

The Wangaratta festival: past glories



WANGARATTA FESTIVAL OF JAZZ & BLUES 30 YEARS

by Adrian Jackson OAM & Andra Jackson

Melbourne Books, 344pp, \$66

Eric Myers

The Wangaratta Jazz Festival, which began in 1990, quickly superseded other regional festivals to become, by the mid-90s, a phenomenon – the country's leading jazz festival. It was the outcome of what now appears to be a unique vision.

This splendid book, written by Adrian Jackson, the festival's artistic director for 27 years, and his journalist sister Andra Jackson, examines the favourable factors which brought about the festival's great success.

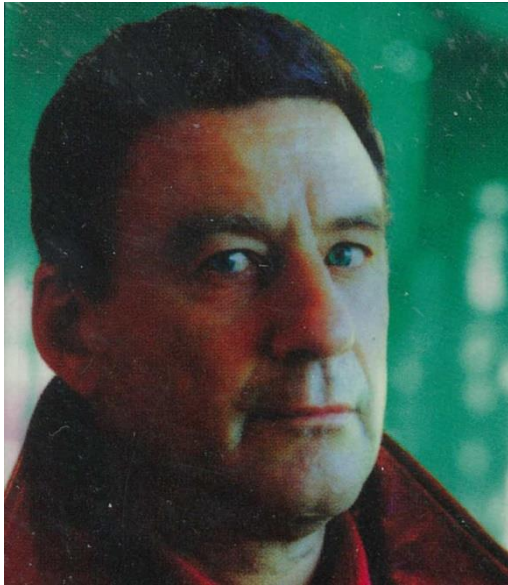


Adrian Jackson (left) and his journalist sister Andra Jackson (below) divide the book's labour...



Wangaratta's geographical location, midway between the two largest jazz centres in the country, Sydney and Melbourne, was an advantage.

Its physical appeal was considerable, as summarised by Sydney writer John Clare: "If the place were any prettier it would be kitsch. Roses grow to prodigious size in the gardens, there are several noteworthy churches, the courthouse is an art-deco classic, and the river vistas of willows and blue-grey gums are pure Streeton."



Sydney writer John Clare who wrote, “If Wangaratta were any prettier it would be kitsch” ...

The jazz festival was an initiative of the town’s business elite, attempting to put Wangaratta on the map, as Tamworth had done with country music. Initial consultations with the jazz community were led by the president of the Wangaratta Chamber of Commerce Beverley Wittig. The festival would enjoy strong support from the city management.



President of the Wangaratta Chamber of Commerce Beverley Wittig (right), pictured here in 1997 with another town leader and festival enthusiast Patti Bulluss... PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BOOK ‘WHY WANGARATTA?’ BY JOHN CLARE

The national jazz co-ordination program, involved from May, 1989, is acknowledged. Peter Rechniewski and I, representing that program, flew from Sydney in early 1990 to inspect the potential venues and discuss the nature of the proposed festival. We provided a comprehensive festival model, including the national jazz piano competition, and a suggested roster of bands for each venue. We particularly urged that the country's contemporary jazz musicians be included.

Adrian Jackson became festival co-ordinator in May, 1990. From the time of his appointment, the festival was in good hands.

Naturally, improvements evolved: a blues program was added; a central stage in Reid Street provided music free-of-charge; the piano competition went over to other instruments and was renamed the National Jazz Awards. In 1995, with local accommodation booked out years in advance, a "homestay" program enabled out-of-town visitors to stay in private houses.

The Jacksons divide the book's labour. Adrian provides an encyclopedic account of the festival programs, sharing his interactions with a cavalcade of great musicians; Andra describes some of the festival's more colourful or miscellaneous aspects: the blues stage; the nature of the audience; the character of the Jazz Awards; and so on.

Testimonies provided by countless jazz artists and enthusiasts recall their memories of the festival, bringing it triumphantly alive.



Brisbane saxophonist Zac Hurren, who won the 2009 National Jazz Awards competition... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY IMPROVISED MUSIC ASSOCIATION

Brisbane saxophonist Zac Hurren, who won the 2009 competition, recalls “a life-changing experience. I realised that there was a place in this world for people like me. A place where musicians and their efforts could be seen and valued. Wangaratta was a place where I felt I belonged. ”

A handsome 340-page tome, of coffee-table proportions, this book boasts a magnificent collection of photographs. It effortlessly dwarfs most previous books on Australian jazz.

Why did the festival board in 2016 dispense with the services of Adrian Jackson? In 1990, he began with a substantial brief: to book the bands and organise the logistics involved, seek sponsorship, sell advertising in the festival’s souvenir program, and be the event’s publicist.

In subsequent years a number of hands-on board members pitched in as volunteers to assist Jackson in various festival roles. Local marketing and tourism experts were involved from time to time. Scores of local volunteers were crucial to the festival’s success.



The Others, L-R, Paul Grabowsky, Kram, James Morrison: one of the hits of the 2017 festival... PHOTO CREDIT CHRIS HERFT

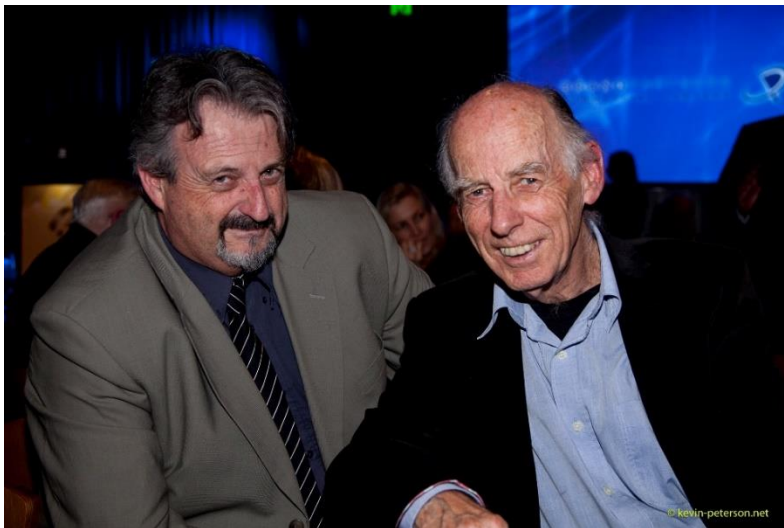
Paul Squires, who’d previously been Wangaratta’s CEO, became chair of the festival board in 2013. He “made it clear he wanted to shake things up. He felt that surviving and scraping by wasn’t good enough,” Jackson writes.

Differing visions in relation to the festival’s future may explain Jackson’s demise. Perhaps there was a belief that the character of the festival, as reflected

in Jackson's artistic programs, needed to change in order to increase box office receipts.

Some argue that a savvy festival board would have cashed in on the festival's undoubted prestige, and secured adequate sponsorship. Unfortunately this was not achieved during Jackson's time. Excellent sponsors - AMP, Subaru, Kawai, and the Transport Accident Commission (TAC) and others - had come and gone.

When a vastly important appointment comes around, the Australian jazz community has a habit of producing one candidate who stands head and shoulders above the others. Adrian Jackson, justly celebrated, was of that ilk. His qualities were legion: knowledge and love of jazz (essential); an apprenticeship as jazz critic for *The Age*; and a background in marketing (Telstra). Over 27 years he came to epitomise the festival. But the inside story of his demise is yet to emerge.



Adrian Jackson (left) who came to epitomise the Wangaratta festival, pictured here with pianist Mike Nock... PHOTO CREDIT KEVIN PETERSON

Wangaratta is now on hold waiting for the post-Covid era. Whether the festival will rise from the ashes remains to be seen. Meanwhile, this great book is a salutary reminder of past glories.

This review appeared in The Australian on April 2, 2022. A longer version of this piece appears in the BOOK REVIEWS folder on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/book-reviews-20>
