

## THE AUSTRALIAN JAZZ ORCHESTRA IN THE UNITED STATES

by Eric Myers

---

*[This is a slightly revised version of an article first published in the 2MBS-FM Programme Guide, August 1988. National Jazz Co-ordinator Eric Myers accompanied the Australian Jazz Orchestra on the two-weeks US tour, along with tour manager Peter Brendlé and sound engineer Lana Lazareff. This project was administered by the Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW, and financially assisted by the Australian Bicentennial Authority, the Australia Council, Philip Morris Australia, and the American Australian Bicentennial Foundation.]*

**T**he Australian Jazz Orchestra (AJO) spent two weeks in the United States from April 5-19, 1988. They began with three concerts in the open air to large audiences at the Houston International Festival on April 8, 9, and 10. Then it was on to Chicago, where the group performed on April 11 at the Jazz Showcase, a lovely jazz room that is part of the Blackstone Hotel.

On April 12, 13 and 14 the AJO performed in New York at a club called Carlos I, situated in Greenwich Village not far from the Village Vanguard and The Blue Note. April 15 saw the band in concert before an audience of over 400 at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

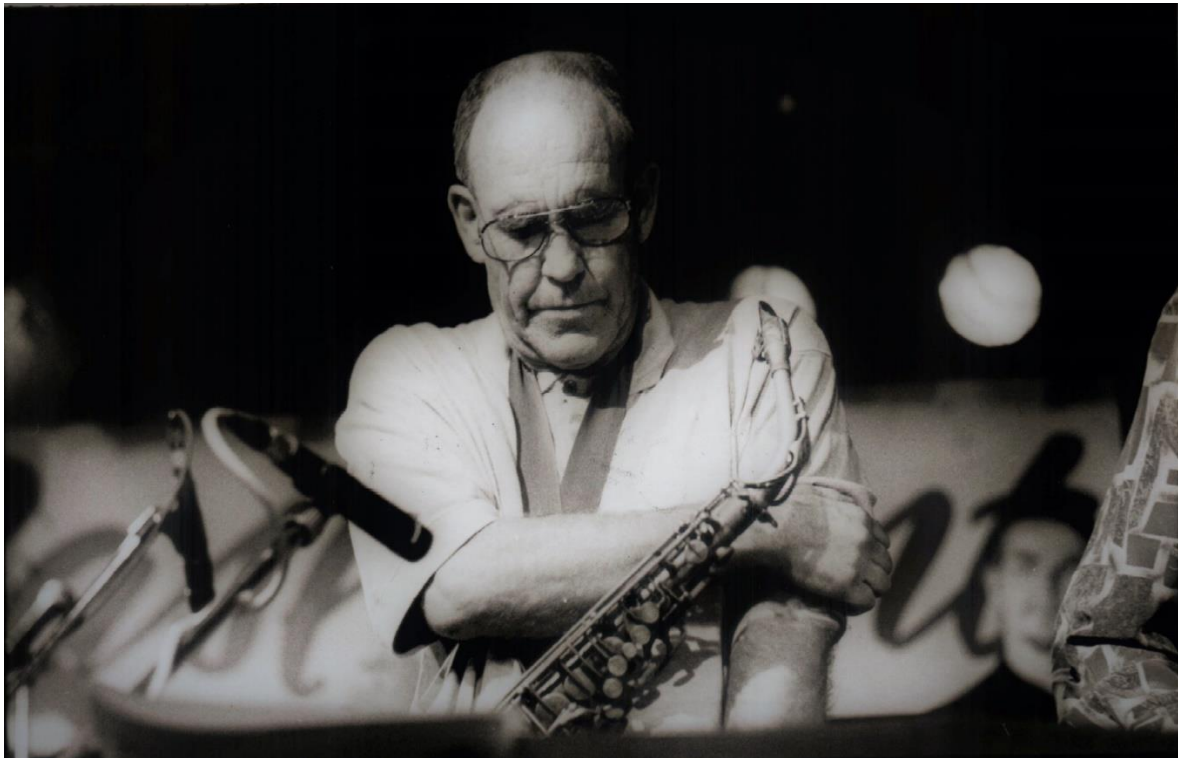
On April 17 they performed at a jazz club called Kimball's in San Francisco before going on to Los Angeles for the last performance of the tour, at Catalina's Bar and Grill on April 19.



*The AJO, rear L-R, Don Burrows, Dale Barlow, Warwick Alder, Paul Grabowsky, Alan Turnbull, Gary Costello, James Morrison. Front L-R, Bernie McGann, Bob Venier, Bob Bertles, Doug de Vries... PHOTO CREDIT BRANCO GAICA*

The AJO included the 11 musicians who had done the highly successful three-weeks tour of Australia in February/March, 1988: Warwick Alder (trt and flugel), Bob Venier (trt and flugel), James Morrison (trb, trt, tuba, euph), Bob Bertles (alto, bar and flute), Bernie McGann (alto), Dave Barlow (sop, ten and flute), Don Burrows (bar and flute), Paul Grabowsky (pno), Doug de Vries (gtr), Gary Costello (bs) and Alan Turnbull (drs), plus the trombonist Dave Panichi who joined the group in the States.

Panichi, who lived in New York and was resident with the group Blood, Sweat and Tears, was booked to replace James Morrison, who was unavailable for the tour after Houston. However, Morrison became available at the last moment and it was decided to retain him as well as Panichi for the whole visit.



*Bernie McGann: New York Post critic Lee Jeske described him as “a rangy, across-the-grain altoist...PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER*

Since the AJO has been back in Australia, it has become widely known that the tour was a successful one. That success was built on two aspects: audience reaction and reviews by the critics. In the case of the first, you will have to take my word for it. Wherever the AJO played — to the masses in the open air, to the more sophisticated ‘high culture’ audience as in Washington, or the cult following in a small jazz club such as Carlos I - we felt that the band had played very well.

The reaction to the AJO was always extremely positive, with some people expressing surprise that a modern jazz ensemble from Australia should be so accomplished. And so it should have been, for the band, thrown together in December, 1987, had developed into a good band in double-quick time. It probably was as good as one could expect, considering that it was an ‘administered’ group, put together to secure

funding from the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA) and to effect an historic collaboration between Sydney and Melbourne musicians.

Until this project was suggested to the ABA by Peter Brendlé and myself, by the way, the ABA had no plans to fund any jazz project during the Bicentennial year.

In advance of the Australian tour, the musicians had put together an excellent product: a wide repertoire of original music, or original arrangements of standards, which touched many bases, and was able to appeal to both the specialist jazz audience and the wider public. And, of course, the AJO included some of the most gifted soloists in Australian jazz. With this sort of combination, there was confidence that the group could succeed under any circumstances.



*James Morrison: He “slithered deftly through pools of darkness and light with sinuous phrasing that suggested Urbie Green with an occasional touch of Jack Teagarden in his tone...” PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

However, once in New York, we were apprehensive about the local critics. I wondered how many artistic careers had been nipped in the bud by unkind reviews in New York. I was aware that John S Wilson of *The New York Times* and Lee Jeske of *The New York Post* would be attending the opening night at Carlos I. I knew Jeske well, as I had met him in Sydney, and asked him to become New York correspondent for *Jazz Magazine*, where I was editor. But we were wary of what he and Wilson might say - until we saw the reviews on the morning of April 14.

In a nutshell, we were flabbergasted to see the reviews by Jeske and Wilson. They were not only positive, but downright laudatory. Singling out those who “served up stand-out solos”, Lee Jeske described Bernie McGann as “a rangy, across-the-grain altoist, on a tear through his own *Lazy Days*,” and referred to “rough loping, snaking lines and hit hard-as-nails Monk-ish chords.”

Later McGann was to be praised similarly praised by the critic from *The Los Angeles Times*, Zan Stewart, who referred to “the bravura soloists, who generated both substance and swing.” “Highlights abounded,” Stewart went on to say. “Altoist Bernie McGann’s *Lazy Days* swayed between medium and spritely tempos and steered the horns...”

In *The New York Post* Lee Jeske described Dale Barlow as “a young, confident tenor saxophonist whose tone is like a big embrace”. In LA subsequently, Stewart once again echoed Jeske: “Tenorist Dale Barlow used a rich, Coltrane-tinged sound to speak volumes, going from funky phrases to high-pitched wails and jack-rabbit bursts.”



*Dale Barlow: Described by Lee Jeske as “a young, confident tenor saxophonist whose tone is like a big embrace...” PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*



James Morrison was described by John S Wilson in *The New York Times* as “a fascinating trombone soloist... [He] slithered deftly through pools of darkness and light with sinuous phrasing that suggested Urbie Green with an occasional touch of Jack Teagarden in his tone.” Jeske referred to Morrison’s “wickedly swinging euphonium”, while Stewart said that “trombonist Morrison exhibited wit and virtuosity on *Jitterbug Waltz*... Later, [he] picked up the larger euphonium and blew mad, wonderful bebop at breakneck speed on reedman Bob Bertles’ *Blues For Clancy*.”



*Don Burrows on baritone: New York Times critic John S Wilson wrote: “...one could hear something of Gerry Mulligan, but from such a distance that it never became imitation.”*

Don Burrows’ solo on *Lace Embrace*, an impressive composition and arrangement by young Sydney writer Evan Lohning, elicited this comment from Wilson: “In [his] solo... one could hear something of Gerry Mulligan, but from such a distance that it never became imitation.” Stewart in LA said that “Don Burrows charged into the relaxed-yet-edgy *Lace Embrace* like a demon driver taking no rest stops, churning

out throaty whelps, careening lines and arpeggiated chords — all tied together into a dazzling multi-coloured whole.”

The Melbourne pianist Paul Grabowsky was another musician who tended to be singled out for special praise. “The orchestra rode,” said Wilson, “on the pulse of a brilliant rhythm section - relaxed but swinging with provocative background piano lines by Paul Grabowsky that gave ensemble passages an added dimension.” “[*Blues For Clancy*] ... began with a stunning five-chorus introduction by pianist Paul Grabowsky, who galloped up and down the keys with the precision and poise of Magic Johnson on a fast break,” said Stewart.



*Paul Grabowsky: another musician in the AJO who tended to be singled out for special praise... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER*

As well as the soloists, the critics praised in no uncertain terms the music itself and, significantly, the rhythm section. (I say “significantly”, for it is sometimes said that, in Australian jazz, we do not produce good rhythm sections). Grabowsky, Costello and Turnbull were, of course, a very effective combination for this sort of orchestra, “tight and in-step throughout”, to use Lee Jeske’s phrase.

The reactions of such critics cannot be overestimated. They have, after all, particularly in NY and LA, seen it all; and had the AJO been lame in any respect then I have no doubt that these critics, who are very blasé, would have had no hesitation in saying so. They praised the AJO because it was, in fact, a very impressive ensemble indeed.

I was not particularly impressed by the promotion and publicity done by those in the US who were entrusted with such tasks. Some audiences were very small, and we encountered many people who said that they had found out about the visit of the



AJO purely by accident, or through good fortune. Also, the group had some bad luck. In Chicago, the AJO played on a Monday night - an off-night anyway - but it was also Academy Awards night, a night on which the whole country stays at home. And in Los Angeles it rained, which effectively closed down the city. Over 20 tables were cancelled at Catalina's.



*The 11-piece Australian Jazz Orchestra plus two administrators who accompanied the tour of the USA: back row L-R, James Morrison, Paul Grabowsky, Dale Barlow, Bernie McGann, front row L-R, Gary Costello, Doug DeVries, Bob Venier, Bob Bertles, Alan Turnbull, Don Burrows, Warwick Alder, front crouching, L-R, manager Peter Brendle & Eric Myers, representing the host organisation, the Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW... PHOTO CREDIT BRANCO GAICA*

Still, it was that performance in LA, before an audience of no more than about 40 people, which drew the ultimate accolade from the critic Zan Stewart: he felt that the local jazz audience and the local musicians who missed the AJO, really missed something. "Sadly, the weather, lack of publicity or plain indifference kept the audience to a handful," he wrote. "Too bad, because local listeners and local musicians could have profited from the infusion of solid jazzmanship offered by these fellows from afar."