

## SOUND BALANCE IN JAZZ: A VEXED QUESTION

by Eric Myers\*

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This article was prompted by a discussion that came about following my review, published in *The Australian*, of the September 8 concert in The Studio of the Sydney Opera House, when three finalists competed for the \$20,000 Music Trust Freedman Jazz Fellowship. They were vocalist Elly Hoyt and pianists Novak Manojlovic and Harry Sutherland, each performing for about half-an-hour with their own small ensembles.



*The Freedman finalists were singer Elly Hoyt (above) and pianists Novak Manojlovic (below) and Harry Sutherland (far below, see next page)... PHOTOS COURTESY FOUNDRY 616 & ANTHONY BROWELL*



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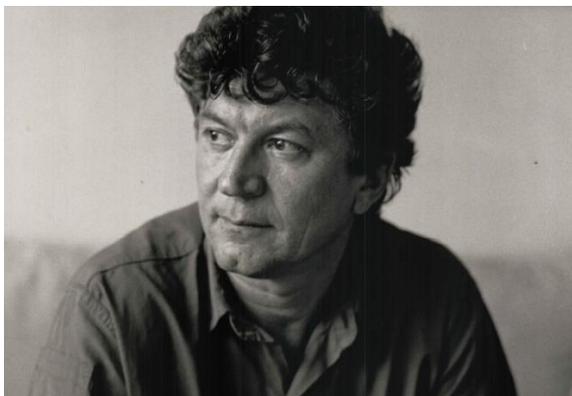
*\*Eric Myers has been listening to jazz for 60 years, and writing on it for 40 years. He was the inaugural jazz critic for the Sydney Morning Herald 1980-1982, then jazz critic with The Australian newspaper, 1983-1988. He was publisher & editor of the Australian Jazz Magazine 1983-1986, and a government-funded Jazz Co-ordinator from 1983-2002. He returned to writing on jazz for The Australian in 2015.*



There were relatively minor sound problems on the night, which in my view were avoidable, given what we now know about the presentation of jazz in such concert halls, which are purpose-built primarily for classical music, and do not suit normal jazz instrumentation. In such venues much care needs to be taken to ensure that the sound is well-balanced and delivered to the audience so that the beauty of jazz can be fully experienced. In a nutshell, there are principally two problematical areas: the way the drums are played, when the music goes into high energy passages, which is inevitable in contemporary jazz; and how the piano should be amplified, to ensure that its sound is pristine, and balanced according to well-known conventions.

But first, a little background. It was never my mission in life to be a jazz critic but, as opportunities to act in this role have presented themselves, I have willingly complied, and taken the job seriously. Also I have been around jazz musicians for most of my life, initially as a bandleader in the Sydney registered clubs circa 1965-1985. During the great days of the club industry, when 1,000 RSL and Leagues clubs in Sydney were prolific employers of musicians, my band was never out of work for 20 years, and I was greatly influenced by the jazz musicians who found their way into my seven-piece band.

Names that spring to mind, some now deceased, are Bobby Scott (bass & vocals); Mick Kenny (trumpet); Herbie Cannon (trombone); Miroslav Bukovsky (trumpet); Bob McIvor (trombone); Barry Woods (drums); and so on.



*Jazz musicians who played in Eric Myers' club band include Miroslav Bukovsky (above)...*

The final version of my band in the early eighties included stellar jazz artists such as Marie Wilson (vocals); Steve Brien (guitar); Charlie Munro (saxophones & flute); John Morrison (drums); Dick Montz (trumpet), and many others.



*Other jazz musicians who played in Eric Myers' club band include Charlie Munro (second from left) and singer Marie Wilson (centre). Others in this photo, taken at the Manly Jazz Festival in the mid-eighties, include pianist Chuck Yates (far right) and Keith Hounslow (far left). PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

While my band provided lucrative regular employment for such jazz musicians, I couldn't help noticing that most of them pursued their art form in poorly-paid gigs, and I deeply admired their dedication to the music. I found myself working in various ways in the support system for such musicians, and was gratified to feel I was doing something which might increase the audience for jazz, which in the long run would hopefully benefit those musicians.

I started writing on jazz for the entertainment industry magazine *Encore* in the late seventies. Immediately I noticed that the sound in various venues was invariably poor, and I believed this in turn was inhibiting growth in the jazz audience which had been shrinking for decades, particularly since the mid-fifties when jazz was decimated by the onslaught of rock and roll.

In the April, 1981 edition of *Encore*, I reviewed a performance in the Concert Hall of the Sydney Opera House by the pianist Oscar Peterson and his trio, which included the Dane Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen (bass) and English drummer Martin Drew. The guitarist Joe Pass also joined the trio for a few numbers. I was by then the *Sydney Morning Herald's* inaugural jazz critic, so often I would publish two reviews: one of 350 words in the *SMH* designed for the average reader; and the other in *Encore*, where more space was available, and I could mention more esoteric industry problems, such as sound reproduction.



*Pianist Oscar Peterson (left) pictured with bassist Niels-Henning Orsted Pedersen...*  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

In that *Encore* piece I wrote: “The performances of the trio were marred by the notorious acoustics of the Concert Hall of the Opera House. While Martin Drew used brushes, the sound balance was excellent, but when he changed to sticks, then Peterson's piano was often lost in the overall sound. It is a peculiarity of the Concert Hall, that no matter how good the acoustics are for other types of music, they just cannot handle sticks and snare drums - which makes this venue entirely unsuitable for jazz.

“There is no doubt that the worst aspect of jazz presentation in Sydney remains the quality of sound reinforcement. It is not a simple problem, and there are many complex variables, but the recent evidence suggests that the quality of sound reinforcement in Sydney is particularly unsophisticated. My feeling is that most audiences who attend these major concerts- usually middle-of-the-road music lovers, rather than jazz purists - are far too happy to accept poor sound. ... As for those people who know little about jazz, and come out of curiosity, who knows how many people are lost forever - who go home thinking ‘well, if that's jazz, I'm not so impressed?’”

Of course, I wasn't alone in drawing attention to such deficiencies. John Shand, longtime jazz critic for the *SMH*, and subsequent winner of the inaugural Walkley award for arts journalism, wrote a piece called “A Dose of the Clap Trap” which was included in his 2009 book *Jazz: The Australian Accent*. The first version of this piece, published in *JazzChord* in 2002, can be read on my website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/contributions-3>.



*Jazz writer John Shand: he referred to “a short-sighted mentality, [which] provides a gig today, but drives away audiences tomorrow”.... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

In his first paragraph John writes: “Given music is fundamentally just the organisation of sound, it amazes me how often sound-quality is shabby. The improvising mentality is brought to bear on ‘making do’ with inadequate rooms, pianos, PA systems and other equipment. A short-sighted mentality, this provides a gig today, but drives away audiences tomorrow.”

Note the connection between poor sound and its effect on the audience.

Going back to *Encore* magazine I followed up the Oscar Peterson review with a long interview in the next edition with sound technician Kevin Davidson, who was responsible for sound reinforcement at the recent concerts of the Sydney International Music Festival, which took place at the Regent Theatre.



*Sydney International Music Festival sound engineer Kevin Davidson: there are no simple explanations...PHOTO COURTESY ENCORE MAGAZINE*

This interview was concerned with a number of sound problems which marred various performances featuring international artists. Below are Davidson's explanations in relation to Milt Jackson, Dizzy Gillespie, and the Eberhard Weber group Colours. Davidson's analysis of the problems made a number of things clear: there are no simple explanations; and musicians themselves have strong ideas on how their music should be amplified, and do not necessarily accede to the expertise of sound technicians; and the technology available – in the early eighties – was often faulty.

In the case of the Milt Jackson concert which included the local Paul McNamara Trio, I asked why the piano was inaudible during the performance. Kevin responded, "This was unavoidable. Paul McNamara insisted on playing with the piano lid fully open, with the result that the lid caught extraneous sounds, mainly the upright bass in this instance, which overrode the piano sound. The pianist was advised during the sound check about this and refused to co-operate, and on the following evening opened the lid fully, although it had been set by us on the short stop."

I asked Kevin to explain why Dizzy Gillespie, when using the harmon mute, could not be heard clearly. He responded, "For solos I prefer in general to let musicians vary their own dynamics, and adjust levels only if an instrument is consistently either too loud or soft. Overriding this consideration all evening was the marginal stability of some mikes which imposed a restriction on the maximum levels available. This was particularly true when Dizzy Gillespie used a mute. The reflective surface of this aggravated the tendency to high frequency ringing in this mike and it was not possible to make it any louder."



*Dizzy Gillespie with harmon mute: the reflective surface of [the mute] aggravated the tendency to high frequency ringing in this mike... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

During a set played by Eberhard Weber's group Colours, the sound went off entirely, which resulted in the most severe criticism of the sound technicians. Davidson explained that "Eberhard Weber and Colours had very definite ideas on their sound. For example they wanted no drum riser and no stage monitors. Performing on the Regent stage without monitors, especially when using electric instruments, is difficult, as the natural acoustics are such that an instrument that is soft on stage can be loud in the audience. Monitors on the stage compensate for this and give the performers a more accurate indication of their performing levels. The group were advised of this, but they were adamant.

"Mikes were placed on the performers' speakers as was done for every other act at the Festival — not to make them louder but to spread the sound evenly through the auditorium. During the sound check this group played at times louder and more intensely than any other act in the Festival. The resulting sound in the auditorium was quite loud. They were advised of this and asked to turn down on three separate occasions. During the performance they played even louder than in the sound check, and the piano in particular was overloading its associated speaker and distorting. Their music had a large dynamic range and the crescendos while loud were of short duration. During their second song, their instrument amplifiers drew so much power that the circuit breaker which they and the sound system were on, opened, causing a power failure. When power was restored they resumed playing at a noticeably lower level and no further major problems occurred."



*The German bassist Eberhard Weber: he and his group Colours had very definite ideas on their sound...PHOTO CREDIT ROBERTO MASOTTI*

Re-reading this is a reminder of a fundamental fact about sound technicians. Obviously their first requirement is technical expertise. They have to know how their equipment works, so that if anything goes wrong, they know how to fix it instantaneously. If there's a sudden burst of feedback or, if the microphones simply stop working, what is to be done?

In addition to technical knowledge, however, something else is needed, particularly in the case of jazz: an adequate appreciation of how the music should sound. Here, in my experience, there has always been a deficit, and I see little evidence that things have improved over 40 years. The most obvious characteristic of much sound one hears, as one goes around, is that the sound balance is based, not on how jazz is best heard, but on the conventions of rock music: for example the bullying sound of the bass (electric or double, both of which are amplified); and often the belief that all features of the drum kit should be amplified with multiple microphones.

Although I have no real evidence, my hunch is that most sound technicians get into the business because they're initially turned on by rock music. They might then find themselves being hired to do the sound at a jazz gig, so they take their rock ears with them. Do they listen to jazz music as a general rule? Unless they have a serious interest in jazz, I suspect not.

In the Feb/Mar, 2001 edition of *JazzChord*, I wrote an article which I had been thinking about for many years, called "The Vexed Question of Sound Balance in Jazz". That piece can be read on my website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles>. I wrote, "In my view, no one factor has sabotaged jazz in this country over the last 50 years, more than the relatively careless and casual attitude towards sound. Hapless musicians, time and time again, have had to tolerate poor sound. Many of them, performing on stage, may be completely unaware of how poor the sound is by the time it reaches the ears of the audience.

"If what the musicians are playing is not delivered clearly and beautifully to the listener, then I believe the listener is likely to switch off. Nothing is more certain. Whenever I've been overseas, particularly in European countries, I have seen evidence that serious attention has been given to this perennial problem. But in Australia little has been achieved in this area."

Coming now to the recent Freedman Fellowship concert, the sound problems on the night were, at most, minor. They were threefold: the two drummers James Waples and Tully Ryan were too loud when their music went into overdrive; Elly Hoyt's unusually slender voice was frequently lost in the sound mix, particularly in the case of the monologues which are an important part of her didactic suite *Eaten Fish Suite*; and more care should have been taken to ensure that the piano was expertly amplified.

More generally, this event highlighted three long-term problems:

- 1/ The perennial problem of presenting jazz in a concert hall, like The Studio, which is purpose-built for classical music, has a high ceiling, and there is little available to absorb the sound at source (for example, carpet under the performers, or heavy drapes around the performing area). The latter facilities are characteristic of jazz-dedicated clubs, such as Sydney's Foundry 616, but not in concert halls such as the

Opera House venues, the City Recital Hall, and venues at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

2/ The lack of sophistication of local drummers, many of whom seem oblivious to how their sound is received by the audience. Some of them seem not to know the difference between the jazz club and the concert hall, and that performing in either context will require a different approach. In 2000 Carlo Pagnotta, artistic director of Italy's prestigious Umbria Jazz festival was in Australia. As his host I took him to hear as much live jazz as possible over two weeks, in Sydney, Melbourne and the Wangaratta festival. The result was an Australian Stage at Umbria Jazz in 2001, when three Australian groups performed, doing between them, nine performances. Pagnotta was very critical of the drummers he heard in Australia. He found some of them intrusive and unable to listen to what was going on around them on the bandstand. "Even Elvin Jones does not play this loud in the trio situation," he told me, as we sat in a prominent Sydney venue, as one of our most virtuosic drummers performed. One night we walked into a venue when the young Felix Bloxsom, a notably sensitive drummer, was playing. "This is the sort of drummer I like," Pagnotta said, "see how he colours the music".



*Umbria Jazz's Carlo Pagnotta: he was very critical of the drummers he heard in Australia... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Getting back to the Freedmans, this is not so much to do with the expertise of the sound technicians, but more a matter of adequate counselling of such drummers in rehearsal, as to what is appropriate.

3/ The question of sound balance, that is, for example, how loud the piano should be, in relation to other instruments in the rhythm section; or how loud a solo instrument should be in relation to the other instruments. Also if a soloist is improvising, how loud should backing phrases be, which are played by other horns behind the solo? Certainly these phrases are rarely deserving of amplification, yet I frequently see them being blasted into microphones, hence drowning out the soloist. This is a question of how educated a sound technician is. How much jazz has a sound technician listened to, so that they have a sophisticated knowledge of how jazz should sound?

One of the basic sounds of jazz is the rhythm section of piano, bass and drums. There is no mystery to this. An acceptable sound balance is available on countless albums.

Listen to any album by, say, the Standards Trio of Keith Jarrett (piano), Gary Peacock (double bass) and Jack DeJohnette (drums) or the Paul Grabowsky Trio. If this is the sound that reveals itself when producers, sound technicians and musicians sit down and mix the tracks to produce an overall sound, how come the resulting sound balance appears to be unknown to so many technicians who balance the sound in live jazz performance in Australia?



*The Standards Trio, L-R, Keith Jarrett, Jack DeJohnette, Gary Peacock: an acceptable sound balance of the rhythm section is available on countless albums.... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Even at a venue such as Foundry 616, where the sound is usually excellent, invariably the piano is down in the sound mix. I refer to a Ten Part Invention performance at Foundry some time ago. During the first set Paul McNamara's piano solos were too far back in the sound mix. I am not saying they were inaudible; they were just slightly



*Paul McNamara on piano, performing with Ten Part Invention: vigorous applause at the end of each piano solo...PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS*

muffled, as if he was playing in an adjoining room. At the end of each of McNamara's solos, there was little audience reaction. At the intermission I asked for his piano to be given more presence. This was done and, during the second set, his solos could be clearly heard. The result? Vigorous applause at the end of each piano solo. That for me is the proof of the pudding.

When I was in Paris in 1998 courtesy of a Churchill Fellowship, Pasquel Anquetil, head of the Centre d'information du jazz (CIJ) told me about a training program entitled Manager du Monde de la Musique which CIJ did in conjunction with INIREP Departement Culture (the French institute for the development of on-the-job training). This included training for sound technicians, and others who wished to work backstage. Training took place at festivals such as the Montreux Jazz Festival, where fledgling sound technicians worked alongside professionals behind the scenes, lived with them, and got valuable on-the-job training. This was, in effect, a mentorship program for young sound technicians.

Has anyone in Australia ever thought this sort of training worth pursuing? Had the NSW jazz co-ordination program survived post-2001, this is one sort of initiative that could well have been undertaken by the program.

In an ideal world, important jazz concerts would involve a "sound designer" who knows the music well – having studied it – and sits next to the house sound technician and advises him when to turn the knobs up and down, depending on the requirements of good sound balance. This is quite common in the USA and Europe, but virtually unknown in Australia, at least in the jazz community. A "sound designer" would know, say, when a flute solo is coming up, and alert the technician to be ready to turn up the flute mike at the commencement of the solo. And so on.



*American Bill Motzing: he came to Australia originally in the early seventies as "sound designer" with the American group Blood Sweat & Tears... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

The late American Bill Motzing lived in Australia for many years, was a prominent film composer and for a time head of Jazz Studies at the Sydney Conservatorium. Bill came to Australia originally in the early seventies as “sound designer” with the American group Blood Sweat & Tears. He knew very little about the equipment being operated by the technician, but knew exactly what sound the group required.



*Another shot of the successful 2019 Freedman Fellow Novak Manojlovic, this time smiling: what is the use of producing great jazz musicians, if audiences are tiny, and no-one is listening? PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*

I feel that, resources permitting, the addition of a “sound designer” at important concerts, such as the Freedmans, would help to alleviate the chronic sound problems which still bedevil the presentation of jazz in this country - problems which, in turn, inhibit the growth of the jazz audience.

We live in a time when the audience for jazz is both aging and shrinking at an alarming rate. Paradoxically the number of highly talented jazz musicians are emerging in Australia in unprecedented numbers. But what is the use of producing great jazz musicians, if audiences are tiny, and no-one is listening?

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