

THE AUSTRALIAN

Kings of the Cross rule as pub jazz springs to life



Alto saxophonist Michael Griffin... PHOTO CREDIT CARY BENNETT

MUSIC

Michael Griffin Quartet
Potts Point Hotel, Sydney
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In Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross, an oasis of art music has been thriving on Sundays for 12 months, courtesy of the Michael Griffin Quartet, a reminder that this seedy area was once inner-Sydney's most pleasant bohemian enclave.

Griffin plays bebop, (or 'bop') a style of jazz featuring brilliant improvisations over structured chord changes, sometimes at impossible speeds. Around for 70 years, it is the common language of most modern jazz musicians and remains the most influential style in the jazz canon. It still sounds fresh today, particularly when played with the sort of full-blooded commitment of this quartet.

Griffin, 29 – like Bernie McGann, an alto saxophone specialist - has mastered the language of bop, and is going through a period of youthful assertion. He has a huge sound and, playing in an environment with friendly acoustics, doesn't bother with amplification, enabling the listener to hear the alto in its pristine state. With blistering facility, reminiscent of iconic American Charlie Parker, Griffin leads a quartet that knows how to get the music off the ground - that is, how to swing.



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Their repertoire consisted of straight-ahead jazz standards (such as Thelonious Monk's *In Walked Bud*, Sonny Rollins' *St Thomas*, etc) and tunes from the Great American Songbook (such as *Stella by Starlight*, *Misty*, etc). Three sets were played, mostly utilising the convention of theme/solos/drum breaks/theme, with one or two ballads in each set for contrast.

Most modern jazz today takes place in the formal settings of the concert hall or jazz club, while so-called 'pub jazz', epitomised here, can be an endangered species. In the casual atmosphere of the hotel bar, the music is played while people move around freely, being served food and drinks. Characterised by informality, this is the sort of jazz gig that creates a community.

It's tempting to call pub jazz old-fashioned and indeed the expressive, rather raucous audience at this performance appeared to be primarily elderly, with

only a smattering of young people. But this is not to say the event did not feel entirely modern and contemporary.



The quartet included exceptional young players Aaron Blakey (above, electric piano) and Tim Geldens (below, drums)...



Griffin's quartet included Aaron Blakey (electric piano), Noel Mason (double bass) and Tim Geldens (drums), all exceptional young players, underlining the extraordinary depth of talent which now exists in Sydney jazz. Geldens was able to play with fire and spirit, without at the same time overwhelming the other players with volume. In a drummer, this is a priceless ability.

The Michael Griffin Quartet plays at the Potts Point Hotel on Sundays from 3-6.30 pm. His Potts Point Big Band will perform there on Thursday December 5, then the first Tuesday of each month from January. On December 12-13 his octet performs at Brisbane's Doo-Bop Jazz Bar.