

***BODGIE DADA AND THE CULT OF COOL*** by John Clare/Gail Brennan. UNSW Press, Sydney, 1995. 218 pp.

**Reviewed by Eric Myers**

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If I know people in the jazz world, they will see what they want to see in *Bodgie Dada* which is a history of Australian jazz since 1945. It's certainly a multi-faceted book but, for me, it's above all a celebration of our jazz musicians since that year - and this book is a timely reminder, 50 years on, that they are well worth celebrating.

It's not that our musicians have created new idioms - only a handful of innovators have changed the course of the music internationally - but there are many great Australian musicians who have played jazz here with enormous spirit, and put their own individual imprints on the music. This has happened in both the major post-war streams in Australian jazz: the traditional revival; and the modern movement, which began with the arrival of bebop.

Those of us who've taken the trouble to listen to our best jazz musicians have been able to experience some very beautiful music - music that has inestimably enriched our lives. We owe a great debt to such musicians. Through their efforts jazz has played an enormously significant role in Australian cultural life, but at an underground level, largely unknown to the mainstream. Many such musicians can now be heard, by the way, on the accompanying two CD set of the same name that ABC Music has released. In the book John Clare describes hearing musicians like Brian Brown, Keith Hounslow, Ade Monsborough and Bob Barnard in person: "... Their playing linked me miraculously to the distant source."



*Brian Brown: hearing players like him in Melbourne linked Clare miraculously to the distant source... PHOTO CREDIT AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

Clare emphasises the solitary nature of his appreciation of jazz, which began in the mid-1950s: "Chet Baker and Miles Davis were handsome as film stars but played with tantalising subtlety in an idiom that none of my friends or neighbours could understand... I would have liked to share this new world with someone, but there was also a strange pleasure in having it all to myself. The lone jazz fan, I lived with frustration and secret pleasure". Little has

changed; even if there are more of us now, jazz fans are still outsiders in today's world and, oddly, we often have very little in common with each other, apart from our love of the music.



*Chet Baker: he and Miles Davis were handsome as film stars but played with tantalising subtlety... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM CLAXTON*

*Bodgie Dada* is also a history of those outsiders: the minority of music lovers who turned to jazz because it offered something more than commercial pop; young people whose modes of dress and interest in unusual musics brought them into close proximity with jazz, such as the bodgies and their female partners widgies who, in the early 50s, jived to the rhythm of various forms of music, and were attracted to jazz. According to the author, they should not be confused with the rock and rollers, who came a little later.

“West coast” or “cool” jazz, which appeared in the 1950s in Australia, featured very restrained and restricted rhythm section playing, unlike the more dynamic, intrusive rhythm sections of the New York hard-boppers. John Clare reports trumpeter Ron Falso’s view that the West Coast style surfaced here spontaneously: ‘We were playing the style for a while before we knew it was called West Coast. Don Burrows had just got his baritone saxophone... and someone said we sounded like Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker, but we’d never heard of that band.’ Similarly, the altoist Bernie McGann was later accused of sounding like Ornette Coleman before he had heard Coleman. Sometimes American innovations have been anticipated here; it’s typical of our cultural cringe that we have underestimated the creativity of our own players.

The apotheosis of cool was the Australian Jazz Quintet, active circa 1954-58 in the US, where it became the fifth highest paid band in the world after Armstrong, Brubeck, Mulligan and Shearing. It’s redolent of the marginalisation of jazz in our culture that the success of the AJQ was virtually unknown in Australia at the time, and is still unknown outside jazz circles. “It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that if an Australian film had been popular in America at that time, or an Australian opera singer, composer or popular singer, or an Australian painter, then this event would now be entering the mainstream cultural history of Australia.” writes Clare. “We would be seeing articles about it and features on arts programs.”



*Horst Liepolt: ze band voss swingkink und groovink... PHOTO CREDIT CLARITA LIEPOLT*

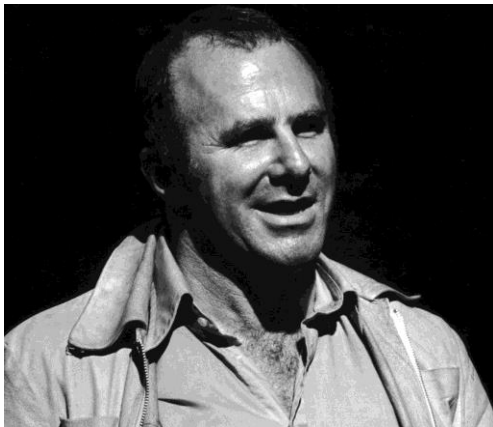
A central line running through the book is its representation of the various key jazz venues: Jazz Centre 44, and The Embers in Melbourne; El Rocco and The Basement in Sydney. Horst Liepolt's Jazz Centre 44, which opened in 1957, is beautifully evoked. Horst moved to Sydney and became Australia's most important jazz entrepreneur before going on to New York. His German accent was widely imitated: "Tell you vot, baby; ze band voss swingkink und groovink!" "And it was", adds the author.



*The legendary Frank Smith (left) pictured here with the trumpeter Ron Falson: The bright dazzle and fire of his alto lines are something I will never forget...PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE*

John Clare was there during significant periods of the music's evolution and therefore writes about it with authority. He heard the legendary Frank Smith - the Charlie Parker of Australia, according to Bob Bertles - at The Embers club which opened in 1959. "The bright dazzle and fire of his alto lines are something I will never forget", he writes. The historian who comes back later, trying to recapture the milieu of the music by reading the available documents and interviewing the musicians is at a disadvantage. "To me it was brighter than Technicolour and bigger than Cinemascope", Clare writes. "As the Mole in *The Wind In The Willows* stumbled upon the river for the first time and took it for a living creature with a glittering skin, I 'saw' the music in front of me in bright paths of energy. The overtones of acoustic instruments played at a heightened energy level were something I, and many of my generation, had never experienced."

"The most daring thing you could do in the late 1950s", Clive James once said, "was to listen to Errol Buddle at the El Rocco". By 1959 this Sydney coffee lounge had become the most famous modern jazz venue in the country. El Rocco, writes Clare, was "a sanctuary from the Cold War ethos, from an aggressively conformist suburbia in which bronzed Anzacs invited you outside to digest a knuckle sandwich if you accidentally said 'the magic word', in front of a sheila".



*Clive James: the most daring thing you could do in the late 1950s was to listen to Errol Buddle at the El Rocco...*

For many years jazz musicians have been poorly served by local critics and enthusiasts, some of them as ignorant and ideological as the musicians have been open and unprejudiced. In this context John Clare's writings - principally in the Fairfax press - have been a breath of fresh air, and central to an understanding of local jazz, particularly the modern scene (although I don't buy the common misrepresentation that he is biased in favour of contemporary jazz; in my experience, he has written often, and very fairly too, about traditional, swing, bop and other early forms of jazz). He now brings the clearheaded vitality of his music criticism to a very individual, riveting history of the music.

*Bodgie Dada & The Cult of Cool* does not pretend to be a scholarly work. There's no bibliography, and I can't remember a footnote. But if it's light on scholarship, it's rich in insight and atmosphere. "This is the underground of jazz, open to all," in the author's memorable phrase. John Clare has written a fine book which gives a brilliant overview of a very interesting jazz culture. But it also highlights the paucity of our historical writing on Australian jazz. If we are to develop a more comprehensive historiography as befits the energy in the music, future writers now need to build on Clare's achievements, and those of Bruce Johnson and Andrew Bisset before him. Such writers will need to go more deeply into certain important periods of the music's development, and research in more depth the lives and work of our most important musicians.