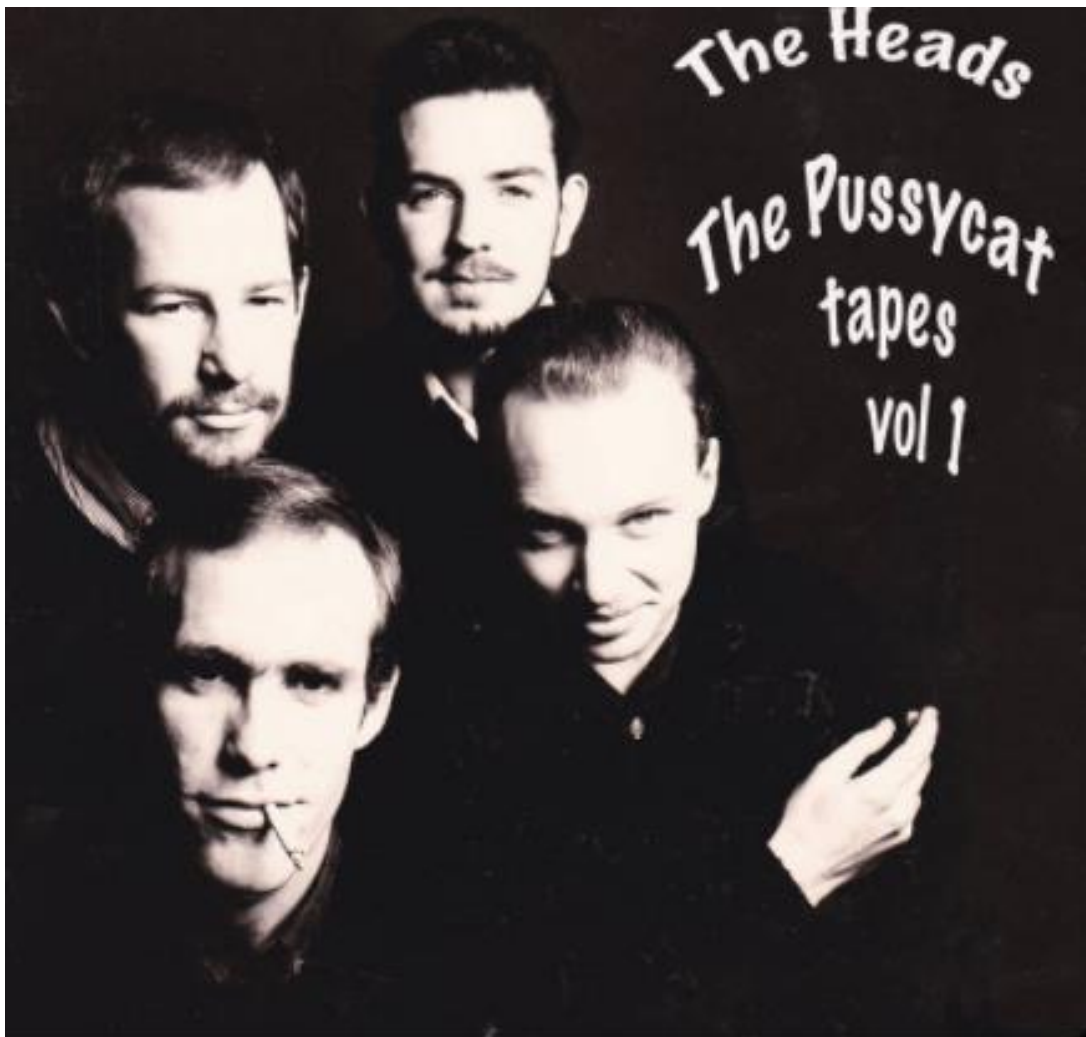


THE HEADS: THE PUSSYCAT TAPES VOL 1

Review by Eric Myers

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Coming simultaneously with the release of John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme Live in Seattle*, a jazz club performance recorded in 1965, this album from The Heads, *The Pussycat Tapes Vol 1*, recorded the previous year in 1964, is comparable, and equally as important. Both gigs were recorded by amateur enthusiasts, using a tape recorder and a couple of microphones, and bring to light the playing of musicians who are important to jazz history in both the USA and Australia.

The Heads, a quartet of out-of-town musicians led by the then 27-year-old alto saxophonist Bernie McGann, was at a small jazz club in Melbourne, the Fat Black Pussycat, doing four nights a week. The gig lasted for about six months. The others were Dave MacRae (piano, marimba, 24), John Pochée (drums, 24) and Andy Brown (bass, 26). They were a slightly younger generation than those musicians who dominated the small Sydney jazz scene in the sixties, particularly at the El Rocco – Don Burrows, John Sangster, Judy Bailey and others.



Two of The Heads at the Fat Black Pussycat, Melbourne, in 1964. L-R, Bernie McGann, John Pochée... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID FRANKLIN ASSOCIATES PTY LTD

Of course the El Rocco lasted only till 1969, when it quietly closed down. The four musicians on this album all played at the El Rocco from time to time, but it's well-known that the venue's owner Arthur James did not care for McGann's playing, so McGann rarely played there; certainly he felt excluded. It's significant also that McGann and his colleagues were playing a much harder-edged music – let's call it African American hard-bop - than Burrows and his colleagues, who epitomised a softer and some might say, more melodic, West Coast approach.

In a little over an hour *The Pussycat Tapes* is an album of vinyl proportions, and it's instructive to note the composers of the six tracks: *Donna Lee* (composed by Miles Davis); *Lazy Bird* (John Coltrane); *Jive Samba* (Cannonball Adderley); two Thelonious Monk tunes (*Well You Needn't* & *Bright Mississippi*); and *Barefoot Sunday Blues* (Ramsey Lewis). The musicians' intensity, earnestness and commitment are palpable in the music. Two of them, Pochée and MacRae, both born

in 1940, are still alive. While listening to this music I rang both Pochée and MacRae, and were told that they all took the music seriously, frequently going in to the club during the day to rehearse.

The fluency of McGann's improvisations is a revelation. He sounds much more like a straight-ahead bop player than he was in later stages of his career. Of course he never lost that bop quality but, as he got older, his style became less busy and more diffident, increasingly allowing for much more space in his improvisations. Pochée sounds like the quintessential hard-bop drummer, a la Max Roach or Art Blakey, and it's revelatory to hear his style already in mature form, at such a high level at the age of 24.

Until I heard this album I was not aware that MacRae played marimba; his solos on that rare instrument are every bit as brilliant as his piano solos. It's no surprise that MacRae went on to a stellar 15-year international career, leaving Australia in 1969 in the company of his wife vocalist Joy Yates. They were in the US for a short time, where MacRae was with the Buddy Rich Big Band. They then went on to the UK in 1971, where MacRae was musical director for The Goodies for eight years, and worked with Ian Carr's Nucleus, before he and Yates formed their own group Pacific Eardrum in 1974, before returning to Australia in 1984.



Pacific Eardrum, with Jeff Seopardie (drums, at rear), below him Dave MacRae (keyboards), below them in a row L-R, Billy Kristian (bass), Joy Yates (vocals), Isaac Guillory (guitar), then in front Jim Cuomo (alto sax)...

Similarly both Pochée and McGann went on over the next 30 years to enjoy immense artistic success, perform internationally many times, and become household names in Australian jazz. The splendid bassist Andy Brown (like MacRae originally from New Zealand) also carved out a distinguished career on both sides of the Tasman. When he died in 2004 at the early age of 66, Pochée wrote his obituary, in which Pochée said “Andy was a wonderfully swinging bassist with a big commanding sound, which was a joy to play with. He was a larger-than-life character, who was always full of fun.” Indeed it was Brown who, notorious for his witticisms, once quipped, “so many drummers, so little time”.



Two of The Heads at the Fat Black Pussycat, Melbourne, in 1964. L-R, drummer John Pochée and bassist Andy Brown, who once quipped “so many drummers, so little time”... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID FRANKLIN ASSOCIATES PTY LTD COURTESY DAVE MACRAE

Editor’s notes: the Pussycat Tapes Vol 1 album can be heard on Bandcamp at this link <https://davemacrae.bandcamp.com/album/the-pussycat-tapes-vol-1>

The obituary for Andy Brown, written by John Pochée, is on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-40>