

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 *Australian Jazz Directory*, published in 1998, listed 81 annual jazz festivals, and 37 arts or blues festivals which included jazz, the last available evidence of the prolific extent of jazz activity throughout the country.

The Wangaratta Jazz Festival, which began eight years earlier in 1990, quickly superseded other such festivals to become, by the mid-90s, a phenomenon – the country's leading jazz festival.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.

One might ask, as does the book's publicity blurb, "How on earth could a tumbleweed town like Wangaratta in rural Victoria host a jazz festival?"

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

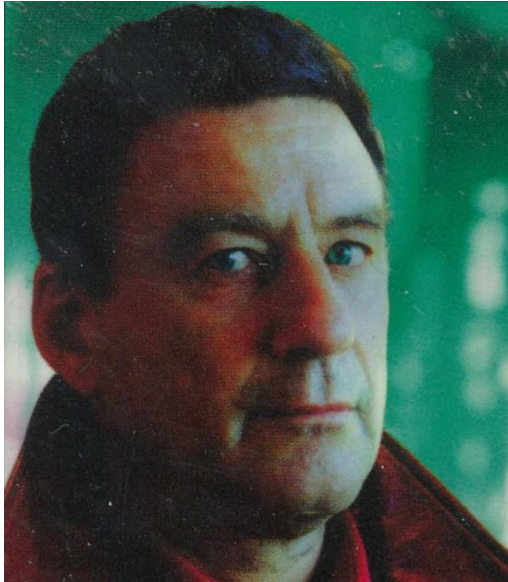


Adrian Jackson (left) and his journalist sister Andra Jackson (below) divide the book's labour...



Wangaratta's geographical location, more or less midway between the two largest jazz centres in the country, Sydney and Melbourne, rendered it relatively accessible from both cities.

In fact Wangaratta was no “tumbleweed town”. Sydney writer John Clare aptly summarised its appeal: “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” ...

Excellent potential venues were available, primarily the Town Hall and Playhouse Theatre, with other venues, such as the Council Club Hotel and the Hotel Pinsent, within walking distance.

Importantly, the jazz festival idea was the 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 none other than the president of the Wangaratta Chamber of Commerce Beverley Wittig. From the outset Wangaratta cleared an important hurdle: the festival would have strong support from the city management.

The national jazz co-ordination program’s early involvement dates from May, 1989, graciously acknowledged by the authors. Representing that program, Peter Rechniewski and I flew from Sydney to Wangaratta in early 1990 to inspect the potential venues and discuss with the organisers the nature of the proposed festival. We particularly urged them not to marginalise the country’s most talented musicians, those playing contemporary jazz. Extensive correspondence ensued. We provided a comprehensive festival model, including the national jazz piano competition, and a suggested roster of bands for each potential venue.

This model was on the table when Adrian Jackson accepted the job of festival co-ordinator in May, 1990. While he tweaked that skeletal model around the edges, it was clear that, from the time of his appointment, the festival was in good hands.

Naturally, improvements were made to the original model over time. In 1991 a blues program was added, and a central stage in Reid Street enabled music to be heard free-of-charge. The piano competition was given over to other musical instruments and renamed the National Jazz Awards. By 1995, with the available accommodation in the town booked out years in advance, a “homestay” program was launched so out-of-town visitors could be accommodated in spare rooms in private houses.

The Jacksons appear to have worked separately on this book. Adrian provides an encyclopedic account of the annual festival programs with fascinating glimpses of his interactions with some of the world’s most distinguished musicians; Andra weighs in with accounts of some of the festival’s more colourful or miscellaneous aspects: the blues stage; the nature of the festival audience; the character of the National Jazz Awards; and so on.

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



*Brisbane saxophonist
Zac Hurren, who won
the 2009 National Jazz
Award, found
Wangaratta “a life-
changing experience” ...
PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY
IMPROVISED MUSIC
ASSOCIATION*

Brisbane saxophonist Zac Hurren, who won the 2009 National Jazz Award, 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. ”

“My band has played at many festivals around the world,” says vocalist Vince Jones. “No festival I have played at has purer motives than the Wangaratta festival.”



Vince Jones: “No festival I have played at has purer motives than the Wangaratta festival” ...

This handsome 340-page tome, of coffee-table proportions, boasts a magnificent collection of photographs, effortlessly dwarfing most previous books on Australian jazz.

Still, for all this book’s splendour, a key question is evaded: 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 - a tall order for one individual.



The Others, L-R, Paul Grabowsky, Kram, James Morrison: a hit at the 2017 festival... PHOTO CREDIT CHRIS HERFT

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. And of course, scores of local volunteers were crucial to the festival's success.

There were clouds on the horizon for Jackson with the advent of Paul Squires, a Wangaratta personality who'd served previously as the city's CEO, and became chair of the festival board in 2013.



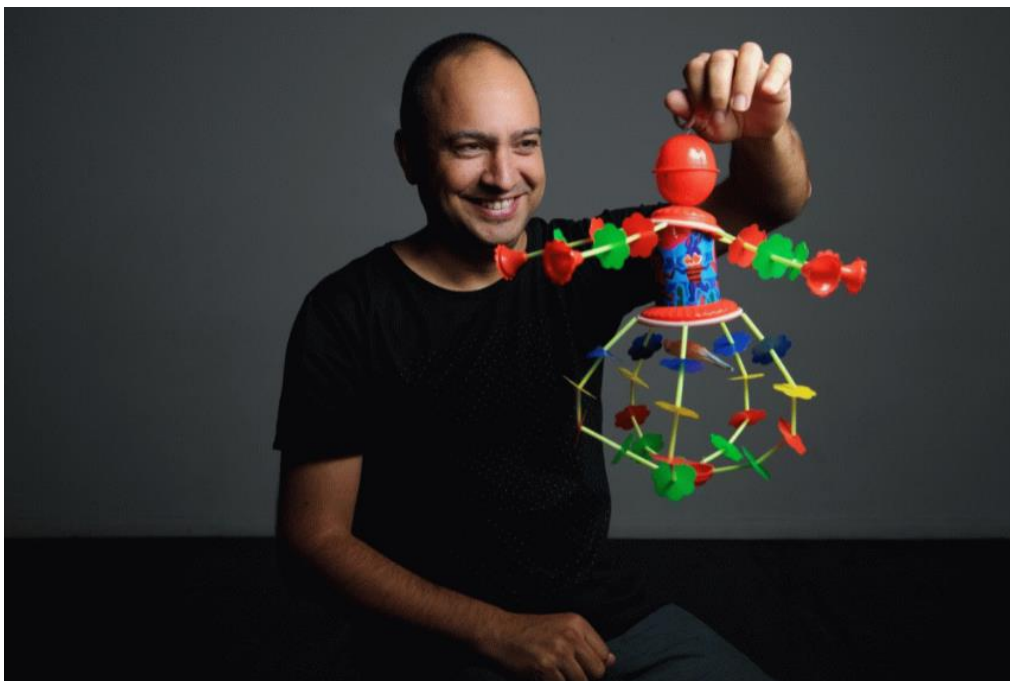
Festival chair Paul Squires, who "made it clear he wanted to shake things up..."

In the 2014 festival program, Jackson wrote that Wangaratta “has shown that a festival can succeed by emphasising musical virtues like originality, creativity and integrity.” Squires, however, “made it clear he wanted to shake things up. He felt that surviving and scraping by wasn’t good enough.”

Even if Jackson and Squires had differing visions in relation to the festival’s future, why did it make sense to take out the artistic director following the 2016 event? We have to read between the lines. 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: a shaky tenet, given the evidence that jazz, over some 70 years, had increasingly become a non-commercial musical genre.



New artistic directors Zoe Hauptmann (left) & Adam Simmons (below) curated a jazz component in 2017 virtually indistinguishable from a Jackson-style program...



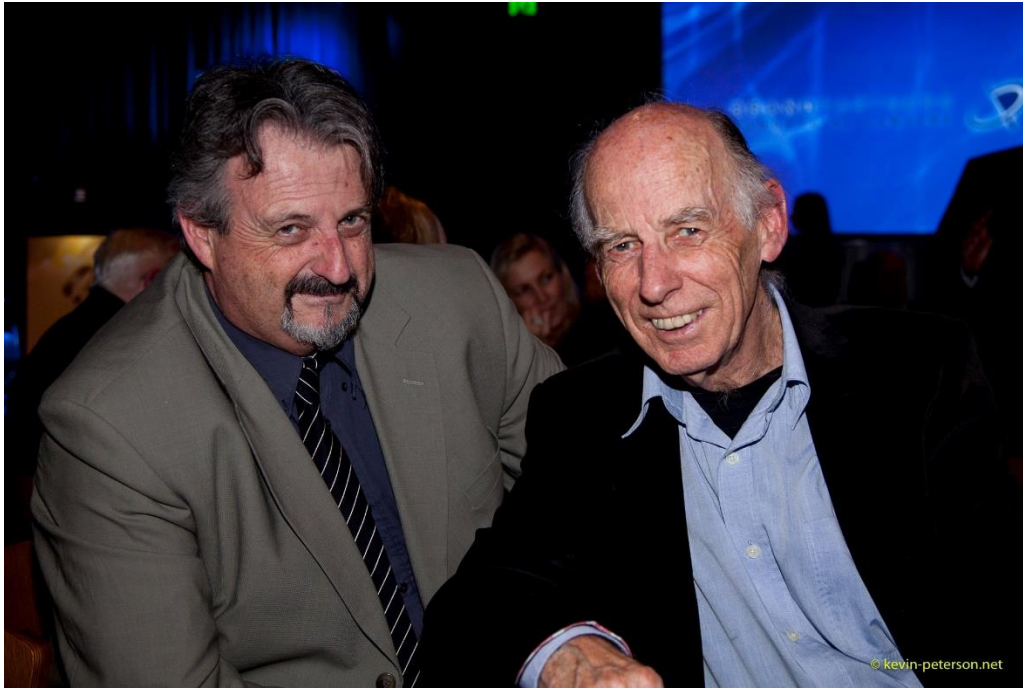
Yet the two professional jazz musicians who replaced Jackson, Sydney's Zoe Hauptmann and Melbourne's Adam Simmons – half of a new four-person team of artistic directors - curated a jazz component in 2017 virtually indistinguishable from a Jackson-style program. It was justly praised by the perceptive Melbourne jazz writer Des Cowley, whose review is reproduced.



Melbourne writer Des Cowley, whose review of the 2017 festival is reproduced...

Some argue that a savvy festival board would have cashed in on the prestige the festival had built up over a quarter of a century, and secured adequate sponsorship. A parade of excellent sponsors, including AMP, Subaru, Kawai, and the Transport Accident Commission (TAC) had come and gone over the years.

When a vastly important job arises in Australian jazz which, if done well, would benefit the jazz community, that community has a habit of producing only one candidate, who stands head and shoulders above others. Adrian Jackson was of that ilk, perfectly suited to the job. He mixed knowledge and love of jazz (essential); a substantial apprenticeship as an analyst of the music (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 epitomize 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.

A shorter version of this article appeared in The Australian newspaper on April 2, 2022. It is on The Australian's website behind a pay wall, but can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-22>

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

John Clare/Gail Brennan, "The Wangaratta Jazz Festival, 1990", <https://ericmyersjazz.com/john-clare-34>

John Clare, "Wangaratta's 25th Festival", <https://ericmyersjazz.com/john-clare-33>

Eric Myers, "The Wangaratta Festival: A History of its Gestation", <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-1a>

Eric Myers, review of the book "Why Wangaratta? The Phenomenon of the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz" by John Clare, <https://ericmyersjazz.com/book-reviews>