

KEITH STIRLING: AN ENIGMA

by Eric Myers*

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For some time Keith Stirling has been an enigma in Australian jazz. Over many years he was regarded as an outstanding musician — perhaps the leading trumpeter in the country at his best, comparable to the great Keith Hounslow. But somehow there was an aura of unfulfilled promise about him.

Those who heard Stirling perform, but didn't know him off the stand, were genuinely puzzled by the erratic nature of his playing. There were times when he produced blistering solos of unmitigated brilliance. At those times he appeared to be unleashing a creative force that had no equal among this country's jazz players. At other times he appeared tentative and uninspired, playing aimless solos that limply expired.



Keith Stirling: an aura of unfulfilled promise about him... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

**In 1982 Eric Myers was jazz critic with the Sydney Morning Herald, and publisher/editor of the Australian Jazz Magazine.*

When these things happen, jazz writers don't usually ask about it. Lip troubles? Unhappy home life? Who knows?

Then, about 18 months ago, something seemed to be happening to Keith Stirling. At the beginning of 1982 he was coming to a watershed in his development.

As part of Jim McLeod's simulcast series *Jazz in Stereo* on the ABC, the Keith Stirling Quintet was televised live from The Basement in Sydney. The harsh glare of the spotlight was placed on Stirling and the young players he had been grooming throughout 1981; Steve Brien (guitar), Jay Stewart (piano), Craig Scott (bass) and Ron Lemke (drums).

The rhythm section didn't actually play badly, but this was suddenly the big league, and their inexperience showed through. Stirling struggled to get the juices flowing with a rhythm section that was going in many directions at once but, in the process produced some shining solos, particularly with the harmon mute. Clearly, here was a man with something new and valid to say, even under great pressure.



The Keith Stirling Quintet in action at the Sydney Jazz Festival, 1982. From left, Jay Stewart, Stirling, Craig Scott, Steve Brien. Drummer Ron Lemke is behind Brien...
PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

At that time the Americans, led by Freddie Hubbard and Johnny Griffin were in Australia for the education clinics and associated concerts around the country. They heard Keith Stirling play often; many of them sat in with him around Australia. They were impressed by his brilliance. Some of them were heard to remark that, of the Australian players they'd heard, Stirling was one of the few whose level of accomplishment approximated the state of the art in New York.

Since that time, Keith Stirling has reinforced his growing reputation: that of a man into a new creative era. In jam sessions at The Basement and for the Jazz Action Society, with the pianist Bob Gebert at the Paradise Jazz Cellar, and in performances

elsewhere, he has been playing over the last 18 months with a consistent, concentrated energy. The erratic nature of his work, which used to handicap him and trouble his listeners, seems now to have receded into memory.

Well, what has caused the transformation? Why is Keith Stirling on this new level of creative energy? Answer: he's into Nichiren Shoshu, a form of Japanese Buddhism. But more of that later.



NSA members Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Buster Williams participate in an NSA parade in October 1982: a form of Buddhism that has captured the imagination of a great number of jazz musicians...

First, a few biographical details. Keith Stirling was born in Melbourne —one of that great army of musicians from down south who eventually found Sydney a far more congenial place for professional music and jazz. But it took him some time to get there.

He came from a musical family. His mother played piano; his father played a number of stringed instruments, sang, and loved opera. Both parents like jazz which meant that Fats Wailer, Ellington, and Jelly Roll Morton records were heard in the home.

There were two brothers and the eldest, Alan, brought home a trumpet one day. Alan loved Charlie Parker, Miles and Howard McGhee, and bought their records. Keith was about 7 or 8 years of age at the time. He was forbidden by his brother to touch the trumpet; if he did, there was a beating in the offing.

Still, the young Keith was fascinated by the instrument, and got it out whenever his brother wasn't home. He taught himself quickly to get a sound and play simple tunes. One night at a party his brother attempted to play *Blue Moon*, and played it badly. Keith took the horn from him and played the tune confidently and sweetly. "My brother belted the daylights out of me", says Keith.

During his early years, Keith was not serious about the trumpet. He never thought that there might be a career in music. As he grew up, he continued his interest in the horn; he was drawn to other musicians, enjoyed hanging around with them, and played a few gigs. In his early teens he took basic lessons from the fine Melbourne trumpeter Freddie Thomas (who also taught Boof Thomsen). Thomas played and conducted in the cinemas in Melbourne.

"I was just fooling around, playing jam sessions", says Keith, "having a lot of fun, going to dances hearing the bands play. I'd always be sitting listening to the bands. I'd just idolise them".

Only now does he realise how much his background was preparing him for a musical career. "I was working for what I wanted to hear; my imagination was getting richer all the time.

"I came from that sort of family. My father was a supervisor on the railways, but he was an amateur sculptor, very creative. My mother was into jazz, a bit like Willie Qua's mum Pat. Every kid was playing football and cricket, but I'd rather be inside listening to music.

"My father worked with a lot of Italian immigrants on the railways. He'd hear them singing and bring them home. He was a frustrated tenor. These guys couldn't speak English, but they could sing and sing! We'd be having dinner and listening to these Italian guys, my father would be crying ... I'm very grateful to my parents for having all that music around."

After leaving school, Keith was a cadet photographer with the *Melbourne Argus* and later worked in advertising, intending to do commercial artwork. But music was always there, hovering in the background.



Roger Bell: a great trumpeter... he knocked me out...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

“I’d hang out with my friends, and we’d see guys like Frank Johnson’s Dixielanders, and the late Ken Herron . . . and Roger Bell knocked me out — a great trumpet player. The jazz was traditional and swing in Melbourne at that time. The music wasn’t new to me; I’d recognise it from home.”

With the growth of modern jazz in Melbourne in the 1950s Stirling got to know the promoter Horst Liepolt, who had opened Jazz Centre 44, and the growing circle of modernists.

“Guys like Brian Brown, Stewie Speer, and Len Barnard were a great help to me. Len was a great player ... he’d be bridging Thelonious Monk into Bix Beiderbecke. It was great hanging around with those people. I used to sit in with Brian Brown and Keith Hounslow. If Hounslow couldn’t make it, they’d hire me.”



Keith Hounslow at Jazz Centre 44 in Melbourne: If he couldn’t make it, they’d hire Stirling...

“Graham Lyall and I were about the same age, and there were a lot of great players around in Melbourne then: Roger Sellers, Chuck Yates, Ted Vining, Graham Morgan... We were growing up with the music. We were the same age as Freddie Hubbard, Woody Shaw and those guys. It wasn’t like now, where the kids have to dig back into the past a bit to hear Lee Morgan. We were growing up with the American players day by day, even if we were in another part of the world.”

Soon, the realisation hit Stirling that it was time to take the music seriously; a musician had to work to survive. “I started to think: ‘how do you play this animal of an instrument? It’s not easy! I hear the music. I’m getting older, I wish I could play this or that’. I was just starting to mature.”



Stirling: maturity through growth, a restless exploration of music, a search for enlightenment... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

From that time, in his early 20s, certain themes began to emerge, which have characterised Keith Stirling's later life: maturity through growth, a restless exploration of music, a search for enlightenment. He was to become one of the most travelled musicians in Australian jazz, living and working for long periods in Sydney, Adelaide and Perth, as well as Melbourne. Consequently, he is now one of the best-known jazz players around the country.



In the great days of the El Rocco, Stirling met men like Mike Nock, pictured here in the US in the early 70s...

In the early 1960s he began hitchhiking to Sydney to play. These were the great days of the El Rocco, and Stirling met men like John Pochée, Dave Levy, Mike Nock, Rick Laird, and Bob Bertles. At that time, there was much commuting between Sydney and Melbourne, as jazz musicians found kindred spirits in both cities. Soon, Stirling was living and working in Sydney.

“I still had the umbilical cord attached to Melbourne, so if anything went wrong I could go back. At one stage I went to Melbourne, and it had changed - or I had changed. So I thought I’d go to Adelaide. I’d never been there. I knew a couple of musicians from there — Bob Gebert and Billy Ross. They’d been playing at The Embers in Melbourne.”

“Bob Bertles and the late Keith Barr* - a great teacher and great friend — also turned up in Adelaide and we formed a sextet with Billy Ross on drums, Bob Gebert piano, and Ronnie Carson on bass. That was fantastic. I learnt a lot from that. We were playing Bobby Timmons stuff like *Dat Dere*, Yusef Lateef’s *Dizzy Atmosphere*, along the lines of the Cannonball Adderley Sextet.”

“It was a great experience meeting Keith Barr. Whenever I hear Paul Gonsalves now on record, it reminds me of Keith —that spirit. We were young guys then, he was an old cat. He taught us so much, with his approach off the stand, everything about music...”



John Howell, who opened Adelaide’s first jazz club, The Cellar ...PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

* *Keith Barr died in tragic circumstances in Sydney in the early 1970s.*

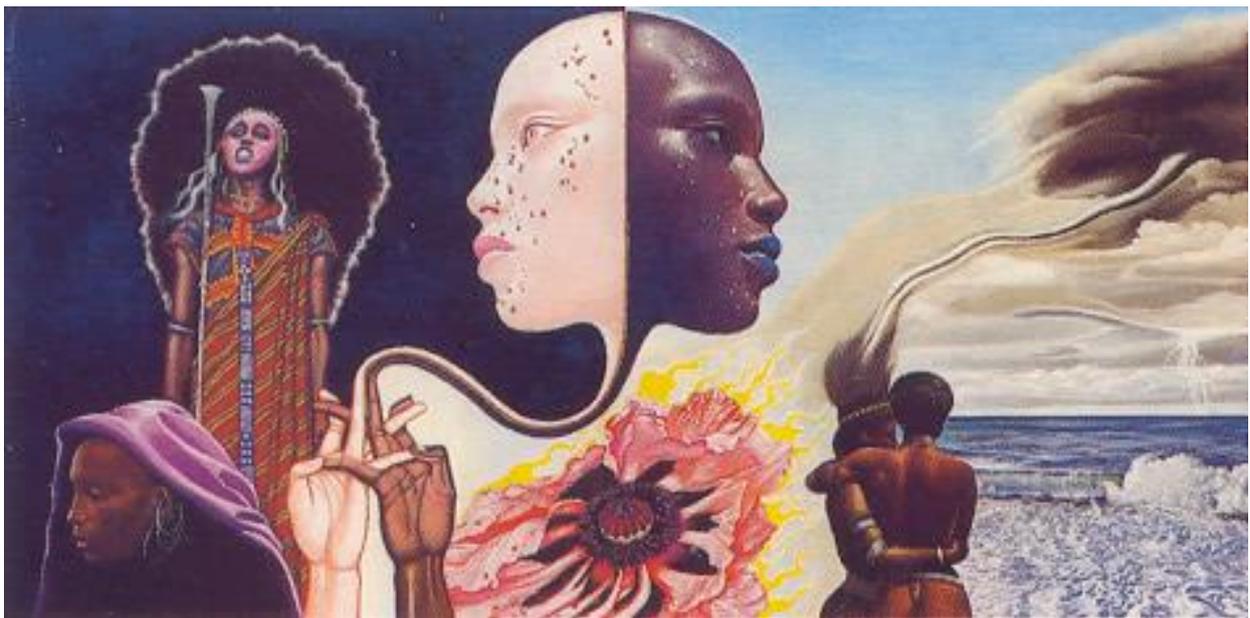
This group, called the Barr-Bertles Sextet, was resident at the famous Cellar in Adelaide, run by John Howell. “We’d start at midnight and do the milk-run until three,” says Keith.

Stirling was in Adelaide for two or three years, and met his wife Marlene. Always restless, he was looking to go overseas, perhaps through Singapore. It seemed appropriate therefore, in the late 60s, to go on to Perth (which was, after all, closer to Singapore than to Sydney).

In Western Australia, Stirling played at the Hole In The Wall with Billy Gumbleton on piano, the fine English tenor player Tony Ashwood (who has now gone back to England), Billy Tattersall on drums, and the late Frank Smith on bass.

“I was still growing. I learnt a lot from those guys. I was a crazy guy in a lot of ways. I thought I had it covered, but I didn’t. I was still growing up.”

Soon he was hit with a desire to get back to Sydney. He came via the Moscow Circus in 1968, at the time of a new wave in jazz: Miles’s *Bitches Brew* was in the air. In Sydney he quickly entered into the swing of professional music, working at the old Chequers’ nightclub with many of the great cabaret artists: Lou Rawls, Carmen McRae, Stevie Wonder, Tony Bennett ... an endless list.



When Stirling returned to Sydney in 1968, Miles Davis’s Bitches Brew was in the air...

“I learnt how to play in a section. I had to survive, so I took this sort of work”, says Keith. “But it was good, I’ve never regretted it. I’ve been very fortunate. It taught me to play, it taught me discipline, light and shade, it gave me greater confidence. A lot of it I didn’t enjoy. A high percentage of it annoyed me, but I had to survive.”

“I did see a lot of that stupidity in other musicians: ‘Oh no man. I’m a jazz player...’ Well, I wanted to eat. I was a jazz player, but I don’t have to say anything else. I don’t have to play games when reality is hitting me in the face. I can do it, and do it well.

“But I learnt a lot at the same time. I sat in with Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers when they were here. There was a lot of bad music too, bad acts, and I was a painful guy too, I’m sure. But I was learning and growing.”

Around 1970, Stirling went back to Melbourne, at about the same time as Graeme Lyall. He recorded an LP with Bruce Clarke, and worked in the studios. But eventually he was itching to get back to Sydney.



Don Burrows came along and Stirling said, ‘Help me, get me outa here!’... There wasn’t the stimulation in Melbourne...

“Don Burrows came along and I said. ‘Help me, get me outa here!’ I just wanted to get back to Sydney. There wasn’t the stimulation in Melbourne.”

At that time, around 1975, the Jazz Studies programme was in full swing at the NSW Conservatorium of Music under the American saxophonist Howie Smith. Through the good offices of Burrows, Stirling landed a job teaching in the course, and taught there for four years.

“It was fantastic. I was learning all the time. I was having a crash course with Howie, saying “What’s the name of this scale?’ I’ve been playing it for years.’ I knew the basics by ear, but I was starting to learn it all over again in an academic way. There’s nothing wrong with knowledge; it won’t hinder your progress.”

Still, Keith found that a preoccupation with the academic approach began to inhibit him as a player. “I got to the point where I’d be playing at The Basement, feeling I had to play the absolute correct scale for everything. I became stereotyped — no-one else noticed it, I’m sure. I just wasn’t happy, whereas before I was free-er and would take chances, I’m that kind of person anyway — I’ll take a chance.”



The US educator Howie Smith: what's the name of this scale? I've been playing it for years...

Stirling resolved this impasse by taking up his travel cycle again. This time, it was off to New York on a study grant from the Music Board of the Australia Council in 1978. "A jazz menopause", as he describes it. "Going to New York verified that I was on the right track, and gave me more self-confidence and direction."

Before going to New York he studied at tertiary institutions in Louisville and Chicago. "I'd just left the Conservatorium and now I was being swamped with information. If I find the Holy Grail I'll share it. I'm that type of person. Because it's eluded me this long in my life, it's made me appreciate it more when I get it. I've had a lot of salt, so when sugar came along. I really knew how to taste it."

Stirling regarded himself as street-wise. Like most true jazz musicians, he was basically self-taught. He had come up from the street-level playing, then had gone to school later, but found he couldn't relate totally to the academic approach. He felt that knowledge and education were necessary, but he needed an extra dimension to justify his jazz beliefs.

"Jazz music is above all an act of creating, of communicating one's feelings directly and immediately, of making something fresh and new which is deeply and thrillingly personal, out of the materials of popular song", he later wrote in his report to the Music Board. "Jazz is a spontaneous music of the here and now, composed on the spot and instantaneously executed."

On his way to New York, Stirling felt that something was missing. “I could hear it. but I couldn’t switch it on,” he says. “That’s why my pilgrimage to New York was so important.

“What did I learn? Well, Lee Konitz taught me how to play a song, how to play *a tune*. And what you learn with one tune, you learn for all tunes. It hasn’t let me down yet.



Lee Konitz: A good player borrows from somebody else; a great player steals from somebody else...

“Lee Konitz comes from a distinguished line, a tree . . . Very much from Charlie Parker. If you listen to Lee. you’ll hear a lot of Bird. He told me himself that he was still lifting off Bird. A good player borrows from somebody else; a great player *steals* from somebody else. That’s what Lee Konitz taught me. It’s not as immoral as it sounds.”

“I learnt the basics from all those people in New York. Not just Lee Konitz, but Tom Harrell, Chet Baker, Ron Matthews... others.

“Also, one of the great things I learnt from the Americans is this: concept before technique. Not the other way around. In other words, your technique must come up to your concept. You can’t allow technique to rule you. That’s a tendency in a lot of players.”

Brimful of energy following his return to Australia in 1980, Stirling applied practically the knowledge he had derived from his period in New York. “I learnt most from one-to-one relationships in New York,” he says.



Guitarist Steve Brien: one of the promising young musicians in Sydney jazz in Stirling’s quintet...

Accordingly, he grouped around him four of the most promising young musicians in Sydney jazz: Jay Stewart (piano), Craig Scott (bass), Steve Brien (guitar), and Ron Lemke (drums) later replaced by Matt Dilosa.



Craig Scott: bassist with Stirling’s young quintet... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

For two years, this quintet was one of the most exciting and capable modern groups playing in Sydney. “I taught those cats a lot of things, man,” says Keith. “I applied those techniques I’d learnt to these young musicians, and I was very proud of their achievements over 18 months or two years. At the same time I was perfecting in myself these fundamental skills which are still growing in me today and still flowing.”

Since that time, Keith Stirling has had some great moments in jazz. On the tour with the overseas artists in early 1982 he was invited by Miroslav Vitous to perform with him and Mike Nock in a series of concerts; he recorded an album in early 1982 with the American alto saxophonist Richie Cole for Peter Noble, which is yet to be released; for two years he played with the Toshiko Akiyoshi/Lew Tabackin big band at the Sydney International Music Festivals run by Peter Korda. These are only some of the memorable highlights of a busy career in jazz.



The bassist Miroslav Vitous: in 1982 he invited Stirling to perform with him and Mike Nock in a series of concerts... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

That brings us up to date, and to Keith Stirling's views on the music scene in Australia today. "If you want to know about a city listen to its popular music," says Keith. "If you listen to music on the radio in Australia, AM or FM, I don't believe it. It's like wheelchair city; it's not healthy, it's not good."

Still, Keith's attitude is a philosophical one: out of this a better and new era will emerge. "In my own life. I've learned that something good can come out of negativity. Things can be better in Australia. Take Japan — Hiroshima. Nagasaki ... Out of that devastation and ruin came the Japan of today, the economy that's the best in the world. West Germany too ... A lotus flower grows in the mud: it doesn't grow in a swimming pool. It may even get worse in Australia, but in the long-term eventually it will get better."

There is a basic strength and optimism about Keith Stirling which he has derived from Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism (in Australia known as NSA). It is a form of Buddhism that has captured the imagination of a great number of jazz musicians: Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Buster Williams, Ron Carter, Billy Hart, Tina Turner, Roberta Flack, Miroslav Vitous, Rufus Reid and many others. Stirling

himself was turned on to it by the black American singer Ernestine Anderson when she was in Australia in 1981.

Ernestine Anderson had flown into Melbourne to a crisis. She was suffering from jet-lag, her luggage had gone on to India, and the rehearsal with the musicians in Melbourne hadn't gone well. She had only the clothes she was standing in, plus her make-up bag, and she was due to open that night. Yet she was serene. Stirling noticed that she was a strikingly attractive woman, looking years younger than her actual age. She was chanting, over and over: "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo..."



The American singer Ernestine Anderson: in Melbourne she turned Stirling on to Nichiren Shoshu (NSA) Buddhism, which has transformed his life and spirit...

Stirling was at that time at a low point himself, stranded in Melbourne, following the Georgie Fame tour. Maureen O'Keefe from the Barry Ward agency, had invited him to lunch to meet Ernestine. Soon the American singer had him chanting too.

That was a crucial meeting for Keith Stirling. Since then Nichiren Shoshu (NSA) has transformed his life and spirit. The chanting enables him to tune into the fundamental laws of vibration and feeling. "You just chant for what you want", says Keith, "and it really works. It gives me tremendous energy.

"Once I started, things started to happen; all these things started to work out. I was thinking 'how much is this going to cost? What do I have to do? Shave my head?' But I only had to chant. It's that simple. Ernestine told me 'in 12 months you won't know yourself; you'll be driving your own bus'. And that's how it's worked out.

"You get incredible wisdom through this, and courage. The knowledge that comes to you is unreal. That's what I'm playing on now. My life condition is in a much higher state, and that's why I'm playing and feeling better."

**Editor's note: Keith Stirling died in August, 2003. An obituary written by John Clare appears on this site at the link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-10>.*