

SANDY EVANS

by Eric Myers*

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In July, 1990, Sandy Evans was preparing to go overseas with Clarion Fracture Zone, the quintet she co-leads with her husband, the Scottish saxophonist Tony Gorman. Assisted by the Australia Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs, the group was scheduled to perform at jazz festivals in Holland, and for two weeks in the Soviet Union, before going on to Denmark and the UK.



Sandy Evans: co-leading the quintet Clarion Fracture Zone with her husband, the Scottish saxophonist Tony Gorman... PHOTO CREDIT FUTURE IMAGE CORPORATION

** When this was written in August 1990, Eric Myers was a freelance writer who had been writing on jazz for 15 years, and National Jazz Co-ordinator, a position funded by the Australia Council, and the NSW Government's Ministry for the Arts.*



Blue Shift: what jazz ought to be doing in 1990...

Also, ABC Records was preparing to release the group's album *Blue Shift* — to excellent reviews, as it turned out. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, described it as "an atmospheric and sometimes piercingly beautiful album... This blending of acoustic and electronically sampled sounds, of pure melody and squalls of dissonance, of drive and danceability and calming, crooning lilts, of sombre sound pools and vivid splashes . . . is what jazz ought to be doing in 1990."



Clarion Fracture Zone, L-R, Andrew Dickeson (drums), Steve Elphick (bass), Sandy Evans (saxophones & flute), Alister Spence (keyboards), Tony Gorman (reeds)...

For a jazz musician in Australia today, an international tour and an album out nationally are tangible signs of success. But, as Sandy Evans has discovered, in an art form where little revenue is generated, it is often very difficult to feel that one is reaching an audience.

"Obviously you want your music to be accessible, but ultimately I don't think you can count on it," says Sandy. "It depends a lot on the social and cultural climate you're living in at the time; what kind of media coverage you can get; what kind of money you've got behind you; what kind of values are propagated in the other art forms; and also whether the society you live in has contact with the traditions that you're working in, and I think in Australia that's not really the case.

"A lot of people aren't into modern jazz, so therefore they don't have a context in which to place you, and I think that can go against making the music accessible." So, like many of Australia's most important jazz musicians, Sandy Evans has never made much money out of the music. But she has had a good deal of artistic and critical acclaim, even if this has turned out to be a mixed blessing.

When she began making a name for herself in the early 1980s, she tended to be identified as avant-garde. "It is refreshing to meet someone like tenor saxophonist Sandy Evans who has the urge to plunge into all the many rivers of music, ignoring the warning signs. Don't Bathe Here: unfashionable; Nor Here: too dangerous; Nor Here: commercial," one critic wrote.



Evans: somehow her growth as an artist over recent years has been overlooked...
PHOTO CREDIT KATE PODGER

Critics have tended to read their own priorities into Sandy's playing. She was said to be more interested in expression, inspiration and beauty than in technical ability; and to have set herself apart from the more academically-minded jazz musicians of her generation. As a performer, it was said, she gave herself totally to forces within the music.

With this sort of press, some people came to perceive Sandy Evans as a cult figure — as someone more interested in ecstasy than in musical excellence; textures and group improvisation rather than individual brilliance; energy rather than discipline and control. When I put such quotes to Sandy Evans, she understood why these things had been published about her; in her earlier days she was less focussed. But she is now concerned to correct the imbalance; somehow her growth as an artist over recent years has been overlooked. For instance, she quickly laid to rest the impression that she was not interested in the tradition of brilliant improvisation in jazz.

"I do think that arriving at a group sound is important, and the collective interplay between people contributes significantly to the expression that takes place," she said. "But, by the same token, I am actually quite involved with the tradition of great improvisers, and definitely aspire to that."

Sandy identifies two major turning-points in her consciousness: the ground-breaking tour of Australia in 1985 by her quintet Women & Children First; and her time overseas in 1987-88. In the latter case, she travelled alone for some time, and met her husband Tony Gorman. But, both times, it was being on the road that enabled her to clarify what was important to her.



Tony Gorman & Sandy Evans: they met in Scotland in 1987 when Sandy was travelling alone... PHOTO CREDIT MATTHEW SUTTON

The monumental Women & Children First tour, funded by the Australia Council, took her to far-flung centres all around Australia, often to small towns where jazz had never been heard; it took eight months. "That tour was the most influential thing that ever happened to me, and to all of us in the band, I think," she says. "It made me much clearer about what I did and didn't want to do, as a player, and in terms of having a band.

"A lot of very diverse personalities came together in that group. We had to camp out, and do everything ourselves — the promotion, the lights, the sound. We were absolutely exhausted, and we went through a lot of personal trauma as a group of people living so closely together." At that time, Women & Children First, other than Sandy, included Cleis Pearce (electric viola), Steve Elphick (bass), Tony Buck (drums), and Sherre Delys (voice).



The group Women & Children First, other than Sandy Evans, Cleis Pearce (electric viola), Steve Elphick (bass), and Tony Buck (drums), included Sherre Delys (voice, pictured above)...

"I realised that, much as it was great to be interested in all these different sorts of music, I was interested in being an improvising saxophonist, within the confines of the jazz tradition to a large extent.

"It's not that I'm not interested in all these other forms, and I believe they can all feed in, and make what I can do really interesting. That's what been happening in jazz all along; one thing's been feeding into another, somebody picks up on something, and someone picks up on something else, and that's how the music's developed right from the word go.

"Then, when I was in Europe I realised that what you do is very specific. I'm a saxophone player, and that's a very specific thing. The more specific you can be about that, the more likely you are to achieve your goal."

While she enjoyed many European bands, and felt they presented their music with imagination, she preferred the sheer musical excellence of many of the American players she heard: their control of tone, feel, note choice, and so on. She says she would like to emulate that sort of control, and achieve a balance between that and the more intuitive approach that has been admired by some critics.

"There's a possibility, if you're just playing from the force of the music, that you don't have enough awareness of what the music is sounding like; it may be out of tune, out of time, whatever," she says.

"Control is definitely part of that balance for me. I think I always believed that, but it's taken me a while to start to see that it's possible for me to be like that. I think the great players are like that. And I think, to some extent, that's why I've been turned off from free jazz, because it bores me after a while.



Evans, pictured here on a northern beach, was born in 1960 and brought up in a middle-class household on Sydney's North Shore...

"I started off with quite a lot of 'expressionism' I suppose, and what I've tried to do as time's gone on, is to give that as musical a form as possible, and I think that's quite a long and difficult road. That's what I really admire about the great jazz players, that they do seem to have done that. Obviously my goal is 'expression', but it's very important to me to put that into a good musical form — not to just blurt it out."

Sandy also was concerned to correct the view that she is only interested in playing 'original' music, rather than jazz 'standards'. Because most of her projects have been highly individual ones, usually involving original composition, some critics have missed the fact that she is greatly interested in the orthodox tradition.

"I'm really keen on playing standards, and I wish I had more opportunity to do it. I spend a lot of time listening to standards, and playing them at home, and privately with people. I love it, and I think I probably will do that publicly a lot more. I've always hoped that the opportunity would just present itself, but it doesn't seem to that often.

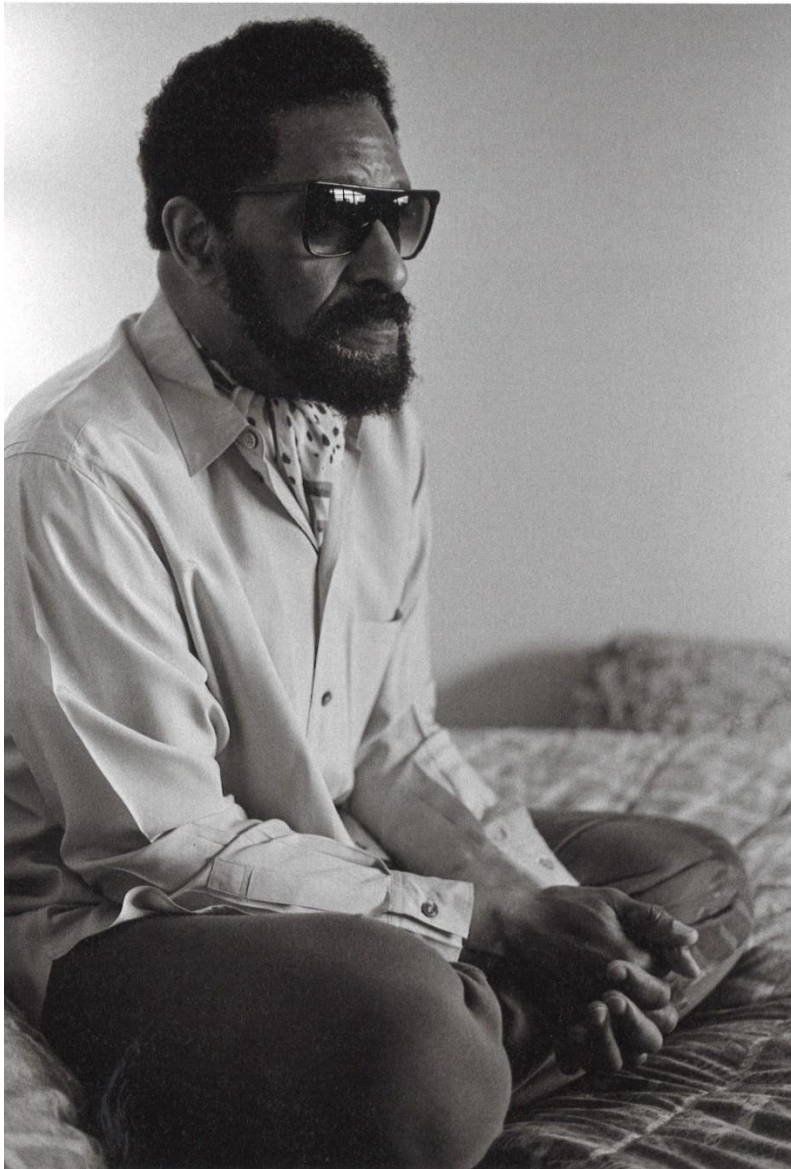
"I still definitely draw from a lot of different influences, but I've honed in much more on the jazz tradition, and that's been a definite change that I've undergone in the last five years. I discovered there was an incredible wealth of knowledge there. And I don't mean just in the modern jazz tradition; I mean Lester Young, and Coleman Hawkins, as much as Wayne Shorter and Coltrane."



Evans discovered an incredible wealth of knowledge not just in the modern jazz tradition but also in Lester Young (right), and Coleman Hawkins (left), pictured here with Ben Webster (centre)...

So, Sandy decided that she wanted to play with a more orthodox jazz rhythm section, which she has achieved with Clarion Fracture Zone; she has left behind the rock, minimalist and free influences which were so much part of Women & Children First. Also, she has tended to concentrate more on playing on chord structures. Thirdly,

she has been examining more closely the feel and phrasing of the great jazz musicians. "I've spent a lot of time transcribing," she says, "just getting into Sonny Rollins..."



Evans has spent a lot of time transcribing, just getting into Sonny Rollins (pictured above)... PHOTO CREDIT ARTHUR ELGORT

Born in 1960, Sandy was brought up in a middle-class household on Sydney's North Shore. From the age of 15, she spent two years at an international school in Singapore on a United World Colleges scholarship. Then primarily a flute player, she was immersed in music, playing in classical orchestras, and also in a Chinese orchestra. During this time she travelled extensively through Asia.

"A great experience", she now says. Significantly, she had a teacher who stimulated her interest in composition. The only student in the music class, she had him for eight hours a week for two years, during which he took her through the various styles

of composition in classical music. At that time, she was interested in music theatre, and wrote *Shattered Crystals: The Rock Opera* at the age of 16.

She began to get interested in jazz composition when she started playing the saxophone seriously, just before she entered the Jazz Studies program at the NSW Conservatorium of Music in 1982. In the same year she took lessons on the Lydian chromatic concept from the bassist Bruce Cale.



In 1982 Sandy took lessons on the Lydian chromatic concept from the bassist Bruce Cale (pictured above)... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CALE

She wrote for Great White Noise, a punk-jazz group she played with, which had considerable impact in Sydney. Since that time, like most jazz composers, she has mostly written for particular bands and for particular musicians.

At the time of *Women & Children First*, circa 1983-85, she was looking at orthodox jazz forms and seeing what she could do with them. For example, one of her pieces,

Climb, on the Women & Children First album, is an exercise in free improvisation; but she attempted to merge that with meditation music and Tibetan chanting.

Her stages of composition have been very much tied in with her development as a player. Another stage occurred during Cleis Pearce's time with Women & Children First. Encouraged by Cleis to get to the core of her feeling, and let the music flow from that, Sandy entered a period of getting away from what other people had done, and moving towards what she wanted to do. This was reflected in the music of Women & Children First, in that the group moved away from jazz and more towards an electric, rock-oriented band, with vocals.



Cleis Pearce: she encouraged Sandy to get to the core of her feeling, and let the music flow from that...

A long period overseas, beginning with six months study in Europe and the US, courtesy of an Australia Council grant, was also formative. In Scotland in 1987 she met Tony Gorman, who was a recording engineer as well as a saxophonist. So, when she and Tony were with the saxophone quartet SAXTC, they had the use of a recording studio, where she could write pieces, record them, and hear them back. She regards this time as an important preparation for the writing she would do for Clarion Fracture Zone and Ten Part Invention.

Sandy Evans considers herself to be extremely lucky to be a member of Ten Part Invention, a large contemporary ensemble in Sydney whose personnel reads like a who's who of Australia's most creative modern jazz musicians. Many people consider that her full potential as a composer finally flowered when she began writing for this group. Her initial piece was a suite called *In Search Of Home*, composed in 1986. This work, she says, resulted from the rough time emotionally she had gone through for some years, both in music, and in her private life.

It had taken Sandy some time to come to grips with so often being the only woman in a group of men — not only in performing groups, but also at places like the Conservatorium of Music. Even though she always enjoyed herself as a professional

jazz musician, it was often lonely; there were never many women around, and she rarely felt comfortable in most situations.



Ten Part Invention at the Wangaratta jazz festival in 1996, L-R, Roger Frampton (sopranino sax), Bob Bertles (alto sax), Bernie McGann (alto sax), Ken James (tenor sax), Sandy Evans (tenor sax)... PHOTO CREDIT BRENDON KELSON

She often used to recall a dream she had as a child where she flew over various landscapes; each time the dream had a different ending. So, *In Search Of Home* moved through various sections, illustrating each landscape. The piece was really a search for herself, she says, inspired by the sort of music played by the Charlie Haden Liberation Music Orchestra and some of Carla Bley's writing. The actual form of the piece came from the images she had in her mind; the melodies came from emotional inspiration.

In writing *In Search Of Home* for Ten Part Invention, she was deliberately avoiding conventional 'big band writing'. She was interested in seeing what colours she could get out of the band, that would suit those melodies, feelings and atmospheres.

Since that time Sandy has gone on to write other substantial compositions for Ten Part Invention, with fascinating titles: *Long Shadows Tall Stories*, *Unidentified Spaces*, *Smiling In A Non-Smiling Zone*, *Modern Companion*, and *Wind Over The Lake*. On the basis of this body of work, she can be considered one of the finest, and most interesting, composers that Australian jazz has produced for some time.

Sandy has found it helpful having a husband, Tony Gorman, who is also a saxophonist. Of course, they work together only in Clarion Fracture Zone, and

maintain their involvement in separate projects. Sandy has Ten Part Invention, and Tony has The Original Otto Orchestra. Since meeting Tony, Sandy has gained in confidence.



The Original Otto Orchestra, L-R, Tim Otto, Boyd Boyd, Graeme Norris, Tony Gorman...

"It's great having someone in your field that you can be open with about what you do", says Sandy. "With Clarion we have pursued it as a team, with [the pianist] Alister Spence as well. That's been good because there are so many things to do. Emotionally, it's really hard to have a band, to try to keep it together, especially when there are not many opportunities for you, and very little prospect of ever making a living out of it. That's all very draining, and I think it's good if you can share that with someone, and not just feel that everything's your own fault".

One feels that, for Sandy Evans, a solid commitment to jazz as an artform has been well and truly made. As the trumpeter Bob Barnard once said of this commitment, "We're out there; for us, there's no turning back." But there are moments when the music itself makes it all worthwhile. Sandy particularly remembers a concert in Melbourne when Women & Children First — the original group, including the brilliant Indonesian prodigy Indra Lesmana on piano — went through a barrier into some kind of nirvana.

"It was almost as if we'd all given ourselves up to this music, which was playing itself. It was absolutely incredible," says Sandy. "I don't know why or how it happened, but it didn't happen again; after that, it was like work again."



Sandy Evans says "it was almost as if we'd all given ourselves up to this music, which was playing itself. It was absolutely incredible"... PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS

"I think it's when you get to the stage you can relax totally with yourself, and your instrument, and the people you're playing with, and then anything is possible. When that happens it's just fantastic; you just don't want to stop — it makes up for all the hard slog. If there was any way to make that happen all the time, everyone would want to be a musician."

SANDY EVANS: LIST OF WORKS 1977-1990

1977 *Shattered Crystals* (rock opera)

1981 *If Only God Was a Christian*

1982 *Lovely Too* (for Great White Noise)

1983 *Voices**, *Shoot**, *March**, *The Universal In You**, *Dance**, *Caress**, *Climb**

1984 *Hara**, *In Your Own Time**

1985 *Arrive Alive**, *Like Wine**, *Evening Prayer**, *Come On Mama* (for Sandy Evans Trio)



Sandy Evans Trio, L-R, Toby Hall (drums), Brett Hirst (bass), Evans (saxophones & flute)... PHOTO CREDIT KAREN STEAINS

1986 *In Search Of Home***

1987 *The Dead The Living and Those In The Sun* (for SAXTC), *The Rose Of Sharon* (for SAXTC), *Long Shadows Tall Stories***

1988 *Unidentified Spaces: Forty-Two, The Heart, North Pole, Queensland***
*Smiling In A Non-Smiling Zone***

1989 *Dark Beneath The Moon* (for Australysis), *Tatabanya* (for Mara), *Lilac Embers****, *Feather Star****, *Blue Shift****, *Dolabrifera****, *Nudibranch****, *Khana Khana****, *Marine Graves****, *The Wild Uproar****, *Boondi****, *Fragrant Harbour****

1990 *Modern Companion***, *Wind Over The Lake***

**Written for Women & Children First*

*** Commissions by Ten Part Invention*

****Written for Clarion Fracture Zone*