

LIMELIGHT

Music, Arts & Culture

THE ENERGY OF JAZZ CONCERT (SIMA)

Reviewed by Eric Myers on July 22, 2022

This SIMA concert was a rare opportunity to hear on one program three extraordinary Australian saxophonists at the top of their game: Richard Maegraith, Sandy Evans, and Andrew Robson. One would be hard pressed to find three more accomplished jazz saxophonists in this country, or indeed anywhere in the world. This review appeared in Limelight on July 26, 2022 and can be read there at <https://limelightmagazine.com.au/reviews/the-energy-of-jazz-sima/>

Australian saxophonist Richard Maegraith, back from Berlin, Germany, where he's been based since 2015, opened this concert with his great band Galaxstare. Originally formed in 2007, they played music from their third album *Listening With Your Eyes*, recorded in November 2018 but just released. In many ways an all-star group, it included Maegraith (tenor saxophone, didgeridoo, bass clarinet, flute, chimes), Kristin Berardi (vocals), Gary Daley (keyboards), Jonathan Zwartz (double bass), and Tim Firth (drums) with guest hip-hop artist Monks, (previously known as 21monks, spoken word).



*Four members of Galaxstare, L-R, Gary Daley, Kristin Berardi, Richard Maegraith, Jonathan Zwartz...
PHOTO CREDIT AARON BLAKEY*

This performance was a mixed blessing. It could have been perceived as a triumphant performance by a returning expatriate bandleader – in many ways it was - but in deconstructing what I heard, I draw attention to some aspects of the performance which may help to explain what was going on. Specifically I raise once again the hoary old questions of sound balance, and the role of the sound technician.

On the positive side, there were two consummate artists on display at Mary's: Richard Maegraith, a splendid saxophonist by any standards, whose brilliant solos throughout the performance were energizing; and Kristin Berardi, arguably the finest jazz vocalist this country has produced since Kerrie Biddell, who died in 2014. Berardi sang lyrics to Maegraith's compositions, and wordless lines to written melodies; improvised scat lines of inestimable complexity; and contributed ingenious lines in counterpoint to the hip-hop artist Monks. Blessed with her gorgeous voice, every time she took the lead the music soared. Her performance was a veritable *tour de force*, and I will remember it for a long time.



Kristin Berardi at Mary's Underground: arguably the finest jazz vocalist this country has produced since Kerrie Biddell... PHOTO CREDIT GRANT LESLIE

With Maegraith and Berardi, their sound was as clear as a bell. I wish I could say the same about the rhythm section. Firstly, Gary Daley's Fender Rhodes piano sound was irritatingly back in the sound-mix, with little presence, unless drummer Tim Firth dropped his volume level, which happened rarely. Secondly Jonathan Zwartz favours a much bigger double bass sound on stage than comparable bassists. Because of this, the sound technician needs to ensure that his sound is carried to the audience at a moderate volume level - as was the case when I heard him recently at Foundry 616 with the quartet This World. Unfortunately at Mary's that assistance was not forthcoming. Instead Zwartz's sound was booming and lacking in definition,

dominating the sound mix. It prompted me to wonder if the sound technician had had an opportunity to hear the Galaxstare album on Bandcamp, where this music was available. The rhythm section's superb sound balance there would have been something to aim for.



Double bassist Jonathan Zwartz: assistance from the sound technician not forthcoming.... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The music genre played here has been known for a long time, perhaps inadequately, as jazz/rock fusion, although I hasten to add that Galaxstare's music is a highly advanced example of the genre, full of interest. Galaxstare took advantage of that genre's strengths, but also shared one of its deficiencies - the full-on drumming at sforzando characteristic of rock music, rather than the more flexible, light and open playing which characterises the jazz part of the spectrum. While Hamish Stuart's drumming with the next group was full of light and shade, Firth's playing, in the jazz/rock context, was certainly brilliant but at the same time relentlessly loud.

The First Nations artist Monks provided spoken word lyrics for four Maegraith compositions. While I have little interest in hip-hop, I get the fact that it sets poetry against a rhythmic groove. At the Melbourne International Jazz Festival in 2018 I was much enamoured with a supreme example of this genre in the form of the rap artist Kassa Overall, playing with American Terri Lyne Carrington's group Social Science. Performing in the Jazzlab, Overall's solos brought the house down.



Richard Maegraith (left) with hip-hop artist Monks: so many words to cram into each bar... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Monks had many words to cram into each bar – so many words in fact, that I felt he had difficulty matching the rhythm section’s groove. Scores of words went by in a flash as the listener struggled to comprehend them. In particular the composition *Word*, which delivered a Christian message, had so many words to articulate that I would defy any listener to comprehend them without reading those words simultaneously. Still, a generous audience reacted warmly to strong First Nations’ messages, particularly in Monks’ opening tune *The Ones Who Were Here First*, suggesting that, at least in this sell-out audience at Mary’s, there would be strong support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

The second group, the Sandy Evans/Andrew Robson Quartet, with two saxophonists in the front line (with Evans on tenor and soprano, and Robson on alto and baritone, plus recorder) presented a much simpler proposition for everyone, including the sound technician and this reviewer. With no chordal instrument to complicate the sound, the rhythm section relied on two brilliant musicians: double bassist Brett Hirst and drummer Hamish Stuart, the latter well-known for keeping the sound open, and playing at a moderate volume level.

This quartet’s full-on performance relied on catchy and melodic compositions from co-leaders Evans and Robson, which sounded very hip; long, raunchy and expressive solos from both of them; and highly adventurous rhythmic forays by Stuart and Hirst. It was plainly obvious that once the improvisations commenced, the music

could go in any direction – usually into exciting high energy and sometimes into the mayhem of free jazz - but, no matter how far out the music was taken, it would be re-stabilized and the ship uncannily righted through empathy and intuition. Such are the talents of musicians at this level of excellence.



Sandy Evans (above) and Andrew Robson (below) in performance at Mary's Underground... PHOTO CREDIT GRANT LESLIE



Soundwise, the set began with Hirst's bass bullying the sound, somewhat reminiscent of Zwartz's problem in the previous set. During the third number however, Evans's composition *The Running Tide*, Hirst took a long, unaccompanied solo which ended with him taking his volume down to a whisper. I assume that during this solo the sound technician manipulated relevant knobs and got the bass sound right. From that moment on, Hirst's sound was immaculate, and I could not fault the group's overall sound for the rest of the set. It was simply superb.



Brett Hirst (left) and Hamish Stuart in performance at Mary's Underground...
PHOTO CREDIT GRANT LESLIE

Despite minor problems with the sound, this concert had much going for it, and credit goes to all ten musicians who made it such a success. I will remember it primarily for the incomparable playing of the three saxophonists Maegraith, Evans and Robson, and the magnificent singing of Berardi.
