

THE AUSTRALIAN JAZZ EXPLOSION by Mike Williams. Photographs by Jane March. Angus & Robertson, 176pp, \$15.95.

Reviewed by Eric Myers

[This review appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on August 22, 1981]

In *Quadrant* last year Clement Semmler described the pianist Col Nolan as “the most dynamic keyboard artist in Australian jazz today.” Yet, the last time I saw Nolan, earlier this year, he had just left the group Galapagos Duck, and was working as a courier. While some wits might regard this as an example of upward social mobility, it illustrates how madcap and unpredictable is the world of Australian jazz. What normal, intelligent person would take on a career in such a shaky profession?



The pianist Col Nolan: the most dynamic keyboard artist in Australian jazz today was working as a courier... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

In *The Australian Jazz Explosion*, which deals with 32 jazz personalities, Mike Williams, jazz critic for *The Australian* and the *Daily Telegraph*, shows that — for the committed - a love of jazz is a powerful force of religious proportions. It is this that firmly unites his 32 subjects who otherwise might have little in common in terms of class, speech, occupation or whatever is usually the basis of group solidarity.

The book is not an interpretive work but a collection of transcribed interviews in which Williams allows his subjects, in stream-of-consciousness vein, to expound freely their musical values and reminisce about their lives in jazz. The results are riveting, entertaining and enlightening, and I doubt if any other art form in Australia could produce a richer collection of witty and outrageous personalities.

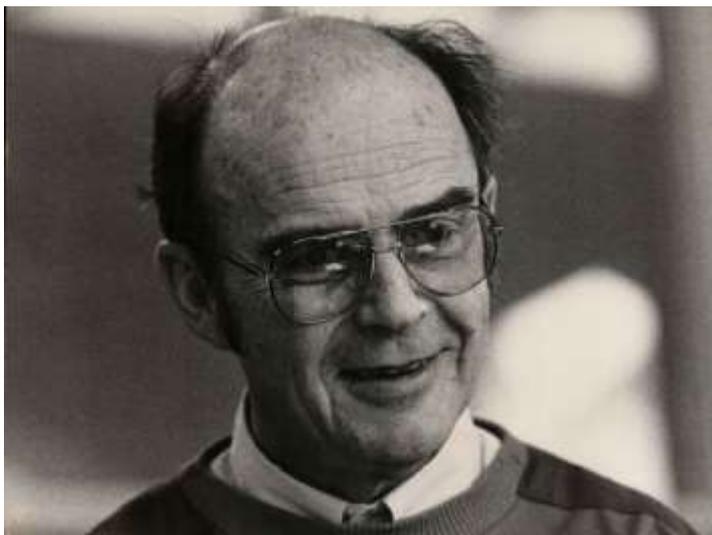
Dick Hughes, jazz performer and critic, bemoans the fact that some record companies stopped sending him certain records because he gave them such poor reviews. Yet Pablo Records also stopped sending him records because the company was embarrassed by his love for them.

“You review them so enthusiastically that people want them,” he was told. “So”, says Dick, “you lose both ways.”



Dick Hughes (centre) pictured here with ABC broadcaster Eric Child (right) and American trombonist Turk Murphy... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Many of the popular names are there — Burrows, Sangster, Judy Bailey, Graeme Bell, the Barnards, and the main figures in Melbourne jazz — but there are also curious omissions. Some will wonder why musicians such as Errol Buddle, George Golla, Col Nolan, Merv Acheson, John McCarthy and Paul Furniss, who would seem to suit the book’s orientation — celebrating the jazz establishment — are not included.



The guitarist George Golla: one of a number of curious omissions... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Mike Williams did speak with a number of musicians who, arguably, should have been there. I understand, however, that once in print, some of these interviews proved to be uninformative.

Apart from the chapter on Roger Frampton, the book does not approach the coterie of wayward and committed players whom I tend to think of as “the wild men of Sydney jazz,” as they were once described by the writer John Clare. This group would include Charlie Munro, Phil Treloar, Chuck Yates, Bernie McGann, Barry Duggan, John Pochée, Serge Ermoll and Stewart Speer.



Two of the ‘wild men of Sydney jazz’ not included in the book: the pianist Serge Ermoll (above) and the drummer Stewart Speer (below)... CREDIT FOR ERMOLL PHOTO PETER SINCLAIR



Often unencouraged, these men, some of the most vital and creative players in the country, strove for 20 years to pioneer modern jazz and keep the jazz flame alight, long before the present “explosion”. They rarely had commercial success or wide appreciation. It is sad that this fine book reinforces their lack of recognition.

Williams writes a short introduction for each musician. He makes many thought provoking observations which, due to the brevity of his comments, are left hanging in the air, unsupported. Speaking of Graeme Bell’s music of the 1940s, he writes:

The strutting, almost swaggering rhythms were evocative of the pioneering spirit of the outback, and the loosely constructed ensembles retained a rugged individualism.



Roger Bell (left) and Graeme Bell: their strutting, almost swaggering rhythms were evocative of the pioneering spirit of the outback...

Or, speaking of the Adelaide saxophonist Schmoe:

There is an obvious gentleness about him which is rare in jazz musicians, whose demeanour is often fashioned by the tough environments in which they are mostly forced to work.



The Adelaide saxophonist Schmoe: an obvious gentleness about him which is rare in jazz musicians...

Are these perceptive insights or fatuous generalisations? Perhaps Mike Williams will amplify them in a second book. Even so, *The Australian Jazz Explosion*, containing beautiful photography by Jane March, is an invaluable work.



Photographer Jane March (centre) pictured here in New York in 1982 with Village Vanguard owner Max Gordon (left) and (right) the pianist Cecil Taylor...

The outlines were first sketched onto the huge canvas that is Australian jazz by Andrew Bisset, in his 1979 book *Black Roots White Flowers*. Mike Williams has filled in some of the outlines, so that we are now developing an impressive literature on Australian jazz.