

KENNY BARRON TRIO AT THE BASEMENT

Reviewed by [Eric Myers](#)

The Basement, Sydney, June 1, 2017

I had heard this great trio the previous night in Brisbane, as part of the Brisbane International Jazz Festival. Where I was sitting, in the cavernous Queensland Conservatorium Theatre, the sound left a lot to be desired. The second concert of the tour in the intimacy of Sydney's Basement - the natural milieu for such a trio – did much to restore my faith in this country's capacity to present live jazz as it should be heard.

Pianist Kenny Barron's trio has been together for ten years, its artistic direction thoroughly honed and road-tested, with superb sidemen Kiyoshi Kitagawa (double bass) and Johnathan Blake (drums). In fact Blake has been with Barron for 20 years. The empathy between the two of them in both Brisbane and Sydney was something to behold.



L-R, Kiyoshi Kitagawa, Johnathan Blake, Kenny Barron...

Barron's approach to the audience was unusual. Before playing a note at both concerts, Barron, just turned 74, took to the microphone and spoke. It had taken him 50 years to get to Australia, he said, but his drummer Johnathan Blake had been here four times... "and he's not even 40".

There was some interesting patter about the hoops he had to jump through to qualify for entry into Australia: the need for medical insurance; a letter from his doctor to

testify that he was healthy enough to travel; and so on. But ironically, when he arrived in Australia from New Zealand, he said, no-one asked him for the documents he had gone to so much trouble to prepare.

Barron went on to introduce his two sidemen before they embarked on their program. This created a warm and receptive vibe in the room. It also established Barron as a humble presence, despite his legendary status at the end of a long evolutionary line of post-bop/mainstream pianists. That line more or less commences with Bud Powell, and travels through Thelonious Monk, of course, then Red Garland, Tommy Flanagan, Wynton Kelly, Hank Jones, and maybe others. To describe Barron as the last man standing is perhaps going a bit too far. But, after him, who remains?



Kenny Barron: after him, who remains?...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Having in mind the monstrous, ballooning sound of Kitagawa's double bass in Brisbane, it was great to hear his lines clearly in The Basement, courtesy of sound technician Hugh Boyce. Kitagawa was given plenty of solo space, as is customary in this sort of trio, and he repeatedly mesmerised the audience with superb solos. He has an endearing, and crowd-pleasing habit of reminding the listener of the melodic line underlying his improvisations.

In terms of audience reaction, one might think that the drummer Johnathan Blake was the night's star. He's not tall, but certainly is a big man. If he was your friend, you might be wondering how you could raise with him the fact that you're worried about his weight. He sits at the drums, as if he's sitting at a bench in the kitchen, with all his implements flat in front of him, under waist height.

But his drumming is a revelation. He plays the tune rather than the drums. He's a listener, and is alive to every nuance in the composition, and to every nuance in

Barron's playing. Whenever Barron went up a gear in his extended improvisations, Blake was there with him. It was exciting stuff: good, old-fashioned tension and release. And excellent dynamics, with his willingness to bring the volume back to a whisper.

Blake's drum breaks - more often than not of eight-bars - brought the house down. His contributions, in response to Barron's playing, would start simply, and progressively build in complexity. At a certain point, there would be so many polyrhythms emanating from the drums, with Blake's sticks flying around, that the pulse was effectively disguised. When the three musicians arrived back on the beat, the audience would erupt.

Sometimes I wonder about this. Why does the drum solo elicit so much more audience reaction than other elements in the music? Why do people feel free to whoop it up, and call out, in a drum solo? Is it the noise - the louder volume - that liberates the animal spirit in some listeners?



L-R, Johnathan Blake, Kiyoshi Kitagawa, Kenny Barron...

The climax of this sort of audience participation occurs when the last drums contribution occurs. It is now a settled convention that when a pianist like Barron re-enters with the theme, and states the melody, people applaud vigorously. I have often wondered if people are applauding, not to congratulate the drummer, but out of relief that the music is returning to a familiar melody.

Jazz artists should not assume that this rather noisy aspect of jazz performance is what the audience prefers. In fact, the obverse is the case. It is the laid-back, relaxed, soft and reflective moments in such a performance that we savour most. For me one of the highlights of the performance was a medley of Billy Strayhorn compositions that Barron played solo: *Lotus Blossom*, *A Flower is a Lovesome Thing*, *Melancholia*, and *Star-Crossed Lovers*.

Other highlights were a gentle version of the standard *How Deep is the Ocean*, in medium four, with Blake using brushes - a tune that Barron repeated from his Brisbane program; and the lovely Barron composition *Cook's Bay*, where the drum-feel was reminiscent of Ahmad Jamal's famous version of *Poinciana*.



Barron: one of the highlights of his performance was a medley of Billy Strayhorn compositions that Barron played solo... PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER

The latter was in the body of the program in Brisbane. In Sydney, after thunderous applause from an audience which obviously wanted more, it served as the group's encore. It was a gentle and relaxing note to finish on, capping off a great night.

[Editor's note: a review by Eric Myers of the Kenny Barron Trio's performance in Brisbane the previous night, on Wednesday, May 31, 2017, was published in The Australian newspaper on Friday, June 2, 2017. It appears on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/the-australian-2015-2>.]