

## JAMES MORRISON AND DALE BARLOW: THE YOUNG LIONS

by Eric Myers\*

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*[James Morrison, 18, and Dale Barlow, 21, are perhaps the tip of the iceberg — only two of the extraordinary crop of talented young Sydney jazz musicians to have emerged in recent times. Both men have strong views on jazz and life, and recently they put them, with some eloquence, to ERIC MYERS. This article appeared in the May/June, 1981, edition of Jazz Magazine.]*

If there is a dominant aspect of James Morrison's activities in music, it is the fact that he is wholly a participant rather than an observer. It may surprise many people to discover that this accomplished 18-year-old has rarely listened to jazz records other than a Dizzy Gillespie cassette which found its way into his car.

Also, he shows little curiosity about live jazz being played in Sydney. He rarely listens to other bands, and remembers going out only once in recent years to hear a group — the Don Burrows/George Golla Duo playing with the Renaissance Players.



*James Morrison (left) with Dale Barlow (right) snapped in Sydney's Centennial Park, April 1981... PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN*

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*\*When this was written in 1981, Eric Myers was a freelance writer and Music Editor of Encore Magazine.*

When you discover something of James Morrison's background, you realise that this is not so surprising after all. He is basically a self-taught musician who plays an array of brass instruments — the valve and slide trumpet, trombone, euphonium, tenor horn, and E flat tuba — as well as the piano. He had no music lessons until he attended the Jazz Studies course at the Conservatorium of Music two years ago. The academic approach, he says, did not come easy.

There is a simple explanation of Morrison's multi-instrumental ability. At primary school, he wanted to play in the school brass band, and there were no vacancies. So, at about the age of eight he taught himself to play all the brass instruments well enough to be the regular fill-in player. That's how much he wanted to be involved in music.

Common sense these days would dictate that he give up most of these instruments, each of which requires a different embouchure or lip position, and concentrate on developing one horn. He agrees that his playing on any particular horn is handicapped by the others. "But I guess I persevere because I wouldn't have the foggiest which to give up," he says.

James Morrison's passion for jazz started about ten years ago in an unusual environment: his local church, the Pittwater Regional Mission. The minister ran a Dixieland band in which he (the minister) played the trombone himself. Morrison was hooked on jazz at this early age, and was never very interested in rock music, which tended to influence most children.



*Dale Barlow (left) and James Morrison (right): two of the extraordinary crop of talented young Sydney jazz musicians to have emerged in recent times... PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN*

"The jazz musicians seemed to be having such a good time," he says. "You know what dixieland bands are like. It just seemed honest to me, showing what they're about. Rock musicians struck me as a commercial venture — they were doing it for money, and weren't really into anything in particular. The jazz seemed like something completely different, more like a way of life."

James Morrison comes from a musical family. His mother Jess plays alto saxophone, his father George, a technical producer at the ABC, played clarinet, and his older brother John plays drums. Even now, they are involved in a musical production show call *The K Company*, which performs in the registered clubs.

The one theme that runs through James Morrison's life is that of early achievement. He formed his own Dixieland band while still in primary school. In his first year at Pittwater High School, he had it announced that he was forming a big band. It was an ambitious and audacious move for a mere first-former, but he was surprised to find that many school musicians turned out and were willing to play under his leadership.

Immediately, and with no theoretical background, he started writing big band charts. In fact, he had heard very little recorded jazz, and possessed only one jazz record — *Charlie Barnett Pays Tribute To Harry James* — given to him by an aunt.

“Having my own big band was such an absorbing thing, ” he now says. “I was writing this music and inventing all these things and, to me, it was for the first time. I thought I was breaking new ground. Later on, I found that all my great new licks were actually cliches. It never occurred to me to stop and listen to what had gone on before.”

The Pittwater High Big Band entered the City of Sydney Eisteddfod, in the Instrumental category. At this time there was still no category for jazz groups. James Morrison's description of the band's first Eisteddfod performance is itself a delightful illustration of how established values can be confronted by the jazz consciousness.

“On would come a school band.” he says, “with the white gloves, blazers and ties, with the shiny shoes, and all the instruments looking perfect, and they would play a very tight classical piece, and all walk off together.”

“Then the announcer said ‘And now the Pittwater High School Big Band’, and he said it with distaste. I wandered on in a denim jacket, and we were all very scraggy; we dragged on an amp for the bass; all our horns were dirty. I started clicking my fingers, whereas the other bands had started without a count-in.”

“The whole place went into a hushed silence, and the adjudicator's face went slightly red . . . We came second — but it was a lot of fun”. Morrison's audacity is perhaps best illustrated by his performance at the Monterey Jazz Festival in 1979 with the Young Northside Big Band, which he had been invited to join as trombone soloist just before their departure.

He had been advised to play with careful precision for all the jazz buffs at Monterey but, at the actual concert, carried away by the enthusiasm of the occasion, in the two-bar break leading into his first solo in *Tall Cotton*, he began with a huge dixieland-style glissando with a growl. “All caution was thrown to the winds,” he says, “but that's how I felt — like having a good time — and fortunately the audience saw that and liked it.”

Morrison's fiery, melodic jazz style and his ability to swing, are qualities that were noticed some time ago by Don Burrows, who has on many occasions invited the young musician to perform with him. There is obviously a warm musical empathy

between the two men, even though one is only 18 while the other is in his 50s. It began at the Conservatorium, where Morrison would go to Burrows' office with a list of questions, and not leave until he had the satisfactory answers.



*Don Burrows (left) and James Morrison in performance: Burrows' playing is just what James thinks jazz to be... PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA*

“Playing with Don Burrows is like the opposite of that phrase ‘alone at last’,” says James Morrison. “At last I’ve got someone to play with, who seems to be wanting the same things out of jazz that I do. I play with lots of musicians, and the bands hang together. With Don, it’s like coming home. Although he’s been doing it for years before I was born, it’s like it was all set up just for me to play with — it feels like that, His playing is just what I think jazz to be.”



*The David Martin Quintet with vocalist Norma Martin, L-R, David Martin, Darcy Wright, Norma Martin, Alan Turnbull, Dale Barlow, James Morrison... PHOTO COURTESY DAVID MARTIN*

“I’ve been told the Don’s not hip,” he went on, “even that he doesn’t play jazz which, in my thinking, is preposterous. But what I first liked about jazz was that it was honest, and jazz musicians were doing something they believed in. I’ve still got to do what I think is right, even if it’s unfashionable. With Don, that’s where I feel at home.”

James Morrison is seen regularly playing alongside Dale Barlow in the context of the David Martin Quintet. There could not be a more fascinating contrast between these two fiery young jazz players. Morrison sticks closely to the melodic implications of the chord changes, while Barlow, in a post-Coltrane style, seems to be always pushing the harmonic parameters. How does James regard Dale’s approach?

“Dale has a different idea of what jazz is than I do,” says Morrison. “His approach I’d describe as more intellectual than mine, if you like. He’s worked more things out. Never let it be said that Dale plays only patterns — far from it — but he does think about the notes he’s playing, and work out what to do. He wants to know what’s going on and why, whereas I just take the dixieland approach, and blow.”



*Morrison’s long-time friend the multi-instrumentalist David Pudney, here playing electric bass: James would like to see the Morrison/Pudney duo with the type of large audience that the Burrows/Golla duo now enjoys...*

At the moment, James Morrison’s own quintet is playing at Scamps, in the Strata Hotel, Cremorne junction, on Friday nights. And he is very keen on establishing the duo he has with his friend David Pudney, who plays trumpet, piano and bass. He would like to see the Morrison/Pudney duo with the type of large audience that the Burrows/Golla duo now enjoys in Australian jazz. The Morrison/Pudney duo, by the way, can be heard at the Paradise Jazz Cellar on Friday nights at 10pm.

Those who don't know James Morrison might also be interested to know that he is a practising Christian, he likes sailing (he has been placed in the State Championships), fast cars, and flying (his brother John is a pilot). Also, he has just become engaged. He has crammed a lot into his 18 years.

"I've always been ready before the world is ready for me," he says, "I seem to be doing everything early, and it's the same thing with music. I'm doing what I feel I have to do. I have no regard at all for what's the done thing, if you like — as long as the trend doesn't continue, and I drop dead at 30!"



*Dale Barlow: different values, increasingly drawn to other impulses in jazz...*

On the face of it, Dale Barlow, 21 shares many things with James Morrison: as the son of the respected Sydney saxophonist Bill Barlow, who runs a music supplies business, he also comes from a musical family; he also studied in the various jazz courses at the Conservatorium of Music; he also first came to notice through the Young Northside Big Band, and established himself as one of its best soloists; he also has played with some of Australia's leading jazz musicians, particularly in the Bruce Cale Quartet; and, of course, he teams up with Morrison in the highly visible David Martin Quintet.

But there the similarities end. If there is one fascinating thing about jazz, it is its ability to attract contrasting personalities who have little in common other than the jazz spirit. Dale Barlow is a highly different sort of rebel, with completely different values. Hence he finds himself increasingly drawn to other impulses in jazz.

Dale Barlow had piano and flute lessons from an early age, and was helped along by his father. At 13 he began classical flute lessons and by this time had taken up the saxophone. He attended Trinity Grammar School, and later did his HSC at a progressive school, the Australian International Independent School at North Ryde. He studied Fundamentals with Bette Motzing at the Conservatorium of Music, took lessons from saxophonist Col Loughnan, and later attended the two-year Jazz Diploma course at the Con. He felt the benefits of this tuition: “There are certain things you just have to be shown, like how to play around chord progressions, how to make best use of your practise time, learning tunes, just being with other guys who are trying to do the same as you are. But it is a fairly academic approach.”

“Jazz has got to be self-taught to a great extent, no matter how much tuition you have,” he says, “because jazz is something that is so individual. I’m more or less self-taught, just from listening to a lot of guys and getting some idea of how the saxophone should sound and should be played.”

Dale Barlow’s major instrument, of course is the tenor saxophone. I asked him why the tenor was his favourite instrument. “It’s got a very vocal, quality,” he says, “very similar to the human voice. I can relate to that sound and express myself through it. Also, it’s a very versatile instrument. You can get many different sounds out of it. There are so many areas of the tenor that are still being explored, still a lot of new things to be done.”

Anyone who has heard Dale Barlow would not be surprised to find that he regards John Coltrane as the greatest tenor player who ever lived. “I’d been listening to Coltrane for about two years before I started to seriously enjoy him, and try to emulate him to a certain extent. I didn’t really understand him when I first heard him.”



*John Coltrane: the most mature sound Dale has heard from anyone playing the tenor saxophone... PHOTO CREDIT LEE TANNER*

“Coltrane’s got a fantastic sound, the most mature sound I’ve heard from anyone playing the tenor saxophone. Also, look at his evolution as a musician — he went through so many different phases, each one very different and remarkable at the same time. The early bebop John Coltrane is very different from the later avant-garde Coltrane.”

“I’ve transcribed a few of his solos, I’m a great Coltrane freak. I think I’ve heard everything he’s done. But I have other favourites — Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, Joe Henderson...”

Barlow notes that when he was in Monterey with the Young Northside Big Band, he was most impressed by the black bands he heard, such as Woody Shaw’s and Dizzy Gillespie’s. He agrees that there is a difference between black and white jazz.

“There shouldn’t be any difference between the two, but there is,” he says. “I think you can hear it. Speaking generally, black musicians play with a lot more feeling and conviction, while a lot of white bands don’t seem very genuine in their approach. But there are exceptions to the rule every time. A white guy can sound black — it’s just a way of playing.”

Dale Barlow increasingly finds himself being drawn to contemporary and free jazz. He enjoyed the performances of the Art Ensemble of Chicago in Sydney last year: “It’s very exciting music, because there are so many different shapes and forms it can take. It moves through to many different areas. I had the same feeling when I heard the Sun Ra band in New York. They were doing things that sounded like Basie’s big band, then they would break into totally free anarchy, then back into an R & B, back-beat feel. It was really exciting and interesting; you couldn’t call it boring”.



*Barlow is excited about his inclusion in a new quintet led by the drummer/composer Phil Treloar...*

“For me at the moment, things tend to lean towards the free side, because that’s the music of today. It’s the only true way you can express yourself honestly, in a situation where there’s no definite chord structure or rhythmic structure. Everything’s up to you, and that takes a lot of awareness of the other musicians you’re playing with, and a lot of knowledge just to come up with a melody. It’s very difficult to create out of nothing.

Barlow is excited, therefore, about his inclusion in the new Phil Treloar Quintet which includes Treloar on drums, Mike Bukovsky (trumpet), Roger Frampton (piano) and Steve Elphick (bass). It is not a free jazz group, but it has the kind of flexibility which Dale Barlow admires.

“It’s about the best band I’ve ever played with,” he says, “just the rapport we all have is remarkable. Everyone plays really sensitively and with a lot of strength at the same time. All the songs have changes, but it’s very much open to what the musicians do with it.”

“In the middle of *Blue and Green* you couldn’t tell half the time it was that tune, because we interact to such an extent that it can change the music totally and take it in a completely different direction.”

With musical values like these, Dale Barlow’s concepts are obviously far more modern or avant-garde than those of James Morrison. I wondered, then, what Dale thought of James’s approach to jazz.



*Superimposing diminished things on dominant seventh chords, polychordal tonalities, a more linear approach to playing through complex changes... Roger Frampton (pictured here) was teaching them at the Con...*

“James doesn’t use to extensions, whereas I superimpose a lot of scales on existing chords,” says Dale. “He’s aware of them — Roger Frampton was teaching them at the Con — superimposing diminished things on dominant seventh chords, polychordal

tonalities, a more linear approach to playing through complex changes. But I think it's more geared to the way he hears music, rather than what he's been shown on an academic level."

"James hasn't really studied changes in a technical manner, but he's very much an intuitive player, which a lot of guys aren't. I really admire him for that. But that has its own limitations. When it comes to playing complex changes, knowledge is required, and sometimes intuitive players falter a bit."

Dale Barlow has made a point of studying changes, partly because people used to consider him just an ear player who needed to do some serious study, and partly because when he first started experimenting with free jazz, people thought he was unable to play bebop. It is ironic that, now he is well-prepared and well-equipped to play all these types of jazz, he is now likely to be knocked for being too intellectual.

This young man is obviously far more of an idealist than most musicians. He looks to go overseas, perhaps New York or Europe, where he believes (probably correctly) that there is a greater awareness of modern music than there is in Australia. He feels that there is not much real dedication to music in this country.



*People like Miles Davis (left) and John Coltrane (right), pictured here in 1960, put their lives into music... that's what ultimately mattered to them...*

"People like Miles Davis and John Coltrane put their lives into music," he says. "That's what ultimately mattered to them... I think that's what's needed in Australia. A lot of people think that because you're dedicated to music, you close your mind to all other aspects of life, but music opens up other areas of your life. Being a good

improvising musician requires a lot of knowledge, finding out more about the arts, more about other countries, more about the history of the world, keeping yourself physically fit, swimming, yoga, whatever. Music is a great teacher, it shows you a lot about yourself.”

“I think the thing that needs to be concentrated on and developed in Australian music is an identity. In the other arts — painting, especially cinema — Australian works have a reputation abroad, and a very good one. People associate Australian films with the outback and general lifestyle. It’s easier to express our everyday experiences through paintings and film than through music. There isn’t really an Australian identity in music at all.”



*James Morrison (left) and Dale Barlow: the music of the future is in safe hands...*  
PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN

“What we need is a real innovator here, someone of the stature of Miles Davis or John Coltrane, to come out of the woodwork and take music in an individual and very Australian direction. We’re not trying to create our own music.”

Who can disagree with these sentiments? If Australian jazz continues to produce exciting young players with the firm convictions of Dale Barlow and James Morrison, then I guess the music of the future is in safe hands.