

THE AUSTRALIAN

Masterful jazz as Virna Sanzone and Phil Stack join forces online



Phil Stack performing for SIMA's online concert, Jazz: NOW Wired

MUSIC

Jazz: NOW Wired

Virna Sanzone & Phil Stack, Bernie McGann Trio with guests, Mike Nock

Little Big Band

Sydney Improvised Music Association, June 6

ERIC MYERS

Bassist Phil Stack appears to be everywhere these days. He's on James Morrison's recent album *Beautiful Friendship*, and Katie Noonan's current album *The Sweetest Taboo*, where he showed that the unusual art of accompanying a vocalist with double bass, a rare occurrence in jazz, can work beautifully.

On Saturday, in a pandemic-inspired venture by SIMA, Stack took his demonstrated artistry to a new level, accompanying vocalist Virna Sanzone in a 35-minute set streamed from Free Energy Device Studios in Sydney. Given they were playing for a handful of technicians, and without the lubrication of applause, it was a magnificent effort to create the semblance of a warm performance.

Stack's double bass, gloriously amplified, sounded huge. He had to overcome a good deal of musical difficulty: ensuring that the flavour of a tune's harmonic changes were clearly in the air, in order for Sanzone to stay in tune; providing rhythmic variety instead of the bassist's customary one-note line, which works well in the protective context of the jazz ensemble, but would be tiresome in a duo; and, in the absence of other instruments, supplying occasional melodic responses to Sanzone's phrases.

In other words, Stack's approach had to be orchestral, extremely hard work for a double bassist. It was an unusual challenge, but ably met.

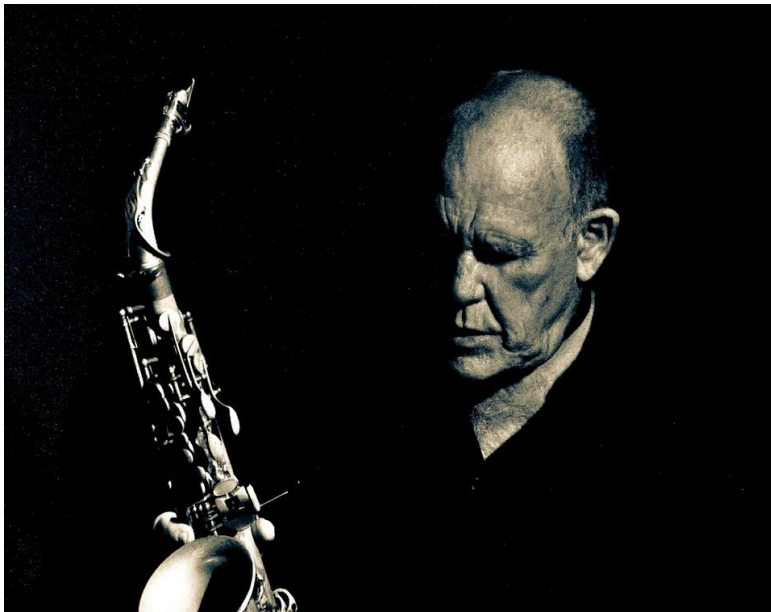


Virna Sanzone performing for SIMA's online concert, Jazz: NOW Wired

The fact that interest was sustained for over half-an-hour is a tribute also to the vocal strength of Sanzone. She traversed a range of genres with enviable versatility: American standards (*Exactly Like You*, *Angel Eyes*), the bossa nova (Antônio Carlos Jobim's *Triste*), a jazz classic (Duke Ellington's *Just Squeeze Me*) and pop tunes (Leon Russell's *A Song For You*, and Fats Domino's *I'm Walkin'*).

Her variations on the melody were well done, and she teased online listeners with 16 bars of scat singing in *Just Squeeze Me*. In a swinging version of *Almost Like Being In Love*, which really got off the ground, she and Stack were palpably flying.

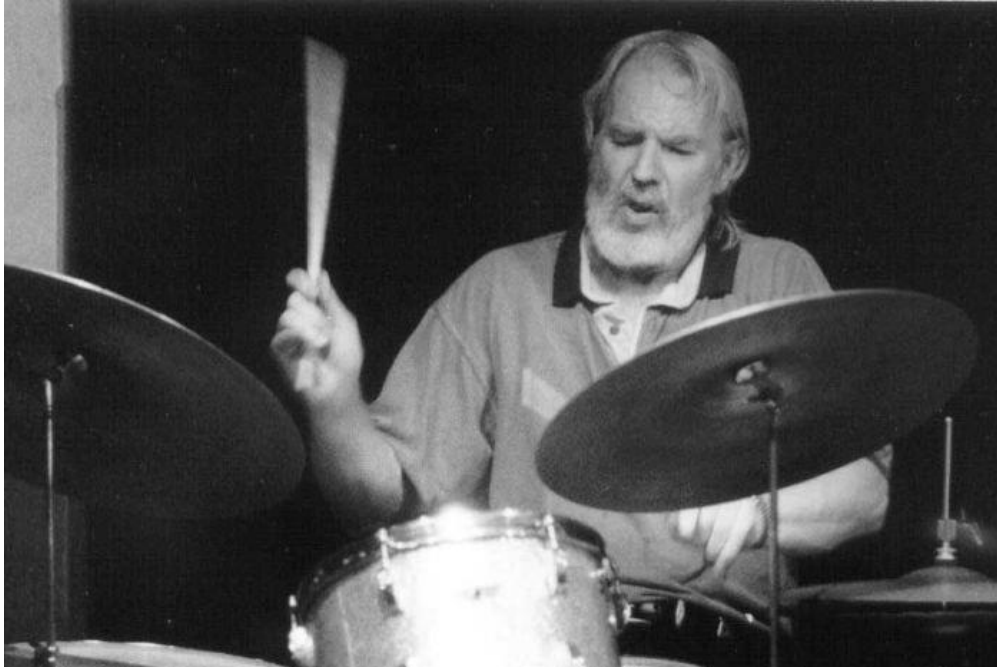
The program also included 25 minutes of footage from the 2001 ABC series *The Pulse*, beautifully filmed in black-and-white at the legendary Side-On Café in Sydney. It featured the Bernie McGann Trio with guests Sandy Evans and James Greening; and the Mike Nock Big Small Band.



Filmed in 2001, footage from “The Pulse” featured Bernie McGann (above) with guests saxophonist Sandy Evans (below, left) and trombonist James Greening (below right)... McGANN PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY; EVANS & GREENING PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY



This was notable for the unique artistry of three quintessential musicians: alto saxophonist McGann, then 63, who died in 2013; drummer John Pochée, who is no longer able to play; and the indestructible pianist Mike Nock, who is still performing today.



Drummer John Pochée (above) is no longer able to play, while the indestructible pianist Mike Nock (below), is still performing today... POCHÉE PHOTO COURTESY MUSIC TRUST; NOCK PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

