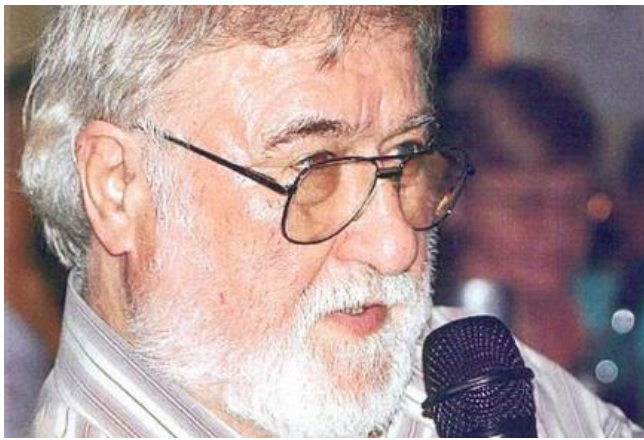


MAINSTREAM JAZZ: IS IT WORTHWHILE?

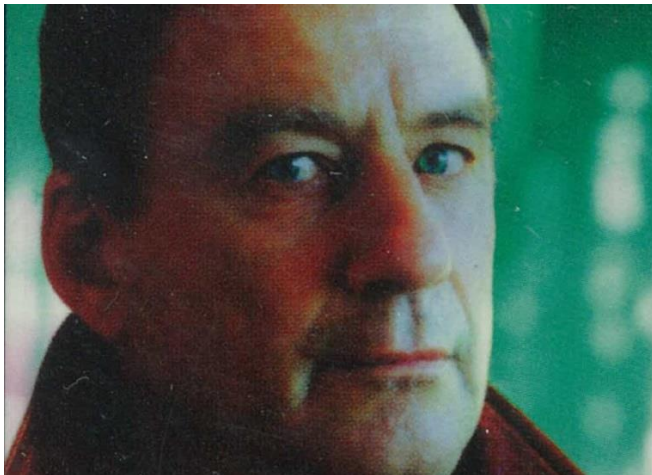
by Eric Myers*

[This article appeared in the official program of the Sydney International Jazz Festival, March, 1992]

When discussions took place on the contents of this souvenir program, it was agreed that the full vigour of Sydney jazz could be appreciated only if the three primary streams of the city's music were represented: the traditional, the mainstream, and the contemporary. None of these could be overlooked in a serious analysis of the jazz world just as musicians representing these streams could not be overlooked as performers in the festival.



Peter Newton (above) & Gail Brennan/John Clare (below) who have written respectively on traditional jazz, and contemporary jazz, in this official program...



** When this was written in 1992, Eric Myers was National Jazz Co-ordinator, a position funded by the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body, and the NSW Government's Ministry for the Arts. He was the editor of the official program of the Sydney International Jazz Festival, March, 1992, in which this article was included. He was a former jazz reviewer with the Sydney Morning Herald (1980-82) and The Australian (1983-87).*

The Sydney International Jazz Festival has taken a comprehensive and novel approach. So many Australian jazz festivals, in past years, have almost totally ignored contemporary jazz, in the belief that such music was not appreciated by the wider public. Programs were stacked with pseudo-jazz groups, some of whom were mediocre, and many of the most brilliant Australian jazz artists - those who could take their places without embarrassment on the most prestigious international concert platforms - were puzzlingly ignored. The Sydney event however attempts to give all our musicians a fair go.

I am indebted to Peter Newton and Gail Brennan for their scholarly surveys of two of those streams: the traditional and the contemporary and it remains for me to write about so-called 'mainstream' jazz. The term 'mainstream' has often meant different things to different people. Some think of mainstream jazz as any form of jazz that is accessible to the wider public, to the so-called middle of the road "cabaret jazz", built around a vocalist with jazz musicians playing arranged music, with the occasional space for improvised solos, is thought to be typical. Many forms of jazz-oriented music but which, in reality, have little jazz content have been considered part of the mainstream.

The matter has to be considered in terms of historical jazz styles. The term 'mainstream' was first coined by the British critic Stanley Dance in the 1950s, in an attempt to describe the sort of small-group swing being played by great musicians who were still active such as Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins. Such players had been superseded by the bebop revolution of the 1940s, but they continued to play in the spirit of the 1930s and early 1940s. Many jazz fans admired them for keeping the older styles alive even if they were often accompanied by rhythm sections which showed the influence of bop.



The UK critic Stanley Dance (left), who first coined the term 'mainstream', pictured here with the US pianist Earl Hines...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The term 'mainstream' has also been applied to a somewhat different kind of music, current in the 1970s and 1980s: to musicians who are still playing bebop with the addition of some more contemporary influences, such as modal jazz and free jazz. What unites these two mainstreams is the tendency for the musicians to have a number of feet in a number of camps. Also both are forms of jazz that feature improvisation on chord sequences.

Most people would not include in the mainstream such forms as Dixieland (or New Orleans jazz), free jazz, fusion (or jazz/rock as it used to be known), or Latin-jazz, and other forms of eight-pulse music. If the music swings and the repertoire utilises popular tunes or jazz standards, based on familiar chord sequences, then we have mainstream jazz whether the stylistic approach is swing-oriented, bop-influenced or affected by a number of more modern influences.

James Morrison whom some people consider a bop musician, because he plays with the technical facility and fire of the early Dizzy Gillespie is, in my view more correctly a swing musician of high sophistication, who is more likely to reach back into the traditional for inspiration - witness his version of *St James Infirmary Blues* on the *Snappy Doo* album - rather than into post-bop forms. I agree with some critics who say that Morrison is yet to produce his best music. He is such a talented musician, that he could certainly evolve into a modernist if he had the motivation. But the suggestion of past forms is basically the secret of his great appeal. His improvisations are triumphantly tonal, related closely to the melody and harmonic structure of familiar tunes - on the wave length of the average music lover. There is little abstraction in Morrison's music.

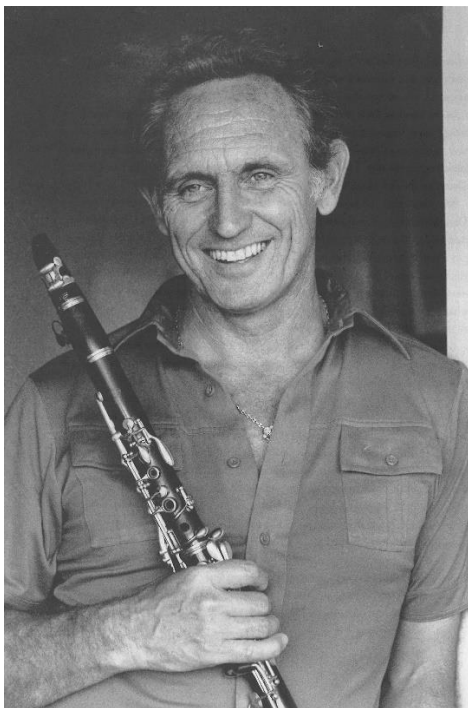


James Morrison: a swing musician of high sophistication, who is likely to reach back into the traditional for inspiration... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Mainstream jazz in Australia is most typified by Morrison, Don Burrows, and other popular groups such as Galapagos Duck. The Duck have enjoyed an ascendancy dating back to the early 1970s, when they were showcased by The Basement and Burrows who, in 1992, celebrates his 50th year as a professional musician. Burrows' ascendancy dates from a time when he was virtually the only jazz musician in the country widely recognised by the public. James Morrison joined the Duck and Burrows as a popular artist in the early 1980s, and by the end of the decade had outstripped both.



One version of Galapagos Duck, L-R, Greg Foster (trombone), Len Barnard (drums), John Conley (bass), Ray Alldridge (keyboards), Tom Hare (saxophones, trumpet)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



Don Burrows, aged 50... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Morrison was more suited to show business than Burrows and became a celebrity. His career moves were unusual for a serious jazz musician. He appeared on mass entertainment television shows, won the Mo Award for Performer Of The Year in 1990, an extraordinary achievement for a jazz musician, and married Judi Green, a winner of the Miss Australian Charity Queen contest. He and Judi became a natural item for the mass media, including high-selling women's magazines.



James Morrison & wife Judi Green, appearing on the television program “This Is Your Life” with their two children... PHOTO COURTESY MERV COLLINS

Some of the newer groups have emerged as highly popular acts in the 1980s, although it is difficult to fit some of them into the bag: Monica & The Moochers (cabaret jazz rather than mainstream), Kate Ceberano (a pop star with a vast audience, some of whom she has brought over to jazz) and Vince Jones.



Kate Ceberano: a pop star with a vast audience, some of whom she has brought over to jazz... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Vince Jones is a special case, far more innovative than the others, and therefore not typical of the mainstream. Look at his latest band: saxophonist Dale Barlow, drummer Andrew Gander and bassist Lloyd Swanton from Sydney, and Melbourne's Barney McAll (piano) and Ray Pereira (percussion). Despite Jones's proven popular appeal his music is not all that accessible. But it is beautifully packaged. The sound is good (permanent sound technician Jeff Phillips), the musicians are always conscious of image (wearing suits even on the hottest nights) and Jones's show has a pace that appeals to the young, hip middle-class audience.



Singer Vince Jones (pictured above, performing with Sydney bassist Lloyd Swanton) and below on trumpet... PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN



Also he has a presence on stage that few performers in Australian jazz can match. Let's not say that his music is accessible but it is mainstream in the sense that it reflects a wide variety of influences that can be found in the history of jazz: the harmon-muted intimacy of Miles Davis's 1950s period, early Coltrane when Barlow is in the group; some R & B; and treatment of jazz ballads in the time-honoured tradition of the great jazz singers.

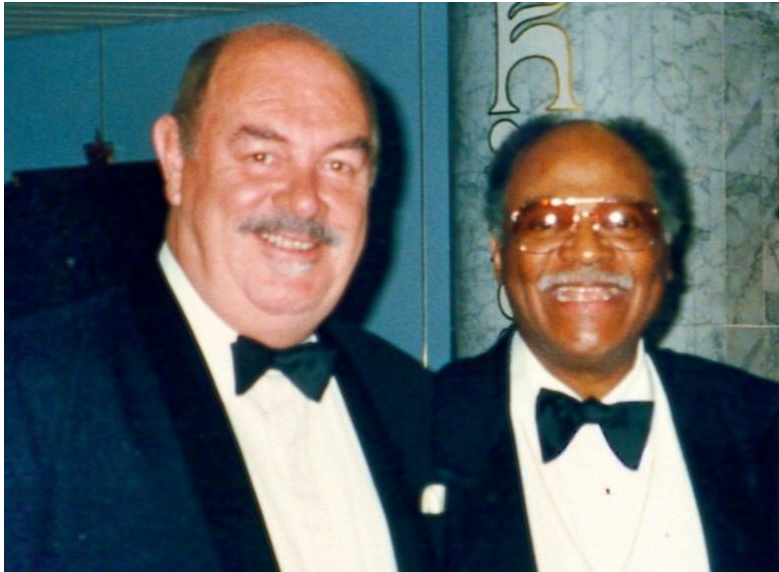
It is hard not to consider a group such as The Last Straw mainstream, although with volatile players like Bernie McGann and John Pochée, the music is always likely to stretch a little into exploration, even if the music is straight-ahead hard-bop after the style of black American groups of the 1960s.



The Last Straw, L-R, Tony Esterman, Lloyd Swanton, Ken James, Bernie McGann, John Pochée: their music is always likely to stretch a little into exploration... PHOTO COURTESY TONY ESTERMAN

Mainstream jazz seems to me to be primarily characterised by settled conventions and the absence of surprise. With mainstream, you've usually heard it all before and that's what you like. This is not necessarily a criticism of the music. Like most people who go to the office and get home fatigued I'm often in the mood for the comfortable and the familiar and in that mood there's nothing better than George Benson, Bob Barnard, Duke Ellington, 1950s Miles, Ricky May - much of the mainstream bag.

Who are the great mainstream musicians in Sydney outside Burrows and Morrison? Many of the lesser-known, less 'popular' musicians are worth drawing your attention to. Let me mention some of my special favourites: Tom Baker, Paul Williams, Keith Hounslow, Bob Barnard. Look for their names in the gig guides, and seek them out. They will be playing comfortable and familiar jazz, but at the highest standard of musical excellence and with real jazz spirit.



Another of my favourite 'mainstream' players Bob Barnard (left) pictured here with American trumpeter Clark Terry... PHOTO COURTESY LORETTA BARNARD

One of our great swing/mainstream players in Sydney is Tom Baker. Originally a traditional trumpeter he took up the saxophone when he was too ill to play the trumpet and in an extraordinary display of musical achievement, learnt to play it at professional standard in six months.



Tom Baker: One of our great swing/mainstream players in Sydney...

His saxophone heroes are the swing and R & B tenorists of the 1930s, the great saxophonists that immediately preceded Charlie Parker and bop such as Gene Ammons. But if he is a marvellous swing saxophonist, he is still a great traditional trumpeter.

I don't remember any jazz critic in the major newspapers singling out the reeds player Paul Williams as a major talent. I think he's an undiscovered giant of Sydney jazz, particularly on tenor saxophone, where he reflects much of the mainstream tradition exemplified by Webster and Hawkins, but also some of the bop tradition, after musicians such as Zoot Sims. Hear him with Keith Hounslow's Jazzmakers. Through the jazz co-ordination program, the Jazzmakers have just done a triumphant tour of the Pacific Islands, funded by the Dept of Foreign Affairs Cultural Relations Branch but they appear in Sydney venues only rarely.



This group, Keith Hounslow's Jazzmakers, includes two of my favourite 'mainstream' players, Hounslow (rear, centre) and Paul Williams (rear, far right). Others, L-R in front, are Grahame Conlon and Jimmy Shaw, and in rear Dieter Vogt... PHOTO COURTESY GRAHAME CONLON

The pocket trumpeter and flugelhorn player Keith Hounslow is a 'living national treasure' of Australian jazz. An intuitive musician, he claims that he is so ignorant of formal music, that he does not know what key he is in, nor the chord sequences of any tune. Yet he produces some of the most beautiful jazz you can hear in this country. It rolls out of him, in an extraordinary manifestation of the jazz spirit.

Then, while on trumpeters, what about Bob Barnard? He is a giant amongst the traditionalists, but has built his style into one of such majesty and lyricism that he is much more than a revivalist. He has moved into the mainstream through sheer talent. "Bob is the Daddy of all of us" the Melbourne trumpeter Bob Venier told me at

the first Wangaratta Festival of Jazz, as we watched Barnard, Bob is not performing at this festival owing to illness. We wish him a speedy recovery and a quick return to performing, for the pleasure of his many fans around the country.



Melbourne trumpeter Bob Venier: he says "Bob Barnard is the Daddy of all of us"...
PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ ORCHESTRA

I could go on. The musicians I've mentioned are the tip of the iceberg. There are others in the mainstream I could mention: the singers Marie Wilson and Kerrie Biddell, the pianist Chuck Yates (who is, in many ways, Australia's Barry Harris), the great Errol Buddle... and so on – all musicians whom I miss, and whom I often feel the need to hear again, lest I forget.

Not that Sydney has them all. One mustn't forget Melbourne musicians. In the mainstream mood Bob Sedergreen is incomparable His piano playing with Onaje in Montreal in 1990 was so hot that, at the time, I thought the piano would melt. Melbourne is not as much a mainstream town, however, as is Sydney. The musicians down there fan out either to the traditional, where they are very purist, or to the avant-garde. And of course there are the modernists. But that's another story.
