

JIM KELLY & MICK KENNY: BACKBONE OF CROSSFIRE

by Eric Myers

[When this article was published in the July/August, 1982 edition of Jazz Magazine, Crossfire had just left Australia on its second overseas tour administered by Musica Viva, and assisted by the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Music Board of the Australia Council. They were to play in Bombay on July 13, 1982, and at the Montreux Jazz Festival, Switzerland, on July 16; they were to give two concerts at the North Sea Festival, The Hague, on July 17. On July 19, 20 and 21, they were to support the American trumpeter Wynton Marsalis at Ronnie Scott's club in London. On July 30 and August 1 they performed in Hungary, and then went on to New York and Los Angeles for dates at various jazz clubs. Crossfire's repertoire consisted of their own original music, written by their keyboards player Mick Kenny and guitarist Jim Kelly. Before the tour, they spoke with ERIC MYERS.]

Crossfire is not just another Australian group. Formed in 1974, the band now has a longevity which makes it part of the establishment in Australian music. Over eight years, its personnel has been surprisingly stable. Mick Kenny (keyboards), Jim Kelly (guitar) and Ian Bloxsom (percussion) have been there since the beginning. Greg Lyon, the original bassist, is now back with the group after a two-year break, when the bass chair was filled by Phil Scorgie. Tony (Spoons) Buchanan is only the second saxophonist Crossfire has had (the first was Don Reid). The drum chair has seen the most changes but, in eight years, there have been only four drummers: John Proud, Doug Gallacher, Steve Hopes and now Mark Reilly.



Crossfire L-R, Greg Lyon (bass), Jim Kelly (guitar), Mark Reilly (drums), Tony Buchanan (saxophones), Ian Bloxsom (percussion), Mick Kenny (keyboards)...

The group has five LPs to its credit: *Crossfire*, *Crossfire Direct To Disc*, *East Of Where*, *Michael Franks Live With Crossfire* and their new release *Hysterical Rochords*. In 1978 they did their first tour of Asia for the Department of Foreign Affairs; in 1980 they accompanied the American singer/composer Michael Franks on his Australian and New Zealand tour; in 1981 they made up the group which toured Australia with the American musicians Lee Ritenour and Don Grusin. Just last month they backed the American singer/pianist Ben Sidran.

‘Jazz/rock fusion’ is an inadequate term, which no-one is happy with, yet it is probably the best we can do to describe the mixture of idioms in Crossfire’s music. Certainly they find themselves between ‘jazz’ on the one hand, and ‘rock’ on the other. They have in common with jazz harmonic complexity and challenging chord structures in their instrumental songs, plus group and solo improvisation; they have in common with rock sophisticated rhythmic patterns derived from funk and soul music, and electric instruments. There are other influences — for example, the music of several classical composers which comes into Crossfire via Mick Kenny.

Original: From talking to Jim Kelly and Mick Kenny, one finds that the group has always had two basic aims: to have fun; and to play original music. For many years they have played only compositions by Kenny and Kelly. Both men feel that they have something to say, and that their music is important. Also they are concerned with how their music is played. They don’t copy records — which is still done so much in Australian music — or ape the styles of overseas musicians.



Guitarist Jim Kelly: playing in Crossfire saps our energies...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Says Jim Kelly:

Playing in Crossfire saps our energies. Almost every other band you play in, without fail will play a couple of originals, and the rest are songs you've got on a record at home. So you've got your reference point. Every time Crossfire plays there is no reference point for any of the songs, other than your own imagination. That's what drains your energy; that's why a lot of guys have found it a bit tough being in Crossfire. No reference points. And Mick and I don't want to hear them in our songs — we don't want to hear what Steve Gadd played...

The group has always tried to get that spontaneous interaction in their music which comes from sympathetic listening and reacting flexibly to the playing of the others. Mick Kenny likes the idea, devised by a European composer whose name he doesn't recall, of every musician having the written score in front of him at a rehearsal, minus his own part. "That sort of idea really appeals to me with a band like Crossfire, because once you have all the information, you have to forget it," he says.

"One thing I think about a lot is getting the guys to stop playing their instruments," says Jim Kelly. "Don't play the drums in this song — don't play the bass — play the song! That's an important part of making music to me. I've no interest in technique per se, in chops, in speed and that. But just play the music, not the instrument."



Mick Kenny: a day doesn't go past without playing some Bach... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Roots: Mick Kenny was born in 1951 and grew up in St Mary's, on the outer reaches of Sydney's working class Western Suburbs. He came from a musical family. His father Tom Kenny played (and still plays) trumpet in various big bands, mainstream groups, brass bands and community orchestras, so there was plenty of music in the home. Mick's older brother Peter is a brilliant keyboard player who is best known for his work as musical director and arranger for the entertainer Reg Livermore.

Mick attended the Conservatorium High School in Sydney, where he studied trumpet, pipe organ and piano:

I studied classical music for a long time, and I love a lot of composers . . . like Bach. A day doesn't go past without playing some Bach. For a long time, Erik Satie; a lot of the French composers of that period, Debussy and Ravel. I've been listening to a lot of Stravinsky lately. Messiaen is another composer I like . . . Beethoven . . . everyone.

Mick Kenny might have had a career in classical music had it not been for other musics around in the mid-1960s, which captured his attention: soul and funk, for instance, and the jazz of Miles Davis and others. "So what happened?" says Jim. "Mick came from the classical thing, and the backbeat grabbed him by the throat. It's that rhythmic thing . . ." By the age of 16, Mick Kenny was playing trumpet with various club bands and rock groups around the city.

Jim Kelly was born in 1950 in Sydney and spent most of his childhood in the beach suburbs north of Sydney — Narrabeen, Dee Why. He took up the guitar fairly late, at 15, and has no illusions as to his earliest musical influence. "Right from the beginning", he says, "That's easy — the Shadows. I mean every song." He was a



Kerrie Biddell: it was she who played Jim Kelly a record of Shelley Manne, Ray Brown, Andre Previn and Herb Ellis...PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN

rhythm guitarist in high school bands and, ironically, for a man who is now one of the most splendid lead guitarists in Australian music, was not interested in playing improvised solos for many years. He liked the Rolling Stones, the Kinks and the Beatles. He was a member of the group The Affair, which entered one of the Hoadley's 'Battle of the Sounds' contests, and won a trip to the UK in 1969. The group also included a young Kerrie Biddell:

I can always remember it was Kerrie who played me a record of Shelley Manne, Ray Brown, Andre Previn and Herb Ellis, and they played a tune I had heard as a kid, Bye Bye Blackbird. When I heard them play that in a jazz style and take solos on it, I couldn't believe it — it turned my head around. I was about 17 at the time. I've had a nice interest in jazz since then.

Other influences have been Wes Montgomery, Jimi Hendrix and, more recently, Larry Carlton and Lenny Breau ("the greatest player I've ever heard on the guitar").

Crossfire's birth: Jim Kelly and Mick Kenny first met about 12 years ago when they played together in a band, Levi Smith's Clefs, at Chequers, shortly after that hallowed Sydney nightclub was transformed into a rock venue. Mick remembers the band as "one of Barry McKaskill's benefit societies for out-of-work musicians". Shortly after, they were together in SCRA — Peter Martin's group the Southern Contemporary Rock Assembly, which made two LPs and was, for a time, the most exciting large rock outfit in Sydney music. From that time, their playing careers have intertwined. They worked together for some time in Hong Kong, where they first met the bassist Greg Lyon, who had come from Japan.

After Hong Kong, Jim came back to Sydney, while Mick and Greg went on to England for a year. It was when they were all back in Australia in 1973 that they began thinking about forming a band which might explore the 'fusion' idiom. At that time, the music of the Crusaders and Tom Scott's LA Express was in the air.

The group that Jim Kelly was working with at the Lifesaver in Bondi, needed a horn player. Kelly suggested that they hire Mick Kenny on electric flugel horn:



Crossfire performing in Mumbai, India in 1982. L-R, Greg Lyon, Jim Kelly, Mark Reilly, Ian Bloxson, Tony Buchanan, Mick Kenny...

Mick joined the band and soon after we started getting ideas. That sound [of the amplified flugel horn] unleashed a particular thing in us, that we had to stop playing this R & B music, and do something else. The Tom Scott LA Express album, the one with the belt buckle on the cover, really kicked us off. We played some tunes that the people at the Lifesaver wouldn't have to stop jumping up and down to — they could keep going. Crossfire was born out of that, in a way.

The seminal influences were clear. It was Greg Lyon in Hong Kong who had introduced Kenny to the music of The Crusaders — former jazz players in the US who had dropped the ‘jazz’ from their original name, The Jazz Crusaders, and were now in the forefront of the funk and soul movement. On the very night Greg and Mick arrived in London they had gone straight to a concert hall and heard Joni Mitchell, backed by Tom Scott and the LA Express. The music grabbed them. “That was it, I reckon”, says Mick.



Ian (Blocko) Bloxsom: one of the most extraordinary understanders of idioms and moods of music... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

The name Crossfire is, in fact, a tune from the Crusaders LP *Unsung Heroes*. Still, it is interesting that, although The Crusaders and Tom Scott are crucial influences, Mick Kenny and Jim Kelly have, over the years, outgrown the music of their heroes. Now they're not excited by the music put out by such groups, including other groups that have become associated with the fusion idiom, like Spyro Gyra. Says Jim Kelly:

When people talk about fusion music, and they say this particular electronic marriage to jazz is no longer happening — and they lump us into that thing — I get irate, because for me it's a real idiom. When I hear Spyro Gyra, guys like that, I reckon they're giving me a bad name. I really must say that because, to my ears, their music is nonsense . . . it might be a lot of fun to record, but to go and play it night after night... I'd go and dig a hole first.

A unique spirit: Since the beginning of Crossfire, there has been a unique spirit in the group. It is not easy to define, although it is obvious to anyone who has seen them perform. It has something to do with good vibrations within the group, and perhaps a quiet conviction that their music is important. The more perceptive writers have tried to come to grips with it. John Clare, writing in *Nation Review*, September 3, 1978, put it this way:

Crossfire rehearses at their manager's place, a house of wind chimes and gentle chaos. They are soft people mostly, but not dreamy. They are well-organised and down to earth. Relaxed is what they are, and their music is relaxed and cleanly exhilarating, and they leave you, as the Beach Boys do, with an impression of blondness and brown skin, though there is no blond member of the band and none of them is very tanned.

When you observe Mick Kenny, Jim Kelly and Ian Bloxsom together, you realise what they have always wanted for Crossfire: to be a band of brothers. "That's why it's gone on so long," says Jim. "With a minimum of jumping up and down as well. Even when the guys have left; whatever's happened, there's never been any animosity. You have your little things, sure, but by and large, Crossfire's been a happy band, absolutely. It's important to the music. You must feel nice towards each other."

When the band has been doing a major concert or a recording session, Mick and Jim have always tried to inculcate a certain procedure: rehearsal and sound-check, then a meal and wine together before the actual performance.

Kelly: Then when you get back, you're buzzing.

Kenny: Communication . . . You're all in the same spot. Even making the albums, that's when we get the best takes. You spend all day getting the sound, you screw around all day, and it's not quite there. Everyone is playing okay but it just needs everyone to relax. The dinner thing, the communal meal, a few bottles of wine. . . You go and play, and sure enough it's there. You get the take within one or two afterwards.

Blocko: If Crossfire is a band of brothers, then the big brother is the evergreen percussionist Ian (Blocko) Bloxsom. Bloxsom is probably somewhere in his early or mid-forties, but he is ageless. It seems somehow irrelevant to ask how old he is. He plays percussion with another good local group — the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. He therefore brings a wealth of musical experience to Crossfire.

Kelly: Blocko is one of the most extraordinary musicians and understanders of idioms and moods of music that I've met. . .

Kenny: Yeah . . . improviser. His silence is as important as his playing. He's one of the few percussion players I've heard who understands that one.

Most of them, it's like playing with the panelbeater. He knows how to utilise the silence and react to things going on around him. His instruments are so varied, his musical experience is huge.

Kelly: Unbelievable. He's a morale booster. I feel sorry for every band that hasn't got Blocko in it. Most bands need Blocko.

Mick and Jim relate the story of how, a couple of years ago, they heard Ian Bloxsom play the drums in a jam session in Brisbane with the trumpeter Bob Barnard and the American stride pianist Ralph Sutton. Bloxsom revealed a musical side that even his closest musical friends had never heard:

Kelly: For me, that piano player was just magnificent. And Blocko . . . you should have heard what he played for those guys! I just stood there — I could not believe what he played.

Kenny: There was no bass player, just Ralph Sutton, Bob Barnard and Blocko. It was insane — just playing brushes.

Kelly: He even showed a side that, in all the years, I'd never even seen that one. I knew it was there, but I hadn't heard him do it. I heard him do it with those guys . . . so heartfelt. Maybe Blocko's a bit wider than all of us. He knows it from The Who to Zappa, and back to the trad bands. He can tell you the names of all the people, and he loves it.

Kenny: Coltrane's Ascension and all that stuff, he knows it. It's all gone in.



The American pianist Ralph Sutton: hearing Ian Bloxsom jamming with him and Bob Barnard was a revelation...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Hysterical Rochords: Mick Kenny and Jim Kelly are particularly proud of their new LP. It is the first of their many albums that they are happy with. A great deal of thought went into the arrangements of their pieces, the length of the solos and so on, and with engineer Martin Benge, they put much work into getting the best sound possible out of their instruments in the recording studio.

“Crossfire has come to terms much more with record-making,” says Kelly. “We used to carry our Basement gig into the recording studio — which isn’t a bad thing — but when you think of the competition, what’s going on in the real world of recording, and the sort of area we’re in, you can’t do that. You have to compete on a record level, editing a lot of stuff out, just getting down to the nitty-gritty, to the essence of the pieces. We had to change a lot of our thinking in regard to how to make a record — a bit more layering this time, and thinking ahead. . . It’s different to playing live. The mix that Mick and I make on the record is the mix that we would like you to hear sitting out the front as an audience.”



Recording engineer Martin Benge: much work put into getting the best sound possible out of their instruments in the recording studio...

Unsuitable: Crossfire has existed for eight years now. It hasn’t been easy. The major problem, of course, has been finding enough work to justify the band’s continued existence. Even in a town like Sydney, where music has been booming, the venue bookers have always preferred bands playing safe, familiar, commercial stuff rather than original music.

The band has often found itself in a no-man's land between jazz and rock, regarded as unsuitable for both types of audience. The promoter Horst Liepolt, when he controlled The Basement and other venues, boasted for some years that there were two groups he would never employ: Crossfire and Kerrie Biddell's Compared To What. He believed that neither played jazz. In recent times, however, both groups have appeared regularly at The Basement.

Also, despite being probably the most outstanding group in Australia in their chosen idiom, Crossfire are largely ignored by many leading musicians in related fields. I asked if, say, the established jazz musicians dropped by to their gigs to say hello and listen to their music. Answer: definitely not. "There are two different camps," says Mick, "we're in between".

"I reckon we're the enemy for a lot of those people", says Jim. "I have to say it. It's a bit of a worry. What saddens me is that when those guys come to me — and I find it a lot with bebop and mainstream players — and have some derogatory term for the word 'fusion', man, all I can say to them is, 'But I love your music'. I love the bebop, I love Barney Kessel's jazz, and Miles Davis's jazz. I like all that, and I like fusion as well. I like all of it, but this is the one I choose to play. Whereas I feel they worship one idiom, and have no time at all for the others. That upsets me.

"Man, the bebop thing is gone. People must come to terms with this. You can play it as good as Charlie Parker, maybe even a quarter of an inch better, but it still doesn't matter these days. It's finished. Listen to it, and love it, but don't worry about trying to play it. There's something else to be played; it's not really necessary. I feel really strongly about that. There's nothing wrong with roots, but trying to re-create what happened in 1957, or 1942, is bizarre."

It has taken a great amount of idealism and persistence on the part of Mick Kenny and Jim Kelly to enable Crossfire to survive and become an important force in Australian contemporary music. I actually began the interview with these two men by asking why they had put so much into it for so long. Jim Kelly's retort was firm:

You ask 'why?' I'd like to say 'why not?' I think it's a little bit of an Aussie attitude, 'hey man, there's nothin' happening around here' but most people don't check out themselves to see why it isn't. There are certain things you must do to have a band like Crossfire, or any good band that plays original music, and that takes time and energy, and everybody pulling with the one thing in mind. I find that a lot of the guys want to talk about it, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of putting in the energy and finding the time, then it's a different matter. I say 'why not?'

Other articles on this website which may be of interest:

Eric Myers, "Crossfire's Unique Sound Hits its Mark", *The Australian*, November 25, 1985 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/ericmyersreviews198087103>