

JAMES MORRISON QUARTET WITH THE SSO

Reviewed by Eric Myers

Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House, November 2, 2018

As an advocate for jazz over the last 40 years or so, I cannot disguise the pleasure I feel at the phenomenon of James Morrison. Frequently, in my capacity as an arts administrator, or occasional jazz reviewer writing for the newspapers, I have encountered unnecessary and inexplicable marginalisation of jazz. Often this has been a matter of ignorance, or sometimes snobbery, on the part of those working for, say, government funding authorities or for the newspapers. But I have often encountered people who were in a position to give jazz a fair go, but who failed for various reasons to come to the party.



James Morrison: a phenomenon... PHOTO CREDIT ADRIAN VAUGHAN

Jazz is arguably the most influential musical form of the 20th century but, because it is now widely perceived – wrongly in my view – as a tiny musical form with a negligible following, it is frequently overlooked or devalued. To some extent, the fate of jazz, at least since the death of Miles Davis in 1991, has been a never-ending downward spiral.

Against this tale of woe, the career of James Morrison has been a tale of triumphant achievement – ever onward and upward, as Billy Strayhorn used to say - since he emerged as a fledgling 16-year-old trombonist with the Young Northside Big Band in

the late 70s. Now, 40 years later, and just shy of 56, Morrison is able to fill the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House on two consecutive nights. As I write, I notice that, in *The Weekend Australian's Review*, the "Out & About" section selects his performance as its "pick of the week" (Tickets \$62-\$127). In terms of drawing-power, this puts him into the category of major Australian and international entertainers.

What is happening here? How can James Morrison be explained?

At this performance, Morrison's assets were on display. Firstly, he is patently a nice bloke with an engaging personality. No hint of an ego-trip here. Secondly, he doesn't talk down to the members of his audience; he treats them as the intelligent people they are, recounting interesting, self-deprecating stories about himself and his past.

In his patter about the Great American Songbook, there was not only informative background information on immortal composers such as George Gershwin (*A Foggy Day, They Can't Take That Away From Me*), Jerome Kern (*The Way You Look Tonight*), and Cole Porter (*Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye*) who are usually regarded as the essential songwriters.



George Gershwin (left) with his lyricist brother Ira Gershwin... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Morrison has extended and modernised the membership of this exclusive club, by including more contemporary composers who have not been such household names:

Johnny Mandel, for example (*A Time For Love*, and *The Shadow Of Your Smile*), and Walter Gross, who wrote *Tenderly*, with lyrics by Jack Lawrence.



The composer Johnny Mandel: his A Time For Love played by Morrison on trombone...

So Morrison's program did not concentrate on the tired workhorses which have dominated the repertoire previously. He provided enough new material, enough variety, to satisfy tired hacks such as myself who are familiar with the Songbook. I particularly enjoyed *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, a Sammy Fain composition circa 1955 which is rarely heard in jazz, and which Morrison played on piano.

Having said that, Morrison showed that, even tunes that have been played many times by jazz musicians – such as Gershwin's *Summertime* – can sound as fresh as ever, if the arrangements are innovative, and are played beautifully.

Even the Ellington pieces (Billy Strayhorn's *Take the A Train* and Duke's *It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing*) were given fresh and unusual treatment, with the former featuring Morrison once again on piano.

As the performance went on, the essential mellowness of Morrison's approach came to the fore. Mostly Morrison's playing was relaxed, laid-back and ruminative. It was a reminder of an earlier era when such compositions epitomised popular music itself. This was music to the ears of a rather elderly audience in the Concert Hall – in my observation primarily populated by well-heeled baby boomers, with a mere sprinkling of young people. But they all loved it.

The orchestral arrangements played by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (SSO) were a mixed blessing. At times, where I was sitting, the volume level of the orchestra overwhelmed the sound of the jazz quartet which included, other than Morrison, Ben Robertson (double bass), William Morrison (guitar) and Gordon Rytmeister (drums).

Also the amplified sound of the grand piano left a lot to be desired. It sounded mechanical, even tinny, and lacked warmth. This may well have been a function of the Concert Hall's notoriously poor acoustics for jazz, rather than the fault of the sound technician. But I have heard many classical piano concertos in the same venue with a much more acceptable piano sound.

Of course, these are minor quibbles. Morrison showed, as usual, that he is a master of an essential aspect of jazz music: tension and release. Once the theme of a composition is stated, and Morrison embarks on an improvisation, either in swinging four or in a slow ballad, there are few players in Australian jazz who can match him for concision, excitement, and brilliant phrasing.

And, needless to say, there's also his astonishing multi-instrumentalism. I once thought his fluency on various brass instruments (trumpet, flugelhorn, trombone, tuba, etc) was the result of a freakish embouchure which enabled him to change instruments flawlessly, without having to warm up for each change. I regarded him merely as a brass specialist.



James Morrison at the piano, where he played Billy Strayhorn's Take the A Train at this performance...

Now, confronted not only by his expertise on various saxophones – at this performance he played tenor saxophone only – but also by his brilliance at the piano (an element in his armoury that was not much visible during his earlier years) I can appreciate why some enthusiasts describe him as a “genius”. That’s a big call. Morrison is palpably not an innovator, as were African American musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker and Ornette Coleman. They, and a handful of others, are the true geniuses in jazz.



James Morrison: a consolidator of past idioms, in the tradition of his mentor Don Burrows...

Morrison is, I think, primarily a consolidator of past idioms, in the tradition of his mentor Don Burrows but – let's face it – he is a particularly brilliant and effective exponent of the jazz tradition. There are other comparable multi-instrumentalists in Australian jazz – Melbourne's Stephen Grant immediately comes to mind – but Morrison's unique qualities as an entertainer and a personality, on top of his extraordinary musical ability, have enabled him to dominate Australian jazz, like no other before him.
