

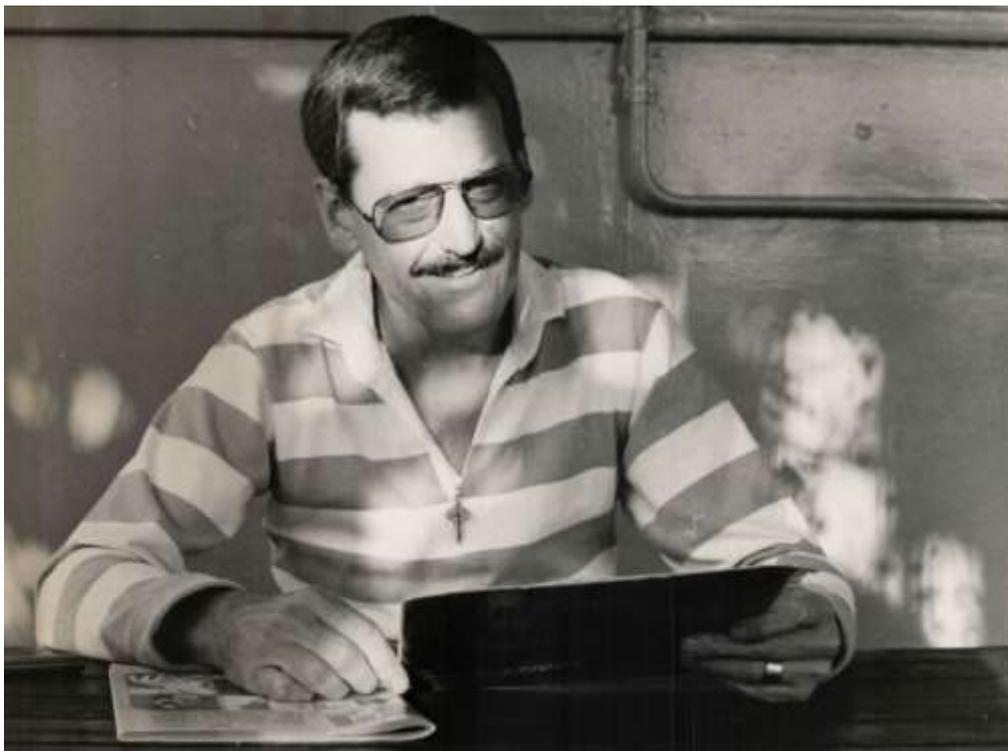
VISIT OF HUUB VAN RIEL IN 1998

by Eric Myers

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Huub van Riel, for the last 20 years director of The Bimhuis in Amsterdam, Holland and, for eight years, President of the Europe Jazz Network, is one of the most important figures in the European jazz scene ever to come to Australia. My thanks to the Audience Development Division at the Australia Council for providing \$6,000 which enabled the Jazz Co-ordination Association to host Huub's visit, which took place recently between October 26 and November 9, 1998.

Huub was in Melbourne for four days, travelled to Wangaratta for the four-day jazz & blues festival, then came on to Sydney, where he spent five days. He was interviewed live to air by Jim McLeod on Jim's ABC Classic FM program *Jazztrack* on November 8 and, at time of writing, an article on his visit by John Shand was still scheduled to appear in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.



ABC Classic-FM broadcaster Jim McLeod: he did an interview live-to-air with Huub van Riel on November 8...

During the Jim McLeod interview Huub spoke about The Bimhuis, which many people consider the finest jazz venue in Europe. The result of a musicians' initiative in 1974, the Bimhuis has been presenting a varied and eclectic program for 24 years, including the latest developments in jazz and improvised music, and will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 1999.

Asked about the venue's music policy, Huub said: "Jazz and improvised music is our central thing, and we look mainly at things that are in development, but we also do other things: most of the American heroes have been there throughout the years - Dexter Gordon, Mingus, Art Blakey... everybody played there.

"Both visually and in programming, the Bimhuis is a sort of a mix between club and concert hall", said Huub. "We have one-nighters only, except for a single exception [for example, the occasion when some days were given over to the Sun Ra Orchestra] and the place looks like a very informal concert hall, or a somewhat formal club - either way - and we can change that a little bit depending on the occasion."

Huub said that funds to support the venue came both from the Amsterdam city government and the Dutch national government. "Is the funding healthy?" asked Jim. "In a way, yes", said Huub. "We've finally been taken seriously, and I think the amounts of money coming to the Bimhuis are fair, according to jazz standards internationally - but then that's a story in itself, of course - but still extremely low compared to the classical field." [The Bimhuis receives some AUD600,000.00 per annum from government sources.]

Huub said that the average audience at the Bimhuis was 150-200, and the maximum capacity about 400. "We're doing well, considering that we are programming, not to fill the place, or to keep people off the streets, but we are really following a musical policy. The place is a tool, rather than a goal in itself."



Clarion Fracture Zone: they performed at The Bimhuis in 1990. L-R, Lloyd Swanton, Alister Spence, Tony Gorman, Toby Hall, Sandy Evans... PHOTO CREDIT MICHELLE AGIUS

Asked if he felt that the Bimhuis was educating the public, Huub said: “Yes, in a way we certainly do. There’s quite a lot of improvised music from Holland - it’s not entirely Dutch music, it’s very international: Dutch-based musicians, rather than Dutch musicians – that we’ve been promoting for a very long period. There is an audience, and it has increased in quality. All this can’t be seen apart from the Bimhuis as a venue over a long period, following that kind of music policy. You can only do this on a professional basis with financial support, in our case from the city of Amsterdam and the national government.”

Jim McLeod said that he had seen evidence lately that musicians were immensely encouraged by the existence of non-profit venues such as the Bimhuis in Amsterdam, and the Copenhagen Jazzhouse. “It must be terrific support for the musicians”, Jim said. “I think it’s absolutely essential,” said Huub, “and it’s also a topic of conversation these days with my Australian colleagues. We have been talking a lot and exchanging information.., and this always comes up: the need for a venue that is central to the scene. Not just to have a high frequency of professionally organised performances, but a meeting-place, and a laboratory. It’s absolutely essential, I would say.”



The Necks: they performed at The Bimhuis in September, 1998. L-R: Chris Abrahams, Lloyd Swanton, Tony Buck...

Huub also spoke about the Europe Jazz Network (EJN), which was set up in 1987. The EJN, a non-profit association of promoters, musicians’ associations, artistic directors, consultants of music programmes working mainly in the field of jazz and improvised music, was the first electronic network in the cultural domain in Europe. “The EJN is an association of mostly promoters and concert organisers, not only in Europe but also further afield,” said Huub. “We came together to exchange information, and consequently co-operate and co-produce. It’s about people who are open to sharing information, and not working in an isolated way, who think that the

business should be about artistic values first, rather than the somewhat commercialised jazz scene characterised by the big festivals in Europe.

“When we started, which is just over ten years ago now, we decided that, instead of starting another organisation that has its annual meeting and good ideas, and then nothing happens until the next meeting, we built an electronic network. This was long before the internet was the obvious thing for everybody. So, we had our own bulletin-board system that we used for common databases and mutual email, and we organised a fair number of projects and tours online, so to speak.”

Asked by Jim McLeod for any ideas on how we might do things differently or better in Australia, Huub said: “Well, Australia is another country and another tradition, and the people that I’ve met are highly professional, and have very good ideas about how to organise the scene. But it’s obvious - and this comes out in all our chats - that ideas being formulated now for new venues, that is the main thing, and it’s an absolutely a necessity, and it should be funded in a decent way.

“There’s a very high quality of music here, and the potential must be much higher, given the rather poor circumstances. Sydney doesn’t have a real, permanently booked venue. The Basement is an excellent venue, but it’s not exclusively an improvised music venue... In Melbourne Bennetts Lane is a very nice club, that functions a little bit as this meeting point. In that sense it’s very good, but it’s strictly speaking a commercial enterprise, and the owner has to keep it going, and does that, so that’s great. But much more is needed, of course.”

Huub van Riel’s visit to Australia appears to have coincided with a renewed interest in Australian jazz artists. Since Clarion Fracture Zone performed at The Bimhuis in 1990, performances by Australians at the club have been few and far between. But The Necks performed there on September 26, 1998; and Dale Barlow’s European trio on November 20.

While in Australia Huub indicated that the trumpeter Scott Tinkler would be playing there following his return to Amsterdam, and he had already booked the Andrew Robson Trio and the singer Michele Morgan for March, 1999 (although this might not proceed because the tour was not funded by the Australia Council). Furthermore, he indicated, there will probably be talks with Paul Grabowsky. Bernie McGann, of course, whom Huub heard for the first time at Wangaratta, and described as “Australia’s Von Freeman” would be welcome at The Bimhuis any time he was touring in Europe.

Postscript: A tangible outcome of Huub van Riel’s visit to Australia was an invitation to Melbourne’s Adrian Jackson to visit Amsterdam before Christmas, 1998. Adrian, then artistic director of the two major Victorian jazz festivals, the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues and the Melbourne International Jazz Festival, and jazz writer for *The Age* newspaper would participate in an event called the Dutch Jazz Connection at The Bimhuis, Amsterdam over three days, December 17-19 1998.

The Dutch Jazz Connection was a showcase of leading Dutch jazz ensembles for the benefit of some 40 international promoters, presenters festival directors and media personalities. All the visitors’ expenses were covered by the Dutch Government.