

## INTERVIEW WITH THE WILLOW NEILSON QUARTET

by Eric Myers

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*[Editor 's Note: The Sydney quartet led by the saxophonist Willow Neilson left in late September, 2001, to participate in the Jazz Hoeilaart Inter'l Belgium, an international jazz contest for youth ensembles. Other than Willow, the group includes Gerard Masters (piano, from Christchurch, New Zealand)), Brendan Clarke (double bass, from Canberra), and the Sydney drummer Craig Simon. The views of these young musicians on music and the jazz scene reflect the mixture of optimism and realism which characterises many of the musicians of their generation. The four musicians are all in their early to mid-20s. This interview appeared in the Oct/Nov 01 edition of Jazzchord.]*

**Eric Myers: I am wondering what it's like to be a young musician, or an "emerging artist". What is the general feeling amongst players of your age in your early 20s?**

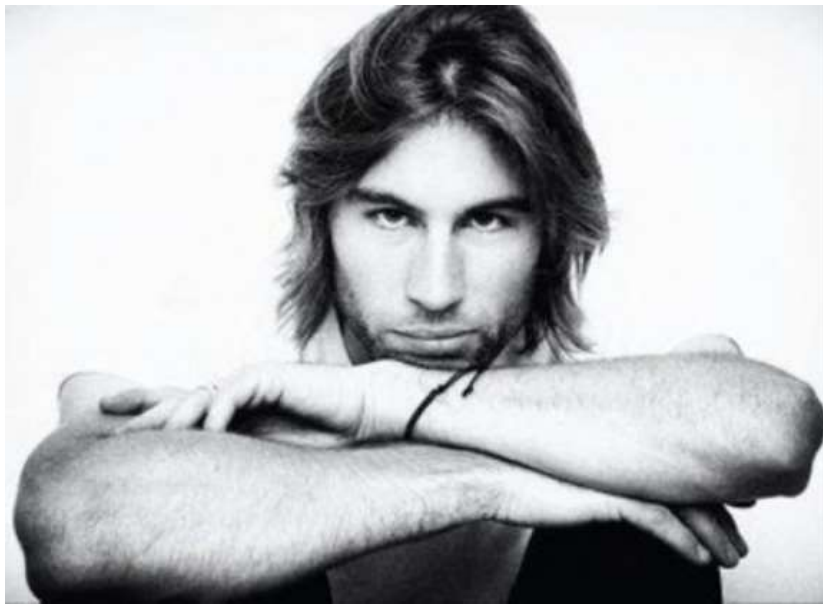
Willow Neilson: I think there is a general positivity amongst the younger players in the scene at the moment, in spite of there only being a small number of venues in Sydney. When I moved to Sydney It was just before the string of tragedies that hit the jazz scene - the closing of the Strawberry Hills, etc. For a while there it was very depressing being a young musician in Sydney. In the last two years with the



*The Willow Neilson Quartet, Craig Simon (bottom of picture) then clockwise Gerard Masters, Willow Neilson, Brendan Clarke... PHOTO CREDIT SALLY FLECK*

formation of the JazzGroove Association, the opening of the Side On Café and the Side On jam session starting up, there is more of an opportunity for all the musicians to hang out and hear each other and rave. It has formed a stronger feeling of community and creative exchange.

Gerard Masters: I think we are very lucky at the moment to have such a great number of inspiring players in the scene, both our age and older. There is no shortage of great players to listen to, and learn off, in many different areas of the music. This inspiration seems to be manifesting itself in many different young groups. We need a few more venues, and festivals that focus on creative jazz, rather than smooth jazz.



*Keyboardist Gerard Masters: we are very lucky have such a great number of inspiring players in the scene, both our age and older...*

Craig Simon: The advent of the JazzGroove Association, and SIMA establishing the Side On Café has created a very positive feeling amongst musicians of all ages including us emerging artists. When the Strawberry Hills shut there seemed to be very little opportunity to perform. I think JazzGroove has helped bring the younger musicians together and create an environment where we can feel there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Brendon Clarke: There is great enthusiasm amongst the younger players on the scene. Everyone seems to be making a great effort to write their own music which is great, but the greatest problem is the huge lack of venues for all this great music to be heard, But as far as general feeling amongst musicians, I think there is a great deal of support and respect for each other.

**EM: So, there's a spirit of optimism in the air about being a professional jazz musician?**

WN: To certain degrees, yes. I have heard older musicians comment that the scene at the moment is thriving in terms of the large number of quality players in Australia,

young and old. There are a lot of people creating some really interesting and innovative music at the moment. The JazzGroove CD and *The Pulse* TV show are great examples of this.

GM: Yes. There is optimism because lots of people are getting things going on at the moment. Jonathan Zwartz (Winebanc), SIMA and JazzGroove are providing us with places to play our music.

CS: I agree there is great optimism among all the musicians. If you dig deep enough there will always be those who feel it is not happening, or they don't have enough work, etc. This will be the same in every scene, but I feel that in Sydney this sort of negative attitude is definitely in the minority.



*Drummer Craig Simon: there is great optimism among all the musicians...*

BC: I think if a person has made the decision to be a professional jazz musician, you have to be optimistic. Let's face it, it's not exactly the most secure job in the world! It's optimism that drives us to succeed and survive. There are always going to be times when you might feel depressed or down about the scene, have no gigs etc. But we are always going to be driven by our love of the music. .

**EM: Is that spirit different from the spirit that is in the air around older musicians?**

WN: No.

GM: I think age really plays no part in it. If you are a musician and you want to get amongst the action then you are going to go for it regardless of your age.

CS: I think the beauty of Sydney's jazz scene is that everyone is out to help each other, whether by coming down and supporting gigs or inviting people to jam. There is a real nurturing spirit amongst all the musicians.

BC: The only difference I think is the fact that there was obviously a lot more work for everyone, say 20 or 30 years ago, but as far as their spirit being different, I would say no. In my experience older musicians are more enthusiastic about the music than ever. If they weren't they probably would have given up years ago!



*Bassist Brendan Clarke: in his experience older musicians are more enthusiastic about the music than ever...*

**EM: Re the music being composed by you and your colleagues: how do you perceive this music compared to the music you heard when you were growing up? Is your music 'retro', or 'conservative'? Do you feel it is 'innovative', an advance on what we know as modern jazz? Or, do these categorisations not bother you too much?**

WN: These things are definitely subject to opinion. Really, who gives a stuff about categorisations? I have heard bands such as The Hoodangers who have a lot of traditional jazz in their repertoire, but sound much more wild than a lot of free playing I have heard. For me it is all about the energy invested in the music. Who cares how 'innovative' something is if it isn't played by someone pouring as much of their energy as they can into it? In terms of influences, I have been exposed to a lot of really different things. I was brought up on a hippy commune in Nimbin, listening to things from Hindustani classical music to strange hippy comedy cabaret music. All music, from techno to classical music, can be interesting and satisfying if the creator of that music has energy, knowledge and intent behind their music.

GM: In jazz there seems to be a tendency to get too freaked out by the 'tradition.' Some people seem to want to keep jazz in the past. I really love bebop and some of

the more traditional aspects of jazz, but I like to try and incorporate many other elements into my compositions.



*The Melbourne group The Hoodangers, L-R, Ollie Browne, Ben Gillespie, Mark Elton, Eugene Ball, Phil Noy, Mal Webb: they sound much more wild than a lot of free playing...*

CS: I think categorisation is a necessary evil in the marketing and promotion of music and art. The problem with trying to explain creativity in as few words as possible leads to titles such as 'traditional', 'innovative', and 'modern'. As a marketing tool this is not bad, but I think they have become catchphrases to use in criticising music. It is too easy to say 'oh that's no good, it is just traditional music', or 'they are just copying what has gone before them', or even 'that is too modern to be jazz'. I think we need to be aware of things that help to explain the music to the potential audience, that give an idea of the music that the audience is about to go and listen to; but this should not be confused with the detail required to adequately describe anyone's music properly.

**EM: Tell me about your music, and what you feel it is trying to express, in musical terms. Are you bringing together some influences in a new way, and therefore presenting music that you feel offers something new?**

WN: Having a group that I play with as much as I possibly can, has been the most important thing for my development as a musician and composer. Often I try to write things that the guys in the group will like or sound good playing. We all lend each other the albums we are into, and that affects our music. I am not sure what I am trying to achieve. I am just getting into things and I guess that affects the way I will sound. People like Phil Slater, Carl Dewhurst and Nick McBride have introduced me to some of the music they are into, and that has given me some different points of view. I like to try and keep our repertoire varied. There are some interesting things beginning to happen in the electronic music circuit. I am interested in incorporating some of their concepts towards sound. Ideally I would like to be playing satisfying music that I feel is purely my own to a large amount of people, for a lot of money. Like what most musicians want.



*Willow Neilson: ideally I would like to be playing satisfying music that I feel is purely my own to a large amount of people, for a lot of money...*

GM: I don't think a lot about achieving anything when I write. I usually write with a specific group in mind, so I think about how it will suit the group and also the type of audience that the group will be playing for. Sometimes I may have a broad idea of how the piece may come out. I guess inadvertently my influences will be coming out.

CS: I think the goal that, as musicians, we all have, is to go beyond playing the notes presented in front of us and be forced to combine. The power of performing together is that sometimes the outcome is greater than the sum of the individual's abilities. This I feel is the aim of the group, to actually sound like a band. We use any means to create this. Yes, we use our influences hopefully in a new way, all members of the band are interested in different musics, and I think this comes through in the sound. In Australia we are lucky that there is a very open approach to improvised music. The only guideline is that it has to be strong. So there is a very individual sound coming from Australia. I have just returned from Europe and I think we have an approach uncluttered by social or scene expectations. This is not often the case abroad.

BC: When I write it is usually, say, with this band in mind, or whatever band it might be, but I don't consciously try to incorporate specific influences. I think that is going to happen anyway. We can't get away from the fact that we are surrounded by lots of different influences so, of course, it is going to affect the music. Afro-American music has had a huge influence on my life so I'm sure that comes through in the music.

**EM: Is your music unlike, say, American jazz? Does your music have a Pacific Rim flavour? Is it music that could only be produced in Australasia?**

WN: American jazz is of course a major part of our music. But I feel that the local musicians in Sydney have had just as strong an influence upon what we play. Like I said before, there are so many good musicians in Australia it would be impossible not



to be affected by what they do. I feel there is definitely an Australian quality to my music. Australian jazz definitely has its own sound.

GM: Australasian jazz does sound different to me. I think the fact that people are constantly leaving on study trips all around the world plays a big part in this. So many different influences are hitting our shores all the time.



*Gerard Masters at the keyboard: Australasian jazz does sound different to him...*

BC: There is definitely a unique Australian sound. Of course there is a strong American influence in our music, but it has to sound different. We didn't grow up in the ghettos of New York or in the deep south surrounded by racism. We grew up in a white middle class environment in a beautiful country with beaches and wide open spaces, and no gunfights happening down the street. Of course our music sounds unique; it reflects all these things.

**EM: SIMA was established in 1984 and has been a major force in keeping creative music alive in Sydney. How do musicians of your generation regard SIMA?**

WN: SIMA has been a huge help to myself and my quartet. They have offered us support in going to the competition in Belgium; they have given us some gigs and live

broadcasts. I have found SIMA very helpful. There is a lot of controversy at the moment around these sorts of things, but I would have to say I have never had a problem with Peter Rechniewski. The formation of JazzGroove has been good for SIMA as it gives them more of an opportunity to hear young players they may have not heard before and therefore give them gigs.

GM: SIMA is fantastic in my opinion. Who else is providing three nights a week of great creative music? Peter Rechniewski has always been very supportive of me and my colleagues.

CS: SIMA and Peter do a great job, and have done since their inception... They set a target standard for young musicians that helps us grow, and once we achieve that standard, SIMA is very supportive of all musics. As the organiser of the Wednesday night jam session co-hosted by JazzGroove and SIMA I was in close contact with Peter and Jane [March]. I feel that continuing to forge a relationship between the two organisations will be very strong for Sydney.



*SIMA President Peter Rechniewski: always very supportive of Gerard Masters and his colleagues...*

BC: Where would we be without SIMA?

**EM: How important has SIMA's move to the Side On Café been to the scene?**

WN: The Side On Café has been a crucial part of the Sydney jazz scene. The management is supportive and it is a nice place to go. A lot of people say that the Strawberry Hills was better, but I think that the Side On has a different type of audience than the Strawberry Hills. I have limited experience of the Strawb, as it shut down a few months after I moved to Sydney. The bar manager at the Side On, Ross, has even been involved with getting live bands playing back at the Blue Room on Oxford St.



GM: The Side On is great. You can always arrive to your gig knowing that you will be playing to people who are interested in what you are doing. Also it is stumbling distance from my house.

CS: The Side On provides that warm, intimate atmosphere crucial to the presentation of jazz music. The staff are enthusiastic about the music and it is a very creative environment.

BC: The Side On is a fantastic venue, the staff are great, people are almost always there to listen to the music, and have respect for the music. Where else in Sydney can you go five nights a week and hear great creative music?

**EM: What are your thoughts on the other venues where you might be expected to play? The Basement, the Woollahra, the Sackville, Harbourside Brasserie, Soup Plus, etc. Are those venues important, from your point of view?**

WN: All of those venues are important. All pander to different types of audiences and are therefore limited in what bands they can book. It would be rare to hear free music based on the mating call of Lithuanian goats at any of those venues. The bottom line in Sydney is money. Venue owners are interested in making money primarily, some to more extreme degrees than others. I think any venue that still has live music is a good venue in some ways, as DJs seem to be eating into a considerable portion of the work opportunities. Things like performance licenses and liquor licenses are stupidly expensive in Sydney. I think there should be some kind of action to make it easier for venue owners to have live music. Sydney City Council is a blood sucking parasite upon the arts community.

GM: All of these venues are great and should be supported. I am trying at the moment to get a project happening that will hopefully be able to play in venues which at the moment are dominated by DJs. I have a real dislike for a lot of DJs who think they are God because they know how to play records. Most of the time they are getting paid three times as much as musicians. It really is a bad scene which I think we need to do something about.

CS: As Willow and Gerard have said, all the venues provide a service to the Sydney audiences. I think it a shame that some of them try cater their programming purely to profit making but this is the economic reality of business.

**EM: How important has the JazzGroove Association been for musicians like yourselves?**

WN: The JazzGroove Association has played a major role in helping young players. It offers frequent performance opportunities, professional advice and support, and it actively promotes all of its members and is non-hierarchical.

GM: JazzGroove is a great organization.

CS: The JazzGroove Association has been essential in bringing the jazz musicians of Sydney together. It is basically a musicians' co-operative and has been instrumental

in getting us to problem-solve and think-tank ideas for the growth of the scene, and working out how to gain more performance opportunities.

BC: The JazzGroove association has been crucial to younger musicians especially. Without them a lot of bands would never have been heard.

**EM: I'm wondering how you view the older, more established jazz musicians. Do you have any heroes amongst them, or major influences?**

WN: Phil Slater, James Muller, Matt McMahon, Ian Chaplin, Carl Dewhurst, Mike Nock, Mark Isaacs, Warwick Alder, Don Rader, Simon Barker, Cameron Undy, Jamie Oehlers, Roger Manins. All have repeatedly made me want to go home and practice and work on things; they constantly freak me out.

GM: There are so many. For me Mike Nock has always made me want to work hard and play good music. Phil Slater, Carl Dewhurst, Rick Robertson, Matt McMahon and Simon Barker, James Muller, Roger Manins, Chuck Yates and Joe Lane are some of my favourites.



*Craig Simon (right) on drums, pictured here with the Melbourne bassist Phillip Rex at the Wangaratta Jazz Festival: if we all pool our strengths we are so much stronger than we are individually...PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL*

CS: I have so much respect for Simon Barker. Not only has he inspired me by his unbelievable playing, but he has been so quick to give his time, to offer advice, or practice with me, or just hang out. I think this is not an uncommon thing in the Sydney scene and it is what makes it so strong. If we all pool our strengths we are so

much stronger than we are individually. I must also say I get a lot of inspiration from the drummers of my own age or younger; Felix Bloxsom in particular.

**EM: What are your future objectives? I know you're going to Belgium for the Jazz Hoeilaart Inter'l Belgium, which is a youth jazz competition. Do you feel that musicians like yourselves can ultimately make a mark internationally?**

WN: From what I am told, Australian musicians can definitely hold their own internationally. I hope to play with as many good musicians as possible, not just jazz musicians, and tour all over the world. Hopefully I can make this fantasy a reality.

GM: I hope to make a mark somewhere.

CS: I hope to be able to play music as often as possible. If that is here, or there, it doesn't really matter. I think that, if you can be successful in Australia, then you will probably do well pretty much anywhere.



*Willow Neilson would be more than happy to achieve what people like Mike Nock (above) and Dale Barlow (below) have achieved, in playing with so many good players and creating a lot of good music...*



**EM: Is your ambition to be household names as jazz musicians in Australia? Or, will you be happy just to make a modest living playing jazz?**

WN: It would be nice to be a household name, but I would be more than happy to achieve what people like Mick Nock and Dale Barlow have achieved, in playing with so many good players and creating a lot of good music. Being able to eat and clothe myself would definitely be a good thing. Who knows what the future holds? Maybe I'll give up saxophone and join a Shaolin temple. Being a kung fu master would be good as well.

GM: I don't want to have to play a lot of boring, crowd pleasing smooth jazz to become famous.

CS: I want to make every effort to be financially comfortable, but I want to try and achieve this while trying not to limit my artistic aims and goals.

BC: My goal has never been to become some sort of superstar. I just want to play great music with great players and make a good living.



*Neilson: Being a kung fu master would be good...*

**EM: Will you want to branch out into more commercial areas, in order to make a better living from being a musician, not concentrating so much on jazz?**

WN: That would be nice too. I bought the new D'Angelo record the other day. It is an R&B record. Roy Hargrove is playing the horn lines on it. Doing something like that would be fun as well. I think I will need to keep my mind open about the future; the Shaolin temple may be the answer. Being a great musician, or being able to repel spears and swords with the power of my chi?

GM: I really don't mind what kind of music I play, so long as it is good and it gives me a buzz.

CS: I am interested in all things creative. I love painting, I have just started learning photography, I love sculpting and working with wood. I think I would rather develop a hobby that I could earn an income from than burn out chasing the commercial music scene. That said, if I was offered a performance opportunity that was commercially based I would not say 'no' because it was commercial. But I don't want to waste energy pursuing it.