

## DALE BARLOW AT FOUNDRY 616 WITH WARWICK ALDER & JOHN HARKINS TRIO

by Eric Myers

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*[This performance took place at Foundry 616 on Friday, January 13, 2023.]*



*Dale Barlow (left) & bassist Brendan Clarke at Foundry 616: all's well that ends well... PHOTO CREDIT DANIEL COBURN*

**T**his was another great night at what most people regard as Sydney's premier jazz club. Foundry 616 was sold out, with the restaurant area full, and standing room near the bar filled with an enthusiastic listening audience.

Foundry owner Peter Rechniewski could thank his lucky stars that Dale Barlow survived relatively unscathed what was described as a mugging a few days earlier. According to his own testimony Dale was "attacked in the street by some crazy drunk young people", near the hotel in Newtown where he was staying. He received injuries to his hip and knee, and in a post on Facebook foreshadowed a possible early return to Thailand, where it would be easier than in Sydney to get a remedial massage and see a doctor. In a nutshell his absence would have been disastrous for the venue. But, all's well that ends well.

Barlow appeared with trumpeter Warwick Alder and the extremely accomplished John Harkins Trio, with Harkins (piano), Brendan Clarke (double bass), and Andrew Dickeson (drums).



*Dale Barlow (centre), John Harkins (top left), then clockwise, Warwick Alder, Brendan Clarke, Andrew Dickeson...*

While a jazz musician's attire is no longer an issue these days, it was interesting that all the musicians, with the exception of Alder, wore sports coats or suits on a night when the venue's temperature might have suggested lighter clothes. Some were resplendent in ties. This gave the quintet a somewhat sophisticated, if not conservative, image. Certainly Barlow himself, in a coat but without a tie, looked cool, relaxed and dignified out-front in the centre of the stage. Tall and good-looking,

he has always had an imposing stage presence, dating back to his days with the Young Northside Big Band in the late 70s. But of course the music presented by the quintet was anything but conservative.



*A young Dale Barlow: when he first emerged onto the jazz scene in the mid-1970s, he had a shock of dark hair, now gone... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

When Barlow first emerged onto the jazz scene he had a shock of dark hair, which is now gone. On Facebook he gives his age as 63. The shaved bald head, very much in fashion these days, enables him to retain that strong presence. Words such as elegant and mellifluous came to mind as the sound of his tenor sax filled the room. He is of course no stranger to the highly technical capacity to play sixteen notes to the bar in any tempo, but I also noted his willingness, during his solos, to lay back, and play big broad melodic phrases which enabled the tenor saxophone to sing. At these moments I found his playing very moving.

It's a fact that Barlow is able to comport himself with the dignity of a musician who has been resident with two of the greatest bands led by African Americans in jazz history: the Cedar Walton Quartet, and Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. A member of a select club, he will always be a Jazz Messenger, reflecting what Blakey himself used to tell the musicians in the band: "You're with the Messengers now, you don't have to prove nothin' to no-one."

There were many things to praise about this splendid performance. Initially I noted how Barlow and Alder played off each other in their improvisations; listening closely, and reflecting their phrases back to each other. It's a truism that jazz is a conversation, but this was a particularly brilliant example, a salutary reminder of one of jazz's essential verities.

Alder's improvisational approach was a revelation. Here is a trumpeter who does not appear to reflect the normal lineage coming out of players like Clifford Brown, Freddie Hubbard and Chet Baker. This lineage in Sydney jazz has been most epitomized in the classic flowing styles of trumpeters such as John Hoffman and the late Peter Cross, arguably the most memorable Sydney trumpeters playing in the 80s and 90s, other than the extraordinary James Morrison.



*Andrew Dickeson (right) & Warwick Alder, whose trumpet solos were so wickedly unpredictable that I looked forward immensely to each of his solos, wondering what he might come up with next... PHOTO CREDIT DANIEL COBURN*

Alder's improvisations were so free and iconoclastic that it was difficult to categorize him. Locking himself into unusual melodic patterns, with a train of thought that was unerringly logical, his solos were at the same time so wickedly unpredictable that I looked forward immensely to each of them, wondering what he might come up with next. Here was a jazz musician whose unusual style for me was packed with interest.

Hearing Dale Barlow play again after many years was a tonic. A tenor saxophonist who excels in all time-feels, whether they be the swing feel, the slow ballad, or the

fusion style eight-feel, there appear to be no obvious weaknesses in his playing. I felt I was hearing an absolute master.

The late John Clare, writing as Gail Brennan in January, 1992 in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, nailed Dale Barlow's credentials as a tenor saxophonist who reflected the jazz tradition:

*In a recent article we were told that Dale Barlow is being hailed in the United States as the new Coltrane. You could find some clown in America who would say that. Barlow is no Coltrane imitator (although that was once a danger), nor is he a comprehensive genius and sweeping innovator, as Coltrane was. In fact he has found his own important voice by studying pre-Coltrane tenor saxophone masters, such as Dexter Gordon and Hank Mobley.*



*Pre-Coltrane tenor saxophone masters Dexter Gordon (above) and Hank Mobley (below)... GORDON PHOTO CREDIT RAY WHITTON; MOBLEY PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS*



Some years ago I went through a period of self-examination, deciding who my favourite jazz musicians were – that is to say, whom I really wanted to listen to more, once I'd decided on the candidates. One day I turned on my FM radio, during one of the daily jazz programs on what was then 2MBS-FM, now Fine Music Sydney. A tenor saxophonist was playing the ballad *You Go To My Head*. I couldn't identify him (or her) but, as I listened, I thought: this is a modern jazz saxophonist with exactly the style I most prefer. I waited with baited breath till the end of the track to find out who this splendid musician was. Well, it was, in fact (wait for it)... Dale Barlow!

This was a track, I subsequently discovered, from Dale's album *Treat Me Gently*, recorded in Melbourne in 2007, with George Coleman Jr (drums), Sam Anning (bass) and - I single him out for special mention because his playing on this album is so brilliant - the Melbourne pianist Mark Fitzgibbon. In my view this is an outstanding album, for the ages.



Getting back to the Foundry gig, I enjoyed very much the repertoire the band presented on the night. The musicians chose to avoid tired old workhorses, instead opting for a very hip selection of tunes, most of which are rarely heard. The first set included only three tunes *Star Eyes*, *My One and Only Love* and Dizzy Gillespie's *Be-Bop*, but were treated in long form. This was like a traditional jam session, with all musicians stretching out with long expressive solos, and including established conventions such as swapping bars between the soloists, and playing background riffs. Some curmudgeons might consider these tried and true approaches predictable, but here they were brought to life in a way that was truly energizing.

Their second set opened with *You Go To My Head*, played two-out by Harkins and Barlow, with the latter on flute (which Barlow has described as “my favourite axe”). With the whole band back on stage, they played *I Hear a Rhapsody*; *Giant Steps*; *Where Are You?* (with Barlow once again on flute); and ended with *Bluesville*, a track from the 1985 Cedar Walton Quartet album *Bluesville Time*, when Dale was of course in that band.



*Barlow on flute, his favourite axe, snapped while performing with the Joe Farnsworth Quartet... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

The latter tune was greeted, particularly from those in the standing-room-only section, by shouting and hollering - a rare phenomenon in Australia but, in my experience, quite common overseas, particularly in the US with African American audiences. In this way, the night was brought to a roaring climax and a standing ovation.

Barlow and his colleagues re-invigorated the feeling I had so many years ago when I heard that version of *You Go To My Head* referred to above. This was jazz as I personally feel it should be played and heard. Hearing improvisations on the chord

changes being articulated with such class, and the swing-feel being presented as the essential language of jazz was, I reiterate, a tonic.

In many ways the themes of the night were expressiveness and a glorification of sound, enhanced by Anin Rafsun, an excellent sound technician whom I last encountered in Foundry at the launch of Jeremy Roses's new album *Face To Face* in November, 2022.

The sound of the John Harkins Trio is built around Harkins's beautiful style, so reminiscent of that school of bop pianists which came out of Chicago and Detroit – think of players such as Barry Harris, Tommy Flanagan and Hank Jones. It's a delight that there's at least one pianist in Sydney jazz who emulates that immortal genre, and captures its essence so authentically. Harkins, needless to say, is himself from Chicago.



*Pianist John Harkins: a beautiful style, so reminiscent of that school of bop pianists which came out of Chicago and Detroit, including players such as Barry Harris, Tommy Flanagan and Hank Jones... PHOTO CREDIT DANIEL COBURN*

As for the trio as a collective, I can do no better than quote the *Sydney Morning Herald's* John Shand, a perceptive critic who has aptly described it as follows: "Harkins, bassist Brendan Clarke and drummer Andrew Dickeson have arrived at a restrained, timeless, manicured approach to making jazz, in which no note is out of place. There are few surprises, but the grooves are always buoyant and the soloing vibrant."