

THE VEXED QUESTION OF SOUND BALANCE IN JAZZ

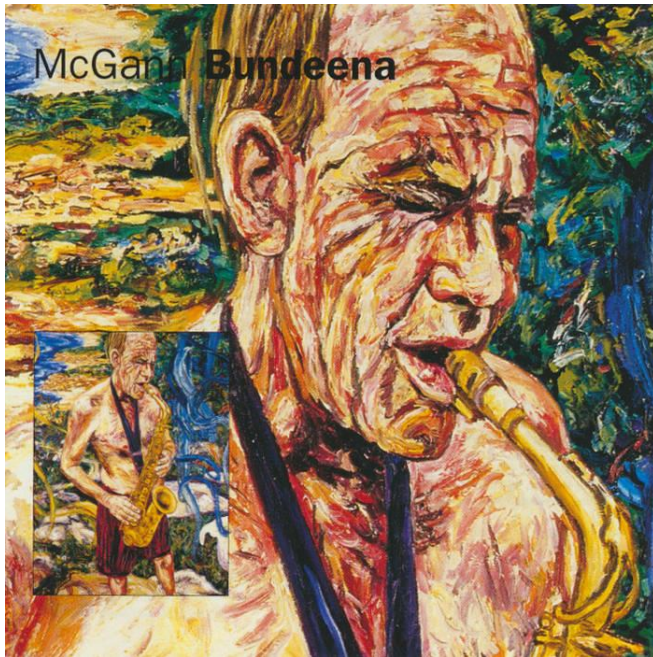
by Eric Myers

[John Shand's piece "A Dose of the Clap Trap", is on this website in the CONTRIBUTIONS section at this link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/contributions-3>. He has the following to say about sound in the jazz industry: "Weird things happen at jazz concerts. Beyond drug-induced hallucinations, I mean. Peculiar aspects of both presentation and reception. 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." I couldn't agree more. 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. As John Shand says, when it's all said and done, jazz is only sound. 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. I give some details in the following piece. But in Australia little has been achieved in this area. I have never seen an industry-wide campaign to stamp out poor sound, except in the case of some rare oases, where the matter has been seriously dealt with. The Wangaratta Jazz Festival is one example where good sound has been a priority, at least during the first ten festivals dating from 1990, when I was in attendance. Overall, however, many opportunities have been lost. The following is a revised version of a piece which was published in the Feb/Mar, 2001 edition of JazzChord.]

Recently I've been listening to the Keith Jarrett Trio's two-CD set *Whisper Not*, recorded live in Paris in 1999. It's interesting to consider its sound balance. I heard the trio live at Umbria Jazz 2000 in Perugia, Italy where, even though it was in the open air, the sound was very beautiful - crystal clear, but not loud, with superb separation of sound. By that I mean you could hear each instrument clearly, and could marvel at the subtle interactions between the three master musicians in the trio: Jarrett (piano), Gary Peacock (double bass) and Jack DeJohnette (drums).

If you listen to *Whisper Not*, you hear a similar sound. The piano is clear as a bell, riding on top of the sound of the bass and drums. I'd suggest that this is pretty close to the ideal sound of the basic jazz rhythm section. There's no mystery to it; this sort of sound balance is duplicated on countless trio CDs. Have a listen to any CD by Browne Haywood Stevens, the Paul Grabowsky Trio, and others. Also have a listen to Bernie McGann's CD *Bundeena*, where Lloyd Swanton plays the bass (and is also responsible for the mixing). The balance here between alto saxophone (McGann), bass and drums (John Pochée) is, in my view, close to ideal.

I assume that anyone reading this article is familiar with this sort of sound balance. 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 cover of Bernie McGann's Bundeena album: the balance here between alto saxophone (McGann), bass (Lloyd Swanton) and drums (John Pochée) is close to ideal...



The bassist Lloyd Swanton: responsible for the sound mix on the Bernie McGann CD Bundeena....PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

The most common abuse is that the piano is down in the mix (irritatingly over-ridden by the other two instruments); the bass is invariably too loud (and sometimes painfully loud); and the drums hover between the two - adding to the overall sound which drowns the piano, but still further back in the mix than the bass. Needless to say, the double bass microphone pickup has a lot to answer for; it has given bassists unprecedented capacity to increase their volume, not through muscle, but by turning up that little knob. Perhaps that has affected the

sound technician's capacity to create an appropriate bass volume in the mix for the benefit of the listener.

The vexed question of sound balance is perhaps the most crucial problem in live performance of jazz. As John Shand says above, "music is fundamentally just the organisation of sound". Yet time and time again I have found myself sitting in a jazz audience when the sound has been out of balance, and therefore ugly to the ear. One can't hear the soloists properly, nor follow their train of thought; the drums might be intrusive; and so on. The audience is getting restless, bored, fidgety. Many listeners don't know why they don't like the music, but often put it down to the mystique of jazz ("it's great music, I'm sure, but I just don't understand it"; or more bluntly, "if that's jazz, I don't like it.") Then, they get up and leave at the end of the set.

Consider another scenario. A similar audience is in a jazz club listening to music that is beautifully balanced. It's not so loud that it hurts the ears; the soloists are up-front in the mix, so one can follow their train of thought; the drummer is playing sensitively, colouring the music, but not hitting the kit at fortissimo; the bass is at the level I've already described (a la Gary Peacock or Lloyd Swanton). The audience (a similar one, as before) is now wrapt in the music. They are enjoying it immensely because it sounds beautiful. If they weren't jazz buffs, they probably couldn't tell you why they were enjoying it. But they know the music is pleasurable, and they're having a good time. There is a warm buzz in the room, which the musicians can feel. I'd like a dollar for every time I've experienced this scenario.

Who is responsible for the poor sound that characterises much live jazz in Australia? The musicians, the sound technicians, the presenting organisations, the jazz clubs, the festival organisers? Is the responsibility shared?



Umbria Jazz's Carlo Pagnotta was critical of Australian drummers when he visited in 2000: even Elvin Jones does not play this loud in the trio situation...

Let's start with drummers. I believe that drummers in this country suffer from the tyranny of distance. Many of our drummers naturally model their playing on American recorded music (rather than on American drummers playing live). When an American drummer plays in the

studio, he doesn't need to be over-concerned about volume; his level can be mixed down later. Go and hear that same drummer in a small club in New York, and you might be surprised at how soft he or she is playing. The live performance is a different situation to the studio date, requiring a different approach. Many of our local drummers assume, mistakenly, that American drummers duplicate their studio playing in live performance.

One of the recent international VIPs who visited Australia was Carlo Pagnotta, artistic director at Italy's leading jazz festival Umbria Jazz. When he was here in 2000, he was very critical of the drummers he heard. 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".

In the case of sound technicians there are indisputably some very good ones (in Sydney, Penny Drake-Brockman, Noel Lightfoot and Danielle Di Giovanni come to mind) who obviously know jazz inside out. But, what of many others? The most obvious characteristic of much sound you hear, as you go around, is that its sound balance is based, not on jazz music but the conventions of rock music: primarily the bullying sound of the electric bass; and often efforts to amplify all features of the drum kit with multiple microphones. It's often said that sound technicians get into the sound business because they're turned on by rock music. Then they move into the jazz world, taking their rock ears with them. Do they listen to jazz CDs as a general rule? I do not know.



Anthony Steel, then director of the Sydney Festival, which produced the 1995 Telecom Sydney Jazz Festival...

In the case of the 1995 Telecom Sydney Jazz Festival, my office was hired as a consultant, chiefly to advise on the artistic program. Anthony Steel was then director of the Sydney Festival, which produced the Telecom Festival. In the belief that the festival would survive, one of the ideas I put to Anthony was that those technicians employed to balance the sound should be required, as part of accepting the job, to attend a workshop one or two days before the 1996 festival and listen to CDs of the artists who would be appearing on the program. The seminar could be conducted by a distinguished sound technician, or perhaps a leading musician, who could take the technicians through the recorded music of each group, and do some analysis of sound balance, and lead the discussion. Someone like Lloyd Swanton, if he

were willing, might have been ideal to advise in such a seminar.

Of course this idea was not proceeded with, because in 1996 Telecom (now Telstra) reneged on its promise - made publicly in 1995 - to make the Telecom Sydney Jazz Festival an annual event. Would the sound company in 1996 have co-operated with this idea? I don't know. But my suggestion to Anthony Steel was that it should be a condition of their accepting the job. This would have been a practical way of giving sound the attention it deserves.

In this country, a long way from the major jazz centres overseas, there is an unusual tolerance for poor sound. It's widely regarded as inevitable, just something we have to put up with. In my experience the attitude is not so blasé in Europe and the US - at least not in the case of Umbria Jazz, the festival which I visited most recently in July, 2000 in Perugia, Italy. At that festival, great pride is taken in producing the best sound possible, and is overseen by the impressive Gianna Grassilli from Bologna, who leads a large team of sound technicians sprinkled throughout the festival's many venues. He has been doing the sound at Umbria Jazz for many years. When I spoke to Grassilli at the last Umbria, he was openly critical of the sound produced at a number of the world's leading festivals, including some of the major American festivals.

When I was in Paris in 1998 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?

The Sydney Improvised Music Association (SIMA), is widely regarded as one of the country's leading presenters of contemporary jazz. How is the sound treated in this organisation? Although SIMA is able to afford a part-time concert co-ordinator, a person at the box office, and some administrative assistance, the organisation is still not well enough resourced to hire a professional sound technician for the four nights a week it presents jazz at the Side On Café. The sound is left to the artistic director Peter Rechniewski. As part of his voluntary



SIMA President Peter Rechniewski: he does the sound for SIMA as a volunteer...

work for SIMA, Peter invariably attends a sound check in the late afternoon and usually attends the performance that evening, where he will keep an eye on the sound, and turn the knobs up and down as required.

But what if Peter is absent? Then the musicians and the Side On Café staff have to struggle along without expert assistance. On some occasions, when Peter has been absent, I have heard poor sound with members of the Café staff running backwards and forwards to the sound system (positioned behind the pianist's back on the stage). SIMA is doing a great job, and the Side On is an excellent venue - and the sound is generally good - but I feel it's regrettable that SIMA is so under-resourced that the crucial matter of sound balance is still in the category of "voluntary work".

Of course, SIMA's priority is to direct its resources primarily to the musicians, and the musicians sorely need the money; SIMA pays very high artists' fees by this country's paltry standards. Even so, a suggestion that some of these resources should be directed to the hiring of a sound-person would not be very popular. But, if the resultant music sounds so much better to the paying public, so much more beautiful to their ears, wouldn't such an investment be worth it?

The Melbourne Jazz Co-operative (MJC) does not hire a sound technician for its presentations at Bennetts Lane, because the proprietor Michael Tortoni sets-up and adjusts the sound system there. "This is a substantial saving for us", says MJC co-ordinator Martin Jackson, "and is one of the reasons that we could expand to a second night. When we do presentations at venues other than Bennetts Lane (such as Melba Hall) we hire a sound technician. When we were at The Limerick, there was an excellent house technician, John Proe, on a special rate. At Doctor Jazz Club (and on most of my international presentations), Geoff Phillips was the chief sound adviser. He also worked for Vince Jones for several years.



The Melbourne Jazz Co-operative's Martin Jackson: musicians often complain about the sound person making more money (or as much) than they do...

"Musicians often complain about the sound person making more money (or as much) than they do on bigger gigs," says Martin. "But the sound guy's job varies from walk-in/walk-out situations to times where he picks up a big load of gear in the morning; sets it up around lunch, spends another hour or so 'tuning the system'; does a sound check; often sticks

around the venue until the gig; does the mix for the gig; packs up the valuable gear like microphones; and, finally, goes to the venue to pack-up and take it all back the next morning! In those cases they more than earn their money.”

During my recent visit to New York in early 2001, I kept an eye out for sound balance problems at the various performances I attended, at the IAJE Conference, in the NY clubs, and the New York Town Hall. I have to say that the sort of sound balance problem I’ve been describing here was noticeably absent from the music I heard in NY – with one significant exception: the performance of the Wallace Roney Quintet at the IAJE Conference. Here, the bassist Buster Williams, in a rhythm section with the drummer Lenny White, was grossly over-amplified in relation to the other instruments.



Wallace Roney: his bassist Buster Williams, in a rhythm section with the drummer Lenny White, was grossly over-amplified at the IAJE Conference in New York...PHOTO CREDIT MELANIE DUNEA

At the end of the performance I discussed the matter with the sound technician, Sergeant Major Scott D Bauer, technical support chief and sound engineer for the United States Army Field Band (he was on loan to the IAJE, and in charge of the sound in the Hilton’s main ballroom). Bauer told me that, in this case, the band’s producer was standing behind him, forthrightly telling him what sort of sound he required. Apparently the belief was that Buster Williams’s bass figures produced the bulk of the band’s excitement, and therefore should be predominant. But Bauer fully agreed with me that the bass was far too loud; he just didn’t feel he had the authority to countermand the producer’s wishes.