

GAI BRYANT'S PALACIO DE LA RUMBA

by Eric Myers*

Palacio de la Rumba
The York Club, Sydney
December 3, 2021



Three members of the Palacio De La Rumba saxophone section, L-R, Julian Gough, Gai Bryant, Graham Jesse...

Jazz For Dancing goes a long way back in history, in fact to the very origins of the music. When the Original Dixieland Jazz Band first played in New York in 1917, the audience had to be reminded that they should dance to the music. The excesses of the Jazz Age, such as the Charleston, during what was known as the Roaring Twenties, had their origins in this somewhat immodest suggestion. Now, cut to London in 1948, when Graeme Bell's Australian Jazz Band, the first Australian artists post-WWII to take Australian culture to Europe, introduced "jazz for dancing" to the uptight British populace.

**Eric Myers is jazz writer with The Australian newspaper.*

The Bell band, full of Australian larrikins, had revived traditional jazz in Melbourne some ten years earlier, before travelling to Czechoslovakia in 1947, where they spent six months fathering jazz in that country. They then went on to the UK, where they revolutionized the stuffy UK jazz scene, so much so that the local police asked them to open their Leicester Square Jazz Club on a second night during the week, in order to help them cope with the crowds.



The Graeme Bell band in the Leicester Square Jazz Club in 1948, with British trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton sitting in, front row L-R, Ade Monsborough (trombone), Lyttelton (trumpet), Pixie Roberts (clarinet), Jack Varney (banjo), back row, L-R, Lou Silbereisen (tuba), Dave Cary (drums), Bell (piano)...

Since then, jazz enthusiasts in Australia have been dancing primarily to traditional jazz bands, although it's clear that, sadly but inevitably, the generations most enthusiastic about this form of entertainment are now dying out.

Enter Gai Bryant's 18-piece big band Palacio de la Rumba, formed as long ago as 2013. It was evident at their sold-out concert on Friday night - I estimate an audience of maybe 200 or more packed into the main auditorium of the York Club - that the "jazz for dancing" torch has now been passed to a new generation, a different category of dancers, younger and decidedly more sexy than the elderly traditional jazz crowd. The event was indeed a spectacle, built around the infectious, exuberant sounds of Afro-Cuban jazz.



Fine Music Sydney broadcaster Leita Hutchings: an aficionado of Afro-Cuban jazz...

I am no expert on this musical genre, and what familiarity I've gleaned is mainly owing to Leita Hutchings' excellent radio program "The Urban Jazz Lounge" on Fine Music Sydney, Saturdays @ 12 noon. Leita is obviously an aficionado, and she has enabled me to discover that there's more to this music than the famous Dizzy Gillespie/Chano Pozo tune *Manteca*. By the way, it was a tonic to hear this familiar classic in Palacio's's first set, along with George Russell's *Cubana Be*.

My impression from hearing this sort of music before is that the jazz content can be subordinated to the Latin element, so it was gratifying to see that Gai Bryant ensured that the jazz content was up-front. There was no doubt that, despite the Latin flavour of the night, there was enough alternating swing-feel, and enough solo space in the arrangements, to denote this as certainly a jazz experience. Accordingly, some of Australia's leading improvisers were able to stretch out and play some memorable solos.

Palacio de la Rumba included Matt Collins, Tim Crow, Angus Gomm and Tom Avgenicos (trumpets); James Greening, Alex Silver, Mike Rapper and Nick Barnard (trombones); Graham Jesse, Gai Bryant, Craig Walters, Julian Gough, Tim Clarkson (saxophones); Daniel Pliner (electric piano); Max Alduca (bass); Giorgio Rojas and Juan Carlos Allende (percussion); and Andrew Dickeson (drums).

Also on hand was the legendary trumpeter John Hoffman, originally from the US, but resident in Australia since the late 1970s. He had come down from Byron Bay to assist the band in rehearsal – Bryant's book of arrangements is apparently full of tricky charts, and all players need to be on their toes – but was unable to play himself, because of a problem with his hearing, a distressing affliction of recent vintage. The audience saw him as the band's conductor, but was deprived of hearing a great exponent of the flowing, melodic trumpet style that has come down through the lineage of American players such as Clifford Brown, Chet Baker and Freddie Hubbard.



Trumpeter John Hoffman: down from Byron Bay, but unable to play because of a problem with his hearing, a distressing affliction of recent vintage...

Perhaps the most electrifying aspect of the program were performances by several dancers from the Dance Mambo academy, including Federico Abis, Paola Calderon, Chris Martin and Melanie Lindaya. Certainly this jaded reviewer has never seen anything quite like the sensual and sexually attractive movements of these superb dancers.

Add the extraordinary Adrian Medina, a black man in a white outfit, who compered with exuberance and humour, presented a completely individual dance style, where different parts of his body appeared to go in several directions at once, and played brilliant cow-bell. All these elements added up to an intoxicating recipe for music and dance.



The extraordinary Adrian Medina: a completely individual dance style, where different parts of his body appeared to go in several directions at once. Behind him, to the left, is Gai Bryant, holding the alto saxophone... PHOTO COURTESY GAI BRYANT

There was a sprinkling of audience members on the dance floor during the band's first set, but it was only during the intermission that a substantial number of dancers ventured onto the floor, attracted by recorded Latin music. Later, during the band's second set, they swept onto the floor in droves to dance to the live music. It was a spectacle to see a crowded dance floor with everyone facing the band, and seemingly through intuition, waving their arms and clapping in unison on various beats in the bar, as if by osmosis. It was a tribal experience, and very hip.

Palacio was further testimony, if this was needed, to the extraordinary depth of talent amongst current Sydney professional jazz musicians. The group is described in the publicity, quite correctly, as “a sensational all star band”. So many fine musicians available means a commendable standard of excellence in the music. In a performance where there were so many splendid solos played, it may be indelicate to mention particular improvisers, but the excellent solos played by the legendary tenorist Craig Walters in Bryant’s composition *The Girl with the Moon in her Eyes*, and later in the Elio Villafranca composition *Last Train to Paris*, caught my ear in particular.



The legendary tenor saxophonist Craig Walters...

Similarly, it was heartwarming to hear the playing of another saxophonist Graham Jesse, who’s now been around long enough to also qualify for legendary status. I most remember two beautiful alto solos he played: one in the Villafranca composition *Mambo Vivo*, and another in a composition, whose title escaped me, towards the end of the second set.



James Greening: his full-throated trombone sound epitomising the open heart of Sydney...

While on the subject of legends, it was a pleasure once again to hear the ubiquitous James Greening, his full-throated trombone sound as usual epitomising the open heart of Sydney.

Amongst the extraordinary young musicians found in this band was pianist Daniel Pliner, a name I know only from his participation in Matthew Ottignon's sextet Mister Ott. His brilliant solos on electric piano cut through beautifully, and were always packed with interest. Here is a monster talent to watch.



Keyboardist Daniel Pliner: a monster talent to watch...
PHOTOGRAPHER
UNKNOWN

At the end of the performance a cheering audience demanded more. Palacio de la Rumba obliged with an encore, a free-blowing tune called *Guaguanco*, where there was space for many extended solo improvisations, ending the night on a note of triumph.

This was apparently the third attempt in 18 months to stage this extravaganza of Afro-Cuban jazz, as it had to be postponed time and again owing to covid. Let's hope that lockdowns are now a thing of the past because, to put it simply, there really should be, in Sydney's musical culture, many more nights like this.