



HARRY MITCHELL QUARTET ALBUM “MARA”

Album review by Eric Myers

Label: Independent

Personnel: Harry Mitchell (piano), Jamie Oehlers (saxophones), Karl Florisson (double bass), Ben Vanderwal (drums).

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Three members of this brilliant Perth quartet were featured on the Jamie Oehlers album *Night Train*, released about six months ago: saxophonist Oehlers, pianist Harry Mitchell and drummer Ben Vanderwal. So *Mara* is another opportunity to savour the playing of three leading musicians from WA, where members of a relatively small jazz community punch well above their weight. The fourth player is bassist Karl Florisson.



Perth pianist Harry Mitchell...

On the Oehlers album Mitchell played the long out-of-fashion electric piano, but played it so well that it sounded like a refreshing innovation. On *Mara* he's on acoustic piano, presenting eight of his original compositions. *Night Train* and *Mara* are not dissimilar, in that a number of compositions on both albums feature interesting, indeed innovative, explorations of different time-feels.

I have mixed feelings about this, and felt I needed some clarification from the composer. Harry Mitchell responded in detail in relation to several compositions. I quote from him here in relation to two of those compositions. Harry writes that *I Wonder*, "was a multi-metre composition so the intro is in 6/4, and the first melody is a bar of 5/4 plus a bar of 7/4, then the bridge is in 4/4." In the case of *Heisenberg* it "was written in 23/8 - like a bar of two bars of 4/4 made up of triplets with one triplet missing at the end of the second bar."

I can understand why Australian modern jazz musicians are fascinated by this phenomenon. Over many years, the most radical innovations in jazz have been in the area of rhythm. The complicated rhythms of other cultures have crept into jazz more and more. Drummers who were once stolid timekeepers in ensemble playing, have become busy contributors, punctuating the sound throughout.

Also, today's improvisers have learnt to fly through music with complex or ambiguous time signatures, with startling virtuosity. In Paul Desmond's *Take Five*, Dave Brubeck continued a piano vamp through the drum solo in 5/4, to ensure that Joe Morello did not lose it. Jazz has come a long way since the late 50s.



Pianist Dave Brubeck (right) continued to vamp through Joe Morello's drum solo on the tune Take Five, written by Paul Desmond (left)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Still, as a relatively elderly listener who likes to tap his foot, sometimes I need to know where the first beat in the bar is; listening to jazz with an ambiguous time-feel

can be irritating. The new music being played by composers such as Mitchell and Oehlers perhaps requires a new kind of listener, who will not be put off by a jerkiness in the music where there used to be a uniform pulse.



Ben Vanderwal: a master at creating original drum patterns which energise somewhat difficult compositions... PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS

On the other hand, that deficit can be compensated by a drummer such as Vanderwal, a master at creating original drum patterns which energise somewhat difficult compositions. Let's return to the comparison with *Night Train*. Compared to the rather dissonant and jagged melody lines in Oehlers' compositions, Mitchell's compositions are decidedly more lyrical and melodic, and therefore more accessible to the average ear. On *Mara* the swing-feel survives, and this is music to my ears. An excellent, interesting album.
