantic) and opens with a solo alto saxophone dissection of the melody. Pochée is especially noticeable with his foundation of mambo-flavoured percussion. McGann makes the most of the melody.



McGann **Ugly Beauty**

Ornette Coleman was born in 1930 in Fort Worth, Texas and the music in the air was church music, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and blues a la Louis Jordan. His Dad died when he was seven. He became entranced with the dance band saxophone he heard in high school. He recalled:

...I went out and worked, around 1944/5 - shining shoes, busboying in hotels, doing summer jobs like scraping paint, all kinds of little jobs. Finally, after saving up my money, my mother told me to look on the couch, and there was a horn, a gold-plated Conn...I remember when I first got the saxophone... I remember thinking, as the book said, that the first seven letters of the alphabet were the first seven letters of music (cf the standard concert scale reads CDEFGAB). So I thought my C that I was playing on the saxophone was A, like that, right? Later on I found out that it did exist thataway only because the E-flat alto, when you play C natural, it is (the standard) A (transposed). So I was right in one way and wrong in another - I mean, sound, I was right. Then I started analysing why it exists that away, and to this very day I realise more and more that all things that are designed

with a strict logic only apply against something: it is not the only way it's done. In other words, if you take an instrument and you happen to feel it a way you can express yourself, it becomes its own law." (Quoted in *The Freedom Principle, Jazz After 1958*, John Litweiler, Da Capo Press, NY, 1984, pp 31/2).



A young Ornette Coleman in 1959, in his late 20s...

As a teenager Coleman sat in with the Stan Kenton Orchestra, played ecstatic high-energy music in the sanctified Spirit Church, toured with a minstrel show and blues singer, and was considered radical even by the *very* underground bebop band in New Orleans. But as a professional musician the music *du jour* was rhythm and blues so, at 16, he switched to tenor, the Texas R&B instrument *par excellence*. Underage musicians were not employed by upmarket clubs and bars but back-street dives liked kids because they were cheap and avoided fighting. He associated the tenor after that with rhythm and blues, and rhythm and blues with violence, so he switched back to the alto, taking with him lessons learnt through playing on the job - forceful rhythmic attack, riffing, and a big throaty Texas sound. In New Orleans he

jammed with drummer Ed Blackwell. Blackwell's musical schooling was in the University of Rhythm, New Orleans campus; Afro-Caribbean cross-rhythms (Mardi Gras context); the second line in the march of people with bottles, cans, pans; marching bands; Indian percussion; and polyrhythms.



Ed Blackwell: his musical schooling was in the University of Rhythm, New Orleans campus... PHOTO COURTESY MOSAIC IMAGES VIA PINTEREST

Two thoughts arise about Coleman's musical "education": firstly, many talk about the distinction between "primitive" (folk?) music and "art" music. Indeed, some schedules, conservatory trained musicians, music magazines, critics, media executives, and festivals talk about "fine music" meaning "high quality music" eg, "classical music" and the remainder being "folk, jazz, World" etc. The last Bellinghen Fine Music Festival I attended did have the Sandy Evans Trio as the climax of the festival, so Bellinghen may be out of step with the norm. Jazz performance is the finest music in terms of artistic excellence, individual accomplishment, and difficulty, so the use of synonyms for classical music such as "fine" is unhelpful and misleading. The second thought is that it's a minor miracle what Bernie McGann achieved; what he did, given the musically conservative even culturally and socially repressive society in which we grew up. In 2020 it seems even a brilliant mid-career artist such as Julien Wilson is hobbled at every turn by the "arts industry" so-called, and the "music industry", and by media populism. It is understandable that Barney McAll and others are driven to work elsewhere. That Bernie McGann grew to shine as bright as he did in this musically and artistically conservative hell-hole - the 1950/60s Australian milieu - is a minor miracle. This was promptly followed by the rock and roll "revolution" etc, and "jazz" was becoming less and less apparent. Yet in the USA especially, in the 1950s, one of the great musical revolutions was under way, and Ornette Coleman was at its centre.

Coleman has said in relation to Robert Johnson: "I wish we could play the blues more like that!" What draws musicians like Coleman to the sounds of the "primitive" blues as played by the likes of the "primitive" country blues music of Robert Johnson, is explained by Robert Palmer:

*Most of what they were hearing couldn't be written down in conventional musical notation, but it's the notation system that's "primitive" not the music. You could get closer to it with the kind of specialised notation systems developed by postmodern composers, which still can indicate hundredths of semitone, but you'll still be missing a substantial part of the **musical** content, not to mention the **feeling** of the thing. For one thing down-home blues singers rarely conform to the equal-tempered scale on the piano. Where classical oriented listeners hear a five-note scale, ears trained in post-John Cage or Asian or Arab music can hear an astonishing array of pitches, sung just above or just below where they'd fall on the piano. And careful listening reveals that these microtonal melodies within the melodies are being sung deliberately and systematically, not according to mere whim. One of the basic rules, which goes back to West African pitch-tone language, is that the more intense the emotion you want, the more you flatten the note, but that's only the beginning. And the play of cross-rhythms between finger-picking patterns, thumb-picked bass lines, syncopated vocal phrasing, and backbeat foot-stomping becomes, in the hands of a solo bluesman of Robert Johnson's caliber, a marvel of polyrhythms, strung accents, even (if you want to hear it that way) multiple meters....in a fundamental sense, Ornette Coleman is himself a bluesman. (Notes to Ornette Coleman beauty is a rare thing: the complete Atlantic recordings, 1993.)*



American writer Robert Palmer: 'Most of what they were hearing couldn't be written down in conventional musical notation, but it's the notation system that's "primitive" not the music'...

After moving to Los Angeles Coleman (25) met Don Cherry (21) cornet, Charlie Haden (22) bass, and Billy Higgins (19) drums. Both Cherry and Haden grew up in musical families: Cherry's dad owned a jazz bar, Haden's family played bluegrass and hillbilly music professionally, and had their own radio show. Between 22nd May 1959 and September 1961 Coleman made a series of documents: *The Shape Of Jazz To Come*, *Twins*, *The Art Of The Improvisers*, *Change Of The Century*, *To Whom Who Keeps A Record*, *This Is Our Music*, *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation By The Ornette Coleman Double Quartet*, and *Ornette!* On this last Scott La Faro replaced Haden in the quartet. On *Free Jazz*, Eric Dolphy, bass clarinet; Freddie Hubbard, trumpet; Scott La Faro, bass; and Ed Blackwell drums; augmented the original quartet.



Ornette Coleman is in front, then clockwise Billy Higgins, Don Cherry & Charlie Haden, pictured in 1987... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID GAHR

Jazz Abstractions: Compositions by Gunther Schuller & Jim Hall involved strings with Coleman as principal soloist. All compositions in these documents were originals by Coleman except *Embraceable You* (Gershwin/Gershwin) and *Abstraction and Variations on a Theme by Thelonious Monk* which were composed by Gunther Schuller. Whilst Lennie Tristano in 1949 issued two albums recorded by a quintet, *Intuition* and *Digression*, which were entirely improvised, the music had no vernacular rhythms, and just meandered in counterpoint.

Ornette Coleman's music introduced "free jazz" to the musical world. John Coltrane's *Ascension* was not recorded until 1965. Coltrane said:

I feel indebted to him (Coleman), myself. Because actually, when he came along, I was so far in this thing (harmonic structures), I didn't know where I was going to go next. And, I didn't know if I would have thought about just abandoning the chord system or not. I probably wouldn't have thought of that at all. And he came along doing it, and I heard it, I said, 'Well, that - that must be the answer'.

On *To Whom Keeps A Record*, the original compositions are *Music Always*, *Brings Goodness*, *To Us*, *All*, *P.S. Unless One Has, Some Other, Motive For Its Use*. When Coleman does perform a standard as he does on *This Is Our Music* with *Embraceable You* (Gershwin) he mocks the song in satirical pitch wavers and bent notes.

In terms of the appeal of "free" music or "freer" music - small group work sans piano - the double bass seems to me to be central to its appeal. This was the case when I first encountered Coleman's early work. Charlie Haden's bass was melodically inventive, harmonically rich, rhythmically strong, and just sounded so beautifully full. In 1980, he said:

*This particular language of improvisation is playing on the tune of a composition rather than open the chord structure of the composition when you improvise, and creating spontaneously your own chord structure, and playing **it together**. There aren't too many people who were raised in that way of playing. I know before I met Ornette I would have the feeling **not** to play on the chord changes; sometimes I wanted to play on the **feeling** of a piece. Every time I would do that people would get angry, they would lose their place. So I wasn't able to do that in a free kind of way until I met Ornette. He was doing it. And then when we all started playing together, it was a closeness that developed, not only musically, but as friends. (ibid Notes p 22).*



Charlie Haden: a closeness that developed, not only musically, but as friends... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Such small group work of each improvising continuously in response to each other and to how they feel and doing it together “beautifully” is a rare thing. (cf title of collected works.) These small group works of Coleman stand with Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis in their originality and influence.

My first 10” LP had a four-head-touching black and white photo on the cover, taken from above by William Claxton with Mulligan front, Chico Hamilton, to his left, Bob Whitlock to his right, and the impossibly handsome Chet Baker, at the back of his head with faces all looking up into Claxton’s camera.



Undoubtedly I was not alone in buying a record for its cover, and undoubtedly the combination of producer Richard Bock (Pacific Records) and William Claxton’s photos and design - his artistic sensibilities - were a major factor in that label’s success. The subtle but driving swing of Hamilton, the contrast between the grandfatherly baritone and the subdued sweet melody of the grand-daughterly trumpet, and the ruminative counterpoint, were irresistible and cool. Carson Smith’s and Joe Mondragon’s basses were pivotal to the pianoless sound. Wilbur Ware, of Jimmy Blanton alumni, contributed mightily to Sonny Rollins and his 1957 classic *A Night At The Village Vanguard* (Blue Note, 1996) where Rollins feels freer and more exploratory, out of the bebop mode and pianoless.



L-R, Gerry Mulligan, Bob Whitlock, Chico Hamilton, Chet Baker...

A more recent incarnation of the trio of bass, drums, tenor is Melissa Aldana on tenor; Pablo Menares on bass; and Francisco Mela on drums; on the document *Melissa Aldana & Crash Trio* (Concord, 2014), a programme of eight original compositions, and two standards *You're My Everything* (Warren/Young/Dixon) and *Ask Me Now* (Monk). Aldana performed at the Fifth International Women's Jazz Festival at Foundry 616 where John Shand noted at the end of her performance she "was a different creature, her sound bigger and her playing bolder and ten times as intense. Suddenly the music was raging" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3/11/16).



Melissa Aldana: at Foundry 616 the music was raging, according to John Shand... PHOTO COURTESY ROGER MITCHELL

Double bassist, composer, arranger and leader Ben Allison uses a trio on his *Union Square* (Abeatrecords, 2012), in a programme of nine original compositions and the Ellington tune *Wig Wise*, with Michael Blake on soprano or tenor, and Rudy Royston on drums.

Rudy Royston also performs with tenor saxophonist, composer and leader J D Allen, who has one of the most beguiling tenor sounds in modern music: full, rich, and so very confident, reminiscent of Sonny Rollins but distinctly original. The bass player is Gregg August on the document *I AM I AM* (Sunnyside, 2006). A later trio has Ian Kenselaar, bass; and Nic Cacioppo, drums; on *Barracoon* (Savant, 2019), nine originals plus *When You Wish Upon A Star* (Washington/Harline).

One of the most beautiful of all alto/bass/drums documents is that of Lee Konitz and his album *Motion* (Verve, 1961) with Konitz, alto; Sonny Dallas, bass; and Elvin Jones, drums. Jones had been performing with Coltrane the night before the *Motion* recording on 29/8/61 and retrained his usual powerful polyrhythmic playing, providing subtle support behind the melodic wanderings of Konitz, another instance of the genius of Elvin Jones which had me daydreaming many days ago when "free associating".



The artistic brotherhood of L-R, John Pochée (drums), Bernie McGann (alto saxophone) and Lloyd Swanton (double bass) must have engendered deep friendship...

Just as Dave Holland's double bass was crucial for Anthony Braxton's 1972 trio of Braxton, alto sax; Holland, double bass; and Phillip Wilson, drums; (hat ART, 1992), so Lloyd Swanton's double bass was crucial to the sound of the Bernie McGann trio. The artistic brotherhood of McGann, Pochée and Swanton must have engendered deep friendship, but extended also to production, where Swanton was a crucial moving force in the production of some of McGann's most important work on record.
