

CHILDREN OF FANTASY IN INDONESIA

by Eric Myers

This article appeared in the September/October, 1982, edition of the Australian Jazz Magazine. The Children of Fantasy tour of Indonesia was sponsored by Garuda Indonesian Airways, Multi Bintang Indonesia (Bintang Beer), the Jakarta Mandarin Hotel, P T Tritunggal Kristal (Kristal Productions) and the Kayu Api Bar and Restaurant, Bali. Eric Myers accompanied the tour as a guest of P T Tritunggal Kristal, Jakarta.

It is not unusual for brilliant jazz musicians to emerge at an early age. At 16 Stan Getz was already a virtuoso saxophonist and playing in a band with Jack Teagarden; our own Don Burrows was an outstanding player in his teens and celebrated his sixteenth birthday working at the Roosevelt Club in Sydney's King's Cross. Therefore, one has to be careful not to overestimate the talents of 16-year-old Indra Lesmana, the young Indonesian keyboards player and composer now living in Sydney.



Indra Lesmana at the keyboards: his dense chords, intensive tremolos and unlikely intervals reveal him as a true prodigy... PHOTO CREDIT RIZAL PAHLEVI FOKUS MAGAZINE

During the recent tour of Indonesia with his group Children of Fantasy, the word "genius" came up occasionally and I must say it made me feel uneasy. Despite the young man's great gifts, this description is somewhat premature. Still, since he came to Australia in 1979 Indra Lesmana has had his share of fulsome praise. Even at 13 he

was sounding like a seasoned and advanced jazz pianist. Don Burrows has said: "I have never seen a kid who plays with such maturity. He is a super pianist and a great composer." The American jazz educator Professor David Baker has said: "He is a monster ... and one in a million."

When Leonard Feather was in Sydney in January 1980 for the first Sydney International Music Festival he heard Indra and his father Jack Lesmana playing at The Basement. He was highly impressed by the baby-faced 13-year-old. "The high spot of my visit to that crowded, humid and happy room occurred when the amazing Indra Lesmana sat in, along with his father the guitarist Jack Lesmana," wrote Feather later in the magazine *Encore*. "The youngster's dense chords, intensive tremolos and unlikely intervals reveal him as a true prodigy. It is to be hoped that Sydney fans will help him earn the renown he deserves."



One of Indra Lesmana's two older sisters Mira Lesmana (left), pictured here with Dale Barlow... PHOTO CREDIT ERIC MYERS

Two-and-a-half years and many performances later, the Lesmanas are now well-known figures in Sydney jazz. Indeed the whole Lesmana family — it also includes Jack's wife Nina, and two daughters Lani, 21, and Mira, 18 — has done a great deal to bring Australia and Indonesia a little closer together. The Lesmanas are a friendly and hospitable clan, and there are many in the Sydney jazz world who speak warmly of the good times and excellent Indonesian food to be enjoyed at their house in Eastwood.

The invitation to go to Indonesia for three weeks to hear the performances of Indra Lesmana's group Children of Fantasy was therefore warmly accepted. It was an

opportunity, not only to hear some excellent music, but also to enjoy Indonesian culture (which was fascinating) in the company of the Lesmanas — a famous show business family in Indonesia, as I was to discover.

Other than Indra on keyboards the group included Jack Lesmana (bass guitar), Dale Barlow (flute and saxophones), Steve Brien (guitar), Harry Rivers (drums and vocals) and Tony Thijssen (percussion). It was therefore an interesting mixture of Australian and Indonesian musicians (plus an American) and the performances were an opportunity to present to Indonesian audiences for the first time the playing of three Australians who are busy performers in Sydney jazz.



Children of Fantasy performing at the Captain's Bar, Jakarta Mandarin Hotel. From left: Tony Thijssen, Harry Rivers, Dale Barlow, Jack Lesmana, Steve Brien, Indra Lesmana.

Dale Barlow has, for some time, enjoyed a reputation as one of the most brilliant of the new generation of players to have emerged in Sydney over recent years. He has been playing with the David Martin Quintet, the Bruce Cale Quartet, and very successfully with his own quartet The Benders every Thursday night at the Paradise Jazz Cellar.

Steve Brien has come to prominence chiefly as a member of the Keith Stirling Quintet, and has recently been playing in a group with the saxophonist Mark Simmonds at the Paradise. The evergreen Harry Rivers is one of Sydney's busiest jazz drummers. For some years he has led the late band Rivers and Co at The Basement (12-3 am) on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Tony Thijssen, an American

drummer and percussionist who hails from Los Angeles, completed the group. He played judicious percussion throughout the tour and also took over the drums when Harry Rivers came to the front of the stage to sing two of the group's point numbers – *Moments Of Paradise* and *Children Of Fantasy* – two impressive Latin/jazz fusion numbers composed by Indra Lesmana with lyrics by Mira Lesmana.



Guitarist Steve Brien (above) has come to prominence chiefly as a member of the Keith Stirling Quintet, while drummer Harry Rivers (below, centre), pictured here with Col Nolan (left) and Andy Brown (bass) has, for some years, led the late band Rivers and Co at The Basement (12-3 am) on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights....



With this personnel Children of Fantasy were bound to be a good group. And they were. They had rehearsed solidly in Sydney and also done a night at The Basement on August 5, coming on after Galapagos Duck and playing two hours of original music which went over well to the Duck fans. Even the presence of a last-minute replacement could not disguise the quality of their music. Ken James came in on flute and saxophones in place of a sick Dale Barlow, and sighted the charts with consummate skill.

As Children of Fantasy's repertoire was based almost wholly on original compositions by Indra Lesmana, their music was unfamiliar to the Indonesian audiences who have heard very little hardcore jazz. The Indonesians are well aware of commercial, soft/funk jazz, which they like very much, but I did not sense much awareness of the sort of contemporary jazz that incorporates recent developments in the art form. Some of Children of Fantasy's music therefore tended to go over the heads of the Indonesians; but I will go into this later.

There was one thing going for the group, however: Chick Corea is popular in Indonesia, as he is everywhere. This was an important factor, as Corea is one of Indra Lesmana's idols, and the batch of compositions used on this tour was highly reminiscent of the sort of Latin/jazz fusion music which the American put out during the 1970s. So, if Children of Fantasy were not playing familiar tunes, they were at least working within a familiar idiom.

The influence of Chick Corea on the young Indonesian is perhaps the key to his present stage of development. When Indra stretches out on the mini-moog synthesiser, it is Chick Corea's style which immediately comes to mind. Like Corea he rockets along with brilliant technique, and solos with the sort of impatient intensity that suggests he has long ago left behind the uncertainty of an exploratory beginner.



Indra Lesmana: like Chick Corea he solos with the sort of impatient intensity that suggests he has long ago left behind the uncertainty of an exploratory beginner... PHOTO COURTESY PETER SMETANA

Like Corea he has a somewhat playful attitude towards the moog, adroitly using the left-hand modulation knob to bend his high notes, so that his improvisations whistle along from one exciting peak to another. I would go so far as to say that Indra has largely mastered the musical language of Chick Corea. And as Corea has so many creative areas of modern jazz covered, one could hardly suggest a better model.

Thus, Indra is also quite a mature solo pianist, as he showed on this tour whenever he had the use of a good grand piano. Moreover, he is an excellent exponent of comping, or articulating a rhythmic background on the keyboards behind the soloists (an art in itself, and one which is often neglected by otherwise excellent pianists).

An enduring image of this tour, which I will long remember, is that of the 16-year-old boy egging on his bassist father, building the rhythmic patterns together to powerful peaks. Indra Lesmana is probably, in relation to Chick Corea, at a similar stage to that of the teenage Charlie Parker when the saxophonist was transcribing Lester Young's solos and learning the Master's licks. Whether he can now go on, as Parker certainly did, to develop into a great jazz musician, with his own individual voice, is a question for the future.



Jack Lesmana (left) with Indra: the 16-year-old boy was egging on his bassist father, together building the rhythmic patterns to powerful peaks...PHOTO COURTESY VICTORIA GASTON

In Jakarta Children of Fantasy played two concerts in the auditorium of the city's major arts centre, Taman Izmail Marzuki (known locally as the TIM); a nightly engagement at the Captain's Bar in the Mandarin Hotel, plus three major concerts in the hotel's ballroom; and an outdoor performance at Pasar Seni Jaya Ancol, a market area and arts centre near Jakarta's main beach.

Their opening concert was at the TIM on the evening of August 9. On the afternoon of that day there was an interesting event: a short performance for the Indonesian censor — a representative of the Government who came out to hear the kind of music being played and to check the identity of the Australians in the group. The Government keeps a close watch on all visiting artists. In the past, unethical promoters have sent bogus tapes in order to acquire visas and work permits, then sent the wrong musicians and artists. Children of Fantasy passed the test, and the concert was allowed to proceed.



The sextet Children Of Fantasy, posing for a publicity shot in the foyer of the Jakarta Mandarin Hotel, L-R, Harry Rivers, Indra Lesmana, Steve Brien, Dale Barlow, Jack Lesmana, Tony Thijssen...

The stage set-up in the TIM theatre was evidence of the care and exhaustive planning put in by the promoters P T Tritunggal Kristal. Behind the group was an extraordinary backdrop, featuring a huge, round Children of Fantasy logo suspended in space over a curved horizon, like a ball suspended in space. It was somewhat reminiscent of the famous photograph of the Earth, snapped from outer space against the horizon of the moon. With lighting bringing up the colours, a stunning stage environment was achieved, with an effective three-dimensional effect.

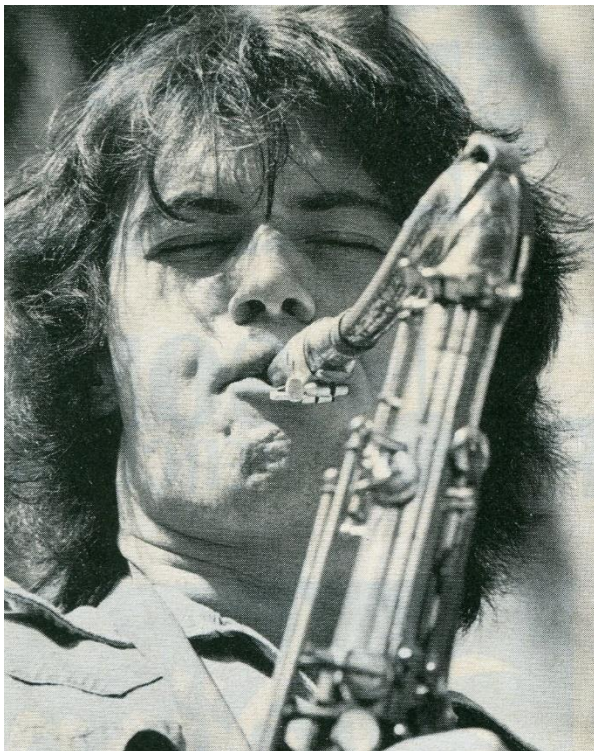
The first performance was as good as any on the tour. Dale Barlow took the trouble to learn "selamat malam" (Indonesian for "good evening") which he delivered with some aplomb when he was introduced. A nice touch which was appreciated by the

audience. The band played beautifully; its energy was infectious, and the audience reaction enthusiastic. If there were any problems they were related to the amplification being used and the efficiency of the sound technicians.

I don't wish to make too much of the sound problems that tended to recur throughout the tour. The technicians battled along with old, battered sound systems, and were doing their best. But there were problems. The musicians in Children of Fantasy often played under circumstances where, for example, they could not hear themselves adequately. Miscellaneous sound problems were inevitable. Sometimes the bass guitar was oppressively loud; sometimes the guitar and bass guitar created a muddy sound which was too strong for the other instruments; sometimes Dale Barlow's flute and saxophone solos did not cut through clearly. Etcetera.

I mention these things not merely to be negative. When it is all said and done music, to the listener, is merely sound. A sound system is just a delivery system and if the sound is faulty, no matter how well the music is played, how can the performer communicate adequately with the listener?

Be this as it may, the sound problems were not disastrous. The band played daily, and there were, of course, many occasions when the sound was excellent, the solos carried tellingly, and the music came through beautifully. These problems never detracted from the exuberance of the band, and audiences always reacted warmly and positively to the music.



Barlow: he tended to confront the Indonesian audiences with a hard-edged and uncompromising modern tenor style – a product of the post-Coltrane era... PHOTO COURTESY JAMM MAGAZINE

After the Jakarta stint, Children of Fantasy travelled to Bali for two performances at the Kayu Api Bar and Restaurant and – the final performance in Indonesia – a

concert for Radio Republik Indonesia in the capital of Bali, Denpasar. This last concert was recorded, to be broadcast at a later date. In many ways it was the ultimate concert for the group. The sound was excellent, and the band was hot, striving to get the last ounce of juice out of the repertoire they had been performing for three weeks.

Often I was surprised that the music went over so well given the Indonesians' apparently limited awareness of jazz. One has to consider that Dale Barlow does not have a light, commercial, easily internalised style. He tended to confront the Indonesian audiences with a hard-edged and uncompromising modern tenor style — a product of the post-Coltrane era. One might think that an audience needs to be aware of modern developments on the tenor to fully appreciate his approach: searing, guttural lines in the lower register; blistering runs of sixteenth notes over the whole horn; and honks and squeals which take him out of the instrument's normal range. Yet his playing was warmly accepted and applauded.

As a professional jazz writer who usually attends one-off performances, I found this trip a unique opportunity to hear a working group night after night, warts and all — the good nights with the bad. It was fascinating to observe the development in the players, and the evolution of the music over the period of the tour. Steve Brien, whom I had considered merely as a busy, highly technical guitarist when he was with Keith Stirling, played many lovely solos where he paced his ideas carefully, leaving himself enough space to savour the singing quality which is possible on the electric guitar. *Forty-Niners*, a gentle, laid-back tune and one of Indra Lesmana's best compositions, was designed to feature Steve's guitar playing, and I found myself looking forward to it every night.



Guitarist Steve Brien (far right), pictured with the Keith Stirling Quintet at the Sydney Jazz Festival in 1982. Others, L-R, Jay Stewart (piano), Stirling (trumpet), Craig Scott (bass). Drummer Ron Lemke is behind Brien... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

The Children of Fantasy tour was an event which Jack Lesmana could approach with some pride. After three years in Australia, he was bringing a group back to his homeland to show the locals that his 16-year-old son had developed into a superb jazz musician. Jack is, of course, one of the handful of musicians which has kept the spirit of jazz alive in Indonesia over the last 30 years.

There is a small, but vibrant, jazz scene in that country — visitors to Jakarta should not miss the Jaya Pub, which is a mixture of the Paradise Jazz Cellar and The Basement rolled into one — and a great many of the working musicians in Jakarta are former pupils of Jack's. The surrounding players were impressive, but it was Indra Lesmana who commanded the most interest (and incidentally, the most attention from the press).

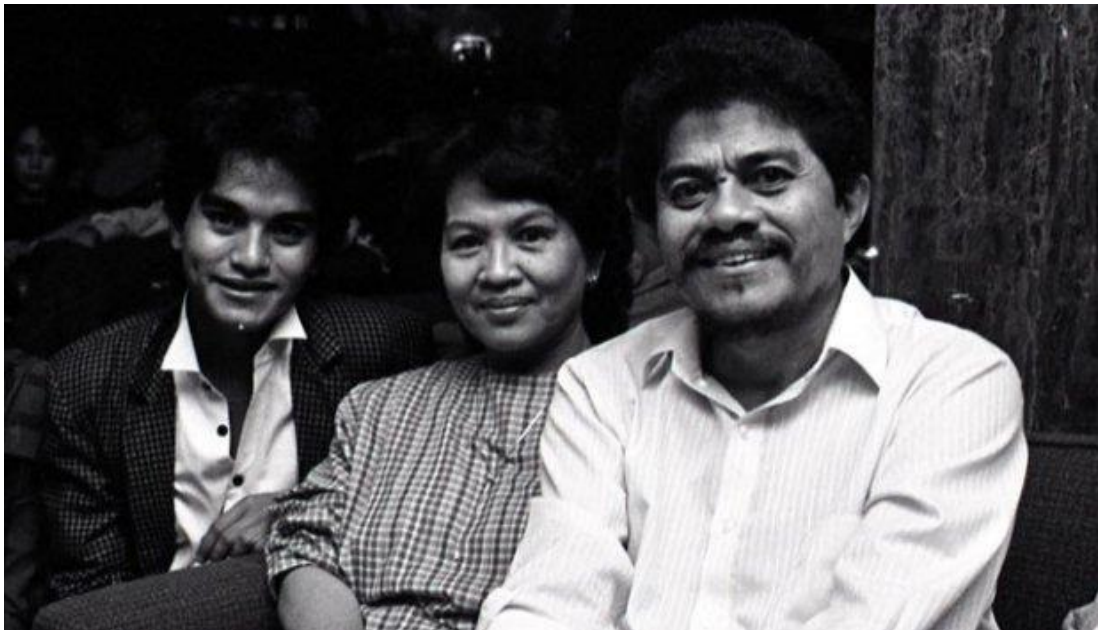
Throughout the three weeks, his head-over-heels development was quite apparent. I would suspect that this tour has exhausted, at least for the moment, his taste for Latin/jazz fusion of the type being played. He was always taking his solos a little further out, always extending what he had played in earlier performances. He is unquestionably a chronic searcher for new ways of expressing himself — the essence of jazz.



Morning tea with the ambassador. Back row from left: Gavan Bromilow (Australian Cultural Attache, Jakarta), Mrs Bromilow, Tony Thijssen, Nina Lesmana, Steve Brien, Australian Ambassador Frederick Rawdon Dalrymple, Jack Lesmana, Mrs Dalrymple. Front row from left: Indra Lesmana and Harry Rivers (with children of Mr and Mrs Bromilow), Dale Barlow... PHOTO CREDIT MARGARET SULLIVAN

The Children of Fantasy tour was a significant event in a number of senses. Firstly, within Indonesia, it was an experimental venture, designed to promote a sophisticated form of Western jazz. There was, on the part of P T Tritunggal Kristal, a certain amount of idealism involved. The promoters saw themselves, if not as educators of the public, then as a vanguard force in introducing new music to the Jakarta audiences. Secondly, the fact that the group included Australian and Indonesian musicians working together was an important step forward for cultural relations between our two countries, particularly at a time when Australian journalists are banned in Indonesia. In what other Asian country are Australian musicians touring and playing with the indigenous musicians?

The significance of the visit was reinforced when the Children of Fantasy party was received for Sunday morning tea by the Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, Mr Frederick Rawdon Dalrymple and his wife, at their residence. Thirdly, the visit underlined what has become increasingly clear over recent years: that jazz is no longer merely an American, or even Western, art form. For many years Anglo-Saxon countries other than the USA have produced great jazz musicians. The fact that fine jazz musicians, like Jack and Indra Lesmana, are now emerging from Asian countries too, indicates that jazz is now unquestionably a truly international music.



Indra Lesmana (left) with his mother Nina and father Jack: the Lesmanas were a famous show business family in Indonesia, as we were to discover...

Finally, my hat goes off to P T Tritunggal Kristal, the organisation which put so much care and honest effort into making the tour a success. Things can go wrong easily on any tour but, on this one, the arrangements went smoothly, and our Indonesian hosts went to great lengths to consider our comfort and convenience. My thanks in particular to Mung Restiaga, Managing Director of Kristal.