

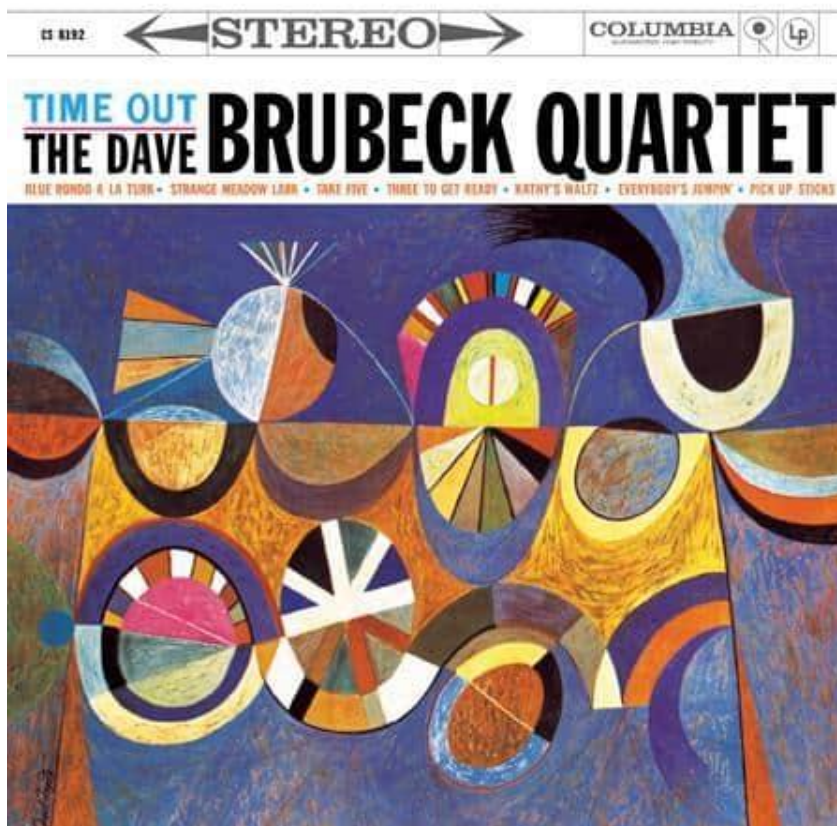
MY JAZZ ODYSSEY

by Eric Myers

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I was born in Newcastle, New South Wales in 1945, but grew up in Singleton, a small town in the Hunter Valley. Studying classical piano as a child, my connection with jazz during those years was tenuous. My teacher, a nun at the local Convent, would teach me stride piano, courtesy of the Art Shefte method but – significantly - only at the end of each year, after the classical exams were over. Jazz was then thought to be a trivial pursuit - for fun only - while classical music was regarded as Serious Music – a view which, in certain circles, I’m sorry to say, still survives to this day.

In the late 50s, aged about 13, I visited my uncle and his family in Sydney, and my cousin played me the Dave Brubeck Quartet album *Time Out*, which I found fascinating. For a number of years therefore my idea of jazz was limited to this quartet, and particularly to the alto saxophone of Paul Desmond. As with many seminal adolescent experiences I often think of Desmond as my first love. In later years I bought the sequel *Time Further Out* and other Brubeck albums, which reinforced my interest in this sort of music.



A major seminal jazz experience occurred in 1962, when I arrived, aged 16, to attend the University of Sydney. During Orientation Week a sign “Free Lunchtime Jazz Concert” drew me to the Wallace Theatre, where I expected to hear something like the Brubeck quartet. The reality was a rude awakening: the Port Jackson Jazz Band, with Ray Price (banjo), Ken Flannery (trumpet), John McCarthy (clarinet), John Costelloe (trombone), Wally Wickham (bass), Alan Geddes (drums) and Dick Hughes (piano). I had never heard anything like this music and, needless to say, found one hour of it completely riveting. Only later did I discover that this was “traditional jazz” while the Brubeck Quartet was “modern jazz” (or, to be more accurate, a particular modern style called “West Coast”).



The Port Jackson Jazz Band with the personnel I heard in 1962, other than Ray Price who had died by the time this photo was taken, and trombonist Doc Willis, instead of John Costelloe...

Over the next 15 years or so my relationship to jazz was fleeting. Stuck in a suburban house, concentrating on my university studies, I became a member of what was then the Australian Record Club, and devoured most of the late 50s Miles Davis LPs and Brubeck albums. But it was only after I began as a professional pianist, working in bands in the licensed clubs during the late 60s, that I came into contact with Sydney’s army of talented jazz musicians. Having never spent any time seriously

studying jazz, I could not be regarded as a jazz pianist in any sense, although I would play spirited solos; I now shudder to think how they must have sounded. My expertise was based on being able to read music at sight, courtesy of my classical training. With 1,000 licensed clubs in Sydney in the 60s and 70s, most of them employing live musicians to play dance music and back cabaret artists, work was plentiful and lucrative.

Many fine jazz musicians came through the club band I led over 20 years. They included Mick Kenny (trumpet), Herbie Cannon (trombone), Barry Woods (drums), Bobby Scott (double bass/vocals) Miroslav Bukovsky (trumpet), Joe André (alto saxophone/vocals), Ned Sutherland (guitar), Ken James, (saxophones & flute), Bill Motzing (trombone), John Pochée (drums), Bob McIvor (trombone), Ned Sutherland (guitar), Phil Treloar (drums). During the last manifestation of my club band in the early 80s, it included great musicians such as John Morrison (drums), Charlie Munro (saxophones & clarinet), Marie Wilson (vocals) and Dick Montz (trumpet). Like many club musicians during these years, I also had a lucrative business writing charts for cabaret artists.



A shot of the front-line at Cronulla-Sutherland Leagues Club in the early 70s: L-R, Bill Motzing (trombone), Miroslav Bukovsky (flugelhorn), Ken James (tenor saxophone)...

In the mid-70s my friend comedian Dave Burke started a monthly magazine for the entertainment industry called *Encore*. At some point in time he asked me to write something on conditions in the clubs for professional musicians. This led to a series of articles called “Musicians and the Clubs”, which Dave ran in *Encore* over several months. This was a real turning point for me. I discovered, in my early 30s, that I

enjoyed being essentially a freelance journalist. After doing music only - non-stop for many years - I found it refreshing to be doing something different and stimulating, an activity which I could pursue simultaneously while still being active as a professional pianist and arranger.

Once writing for *Encore* it wasn't far to reviewing musical performances and - dare I say it - posing as a music critic. By 1976 Andrew L Urban and his wife, the singer Margaret Keller, had bought *Encore* from Dave Burke. One day Andrew said: "We've got two complimentary tickets for the Roberta Flack concert at the Hordern Pavilion next week, would you like to go?" I said yes of course. There was a catch, however; I had to write a review for the magazine. I said I'd have no idea what to write, but Andrew advised: just write anything intelligent about the music you hear. This I did, and enjoyed it. Andrew was happy with my contributions, and this led to my reviewing jazz performances and writing feature articles on jazz musicians for *Encore*.



The Encore magazine principals L-R, Dave Burke, his wife Sybil, Louise Keller (I knew her as Margaret Keller), Andrew L Urban, who bought Encore Magazine from Dave, circa 1978...

When in 1977 I told Andrew that my partner Margaret Sullivan and I were relocating to England he said "How would you like to be *Encore's* London correspondent?" This was the furthest thing from my mind, and felt it far-fetched, but it turned out to be a great idea. The first thing I did after we hit London was contact Ronnie Scott at his jazz club in Soho, and do an interview with him, which was later published in *Encore*. Ronnie invited Margaret and I to attend the club as his guests. This was a revelation. In this way I discovered the freebie. Whenever there were major concerts on in London, I would contact the promoters or publicists, who had complimentary

tickets available for the press. When I told them I was the London correspondent for *Encore* magazine in Sydney, Australia, they would shower me with free tickets.

Returning to Australia in 1978 after 12 months away, I resumed working for *Encore*, and became its music editor in August 1978. I had become increasingly interested in writing on jazz, and one of my first major articles, in the August 1978 edition, was a cover story on the country's most well-known jazz musician: "Don Burrows: The Gentle Communicator". I was then able to branch out to other publications. For some time, for example, I was the jazz records reviewer for the Australian *Penthouse Magazine*.



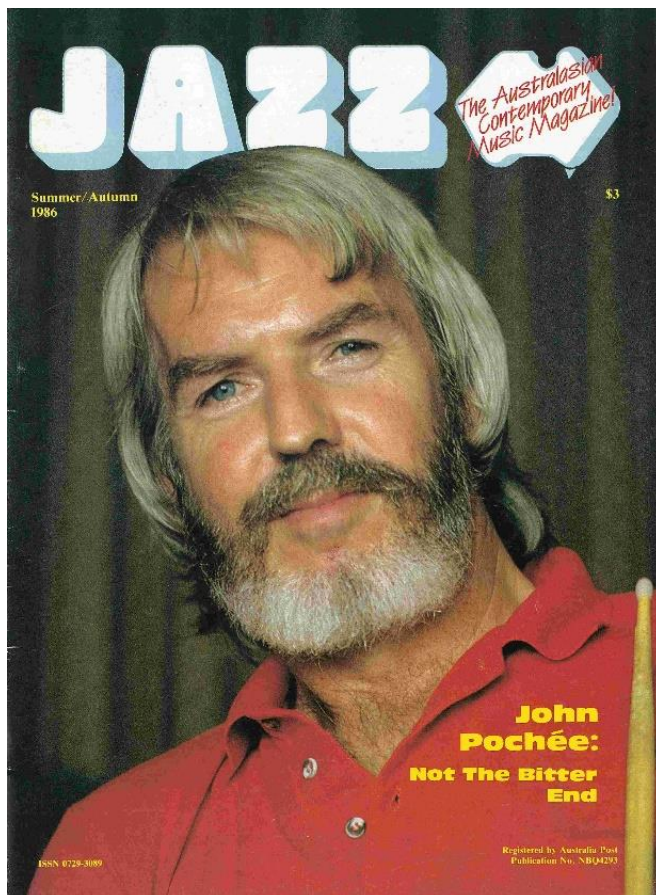
The cover of Encore magazine, August, 1978 edition...

In late 1979 I did a profile of the promoter Horst Liepolt, then the most significant non-musician in the Australian jazz world. This was shortly before Horst left for New York, where he became highly prominent in the NY jazz scene. My article on him was published in *Encore*. In early 1980 Horst recommended me to the new arts editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)* Richard Coleman, who was then looking for a jazz critic. Until then, occasional pieces on jazz had appeared in the *SMH* but they had never had a specialist jazz critic. I was the first, and commenced in 1980. There were a number of distinguished critics then writing for the *SMH*, notably H G (Harry) Kippax (theatre) and Roger Covell (classical music). So, with very minor credentials, I arrived into exalted company.

In 1983 I went on to *The Australian* where I was their jazz critic until late 1987, working for the legendary arts editor Maria Prerauer (nicknamed Maria Piranha).

Meanwhile, in early 1981 the entrepreneur Peter Brendlé had started *Jazz: The Australasian Contemporary Music Magazine* (which everyone called *Jazz Magazine*). I contributed various articles during its first year. Towards the end of 1981 I was talking to Peter, who was manager of the then young and up-and-coming musician James Morrison. Peter said he simply did not have the time to deal with publishing a bi-monthly magazine, and was thinking of selling it. On a whim I offered him \$1.00 for the magazine, an offer he accepted. I published and edited *Jazz Magazine* for about five years, until 1986. My partner Margaret Sullivan did the graphic design, while I was the editor and sold the advertising. So it was a family project, put together in one of the rooms in our Leichhardt house.

The magazine did not make a great profit, but neither did it lose money. Advertising revenue was able to cover costs and payment of modest fees to contributors and photographers. However, editions became intermittent as I got busier with my day job. I ceased publishing *Jazz Magazine* in 1986 because I no longer had time to devote to it. At this time I also resigned from *The Australian* because, by 1987, I was the CEO of a jazz organisation, the Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW (JCANSW), funded by Federal and State governments, and held the full-time position of National Jazz Co-ordinator from 1986. Running an organisation dedicated to supporting jazz musicians, I felt increasingly there was a conflict of interest in simultaneously being active as a critic.



Jazz Magazine, Summer/Autumn, 1986 edition, with drummer John Pochée on the cover...

The most satisfying aspect of the jazz co-ordination job was producing the bi-monthly newsletter *JazzChord* which, on the advice of my management committee, was first published in magazine form in January, 1993. It was full of invaluable news and information, directly relevant to the jazz community. I wrote prolifically for *JazzChord*, as well as doing the editing and graphic design. Looking back now at the 53 editions that were published in magazine form, I see an invaluable documentation of what was happening in the Australian jazz world during the decade of the 90s.

As the JCANSW did not survive my resignation in 2002, *JazzChord* went down with the ship. Unfortunately this meant that the jazz community lost, not only the one organisation that could act as a lobbying force on a national level, but also the one indispensable organ of communication that had united the Australian jazz community for a decade.

During the decade after 2002, I concentrated on running a business until I retired in 2015. Noticing that reviews of jazz performances were absent from the daily Arts page of *The Australian*, I offered my services as a reviewer to the then arts editor Ashleigh Wilson. Accordingly I began writing performance reviews and feature articles for *The Australian* in September, 2015. As from September, 2017, I succeeded the late John McBeath, writing jazz album reviews for the *Weekend Australian's* MUSIC REVIEWS page.



Ashleigh Wilson, arts editor of The Australian, who accepted my offer in 2015 to write on jazz for his newspaper...

Also, as from mid-2017, I began my own website www.ericmyersjazz.com, primarily concerned with documenting the history of Australian jazz.

While I have used the term “critic” a number of times above, it is the case that I’ve never thought of myself as a critic in the great tradition of a writer such as say

Whitney Balliett. What unites my activities in jazz for so long in the Australian context has been the desire to document the exploits of our jazz artists and act as a publicist for their music.

It has always irked me that the majority of great jazz musicians who provided the music that has immensely enriched my life – both here in Australia and overseas – have been so poorly rewarded.

My thanks to Ralph Powell, the Australian Jazz Museum's Collections and Research Officer, for inviting me to write this piece.



Eric Myers has been listening to jazz for 60 years, and writing on it for 40 years. He was the inaugural jazz critic for the Sydney Morning Herald 1980-1982, then jazz critic with The Australian newspaper, 1983-1987. He was publisher & editor of the Australian Jazz Magazine 1981-1986, and a government-funded Jazz Co-ordinator from 1983-2002. He returned to writing on jazz for The Australian in 2015.