

EMMA PASK AT THE WOMEN'S JAZZ FESTIVAL

by Eric Myers

Emma Pask & Her Band
Sydney Women's International Jazz Festival
Mary's Underground, October 31, 2020

Legend has it that James Morrison, at Kirrawee High School in Sydney's Sutherland Shire, heard a 16-year-old Emma Pask singing with a school ensemble and, impressed with her natural ability, immediately invited her to sit in with his own group. Pask survived this baptism of fire, and Morrison later took her under his wing. Welcomed into what one might call the influential Don Burrows/James Morrison stable, Pask has not looked back.



Emma Pask (centre) pictured with the late Don Burrows (left) and James Morrison (right)...

On the second night of the Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival, at Mary's Underground, Pask showed that, two decades on, she has considerably built on that natural ability and evolved into a consummate performer. How come? Well, in simple terms, she ticks a number of important boxes.

First, she takes on, and expedites with aplomb, what many consider the most difficult art in all of jazz: scat singing. In her opening number *Smack Dab In The Middle*, she laid down the gauntlet with an impressive scat chorus. Later, in the great Johnny Mercer tune *I Just Found Out About Love* she sang what appeared to my ears to be a

written wordless vocal; I say written, because it was duplicated in unison by her pianist Kevin Hunt, and brilliantly articulated by both.

Moreover, Pask incorporates into her delivery small improvisations and scat passages which increase the effectiveness of her style – the sign of a committed jazz singer. To close many of her numbers, her ending phrases incorporate scat lines which take her up into her higher register, to a climactic last note. Some of these final notes sounded somewhat strident where I was sitting, but they successfully milked applause from an appreciative audience.

Otherwise, her general repertoire is very pleasing to the jazz buff. Not having heard her before, other than her streamed concert from the SOH's Joan Sutherland Theatre in May, 2020, I was not expecting her program at Mary's to be so sophisticated. Only a talented jazz singer takes on compositions such as Wayne Shorter's classic *Black Nile* and Chick Corea's *You're Everything*, the latter described as a tribute to Flora Purim. In these tunes she did a great job with difficult material.

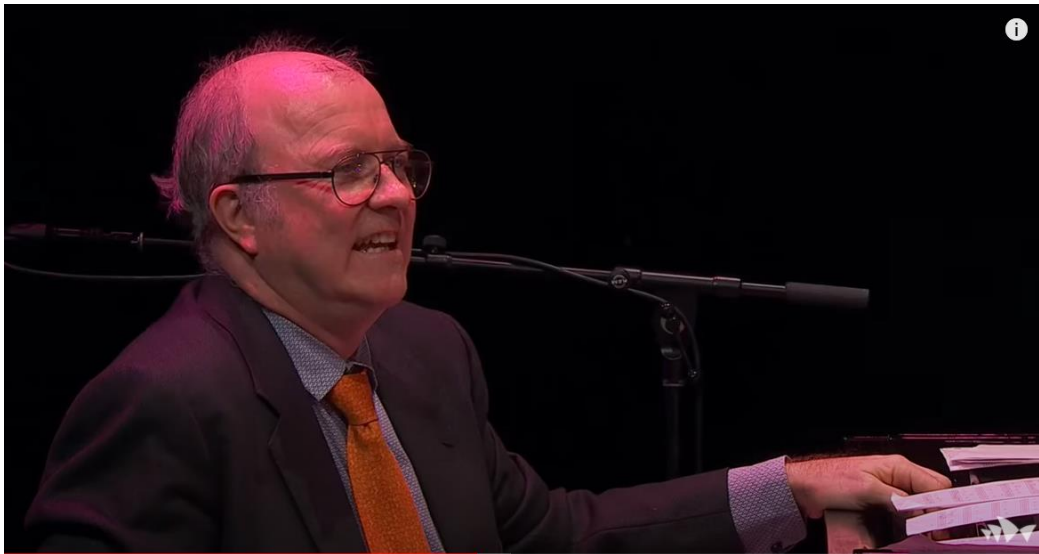


L-R, Kevin Hunt (piano), Phil Stack (bass) and Pask: her presentation of standards from the Great American Songbook was a strong part of her program... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

Another box adroitly ticked by Pask, appealing to the middle-of-the-road portion of her audience, was her presentation of standards from the Great American Songbook, a very strong part of her program. It was pleasing that she avoided old workhorses (*Autumn Leaves, All The Things You Are, Mack The Knife* et al) and presented some little-heard standards, which should be better known: Irving Berlin's *They Say It's Wonderful*, Harold Arlen's *Let's Fall in Love*, and in a tribute to the late Janet Seidel, Jimmy Van Heusen's *Darn That Dream*. The latter enabled Pask to situate herself, with some justification, in the tradition of the best female jazz vocalists in this country over the last 40 years.

Pask's spirited and well-thought through version of *Mais Que Nada*, best associated with Sergio Mendes & Brasil 66, opened her second set. In the following number, *Let's Fall In Love*, Pask brought the volume down to a whisper and sang the verse out of tempo, with just piano accompaniment. At that point, it became clear she had the audience at Mary's eating out of her hand. I estimate the audience at 60, the outer limit of what was possible in the venue, given social distancing. With them demonstrably in her orbit, Pask had ticked another box: the art of the cabaret singer.

Her closing number *Don't Touch Me*, apparently taught to Pask by the American singer Barbara Morrison, a 12/8 blues-oriented tune, was a vigorous showstopper which brought a strong performance to a crowd-pleasing climax.



Pianist Kevin Hunt: extroverted, energetic piano playing ... always willing to go for it... PHOTO COURTESY SNIPPING TOOL

Pask's excellent backing trio was just as essential to the success of the performance: Kevin Hunt (piano, described by Pask as "my right-hand man"); Phil Stack (double bass); and Tim Firth (drums). Their playing was so immaculate, and so supportive of whatever Pask attempted, that little needs to be said.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the trio was the unusually extroverted, energetic piano playing of Hunt - always willing to go for it, with adventurous, syncopated, percussive figures in his solos. I came to look forward to the excitement he was able to create throughout the performance.

Mary's Underground used to be the legendary Basement, for many years Sydney's premier jazz venue. While there might be differences of opinion here, I feel that moving the stage from the centre of the room, to the end of a long rectangular room, was an unfortunate decision. In the previous configuration, virtually everyone in the venue had good sightlines to the stage. The latest configuration means that only few people are close to the stage, and in intimate contact with the music, in my view an essential part of jazz performance.



Pask (centre) pictured with Phil Stack (left) & Tim Firth (right)... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

Where I was sitting at the back of the room (situated behind the legendary technician Ross A'Hern, who did a great job with the sound) I experienced a certain insensitivity to sound on the part of the venue. In the poignant moments when the room should have been absolutely silent in deference to Pask's singing of, say, a ballad, there was, on more than one occasion, the clip-clop on the floorboards of a waitress in high heels delivering food.



Legendary sound technician Ross A'Hern, who did a great job with the sound... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN