

WHY WANGARATTA? THE PHENOMENON OF THE WANGARATTA FESTIVAL OF JAZZ by John Clare. Published by the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz Inc. Victoria 1999. ISBN No 0646380516, 176 pp.

Reviewed by Eric Myers

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Why has the Wangaratta festival become, in ten years, the one festival which almost everyone regards as the best jazz festival in the country? Not only in terms of artistic excellence, but also in commercial terms: over four or five days, visitors inject some 15 million dollars into the local economy, and the accommodation within a 30km radius around the town is booked out 12 months ahead. It's not as if there's no competition. The *Australian Jazz Directory* lists over 100 arts & jazz festivals around the country — about two every week. Well, why Wangaratta, indeed?

Wangaratta made every post a winner. In 1989 the festival was an initiative of the local Chamber of Commerce. The town business people, faced with a shrinking economy, and wanting to put the town on the map - as Tamworth had one with country music - were behind the event right from the start. (An unsatisfactory alternative is the initiative coming from a minority of jazz enthusiasts, who then have win the support of business).

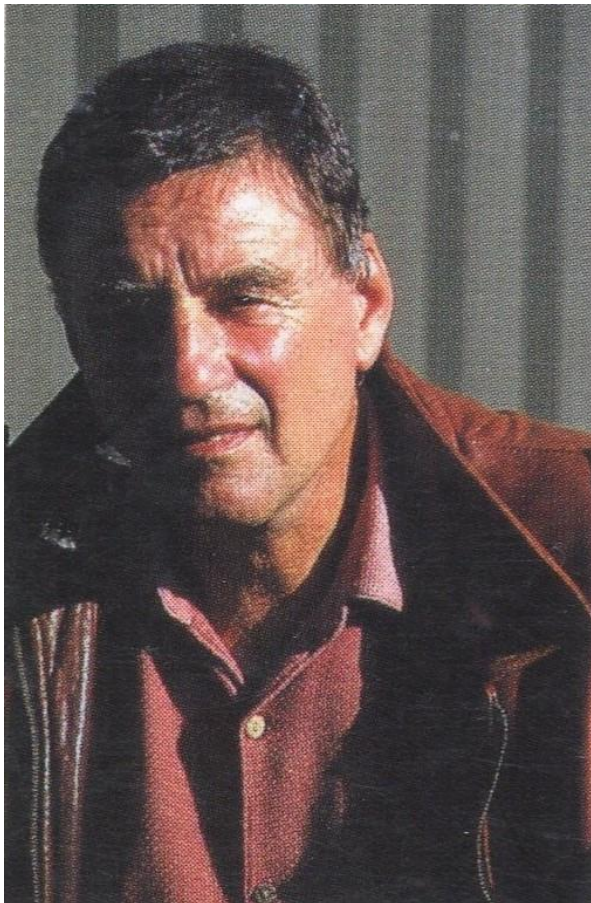


Bev Wittig (right) pictured in 1997 with Patti Bulluss (left)...PHOTO COURTESY WHY WANGARATTA?

The representatives of local business, such as Beverley Wittig (now Spiller) and Bob Dewar, sought advice from within the national jazz community, from people whose interest was the welfare of Australian jazz, rather than some commercial imperative. They largely accepted that advice. They were strongly supported by the local Council, (the CEO was then Greg Maddock, who later moved on to become CEO of the Sydney City Council), in the form of \$25,000 a year for the first three years. They accepted advice regarding whom to liaise with in Melbourne, and appointed an artistic

director, Adrian Jackson, who was dedicated above all to musical excellence. During the ensuing years, led by Patti Bullus, they survived the efforts of those who wanted to cancel the festival. They stuck to the belief that, over time — five to seven years was the advice — such a festival would put down firm roots, and develop a large and loyal audience. They proved to be right.

John Clare's book goes through all of this, and it's a very good read. He is well qualified, having attended every Wangaratta festival. I should, however, declare a conflict of interest. I had a lot to do with the gestation of the festival, and regard it as one of the major achievements of the National Jazz Development Program. So, I have a vested interest in its success. In offering a critique of this book, my approach is somewhat subjective. I'm glad to say that the role in the festival's early development played by myself and Peter Rechniewski, who flew to Wangaratta with me in February, 1990 to inspect the venues, and worked on the festival model with me, is reported accurately.



John Clare: well qualified, having attended every Wangaratta festival... PHOTO COURTESY LOW RENT

Essential to the success of the festival has been its commitment to musical excellence, and its determination to ensure that no major jazz idiom was excluded. During the 1980s a number of jazz festivals in this country ignored or downgraded contemporary jazz, because it was regarded as unpopular with the average jazz fan. Such festivals, now long gone, packed their programs with mainstream artists and traditional jazz, much of it mediocre, on the advice of commercial agents.

“Wangaratta presented music from across the spectrum with almost no dross,” writes Clare. “That, believe it or not, is very unusual!” Wangaratta attempted to attract “the kind of people who would listen with great curiosity to the very earliest manifestations of the form and the very latest. Who believed, in short, that jazz — like any living art form — had a past and a present”. The best thing Wangaratta has done is explode various myths that have prevented jazz from developing its great potential in this country: one of them is the myth that the public will always stay away from modern forms of jazz.



The saxophonist Julien Wilson: John Clare admits he strongly disagreed with the decision to award Wilson first place in the saxophone competition in 1994...

This is a warmhearted book, which gives the reader a good feeling. Clare, who grew up in Melbourne, disposes of that old chestnut, Melbourne-Sydney rivalry: “[One does not] need to be told how intense the rivalry between these two cities has traditionally been,” he writes. “Nor does one need to be a qualified armchair

psychologist in order to divine that the two cities are deeply infatuated with each other, as each has what the other lacks. And what, you might ask, is that? Melbourne has culture, old money, a deeply fascinating self-importance, profoundly mysterious traditions and institutions, and entrancing civic beauty, while Sydney has surf. Needless to say, I prefer to live in Sydney.”

The National Jazz Awards (originally the National Jazz Piano Competition) was one of the more inspired suggestions made by Peter Rechniewski and I. This has made it easier for the festival to secure sponsorship and publicity. I was interested to read that the bassist Lloyd Swanton refuses to listen to any of the competition, because “he does not believe that competitions have anything to do with jazz”. Also, that the saxophonist Sandy Evans has “refused to be a judge in other competitions, because she does not believe in them either.”

Clare is bold enough to declare that he disagreed strongly with the judges’ decisions on two occasions: firstly, the Melbourne saxophonist Julien Wilson, who won in 1994. “I didn’t think he should have won it...! Too soon. As it happens, he has since developed into one of the most distinctive and satisfying players we have.” Clare had even more difficulty with the Melbourne drummer Will Guthrie’s win in 1997. “An outrage,” he writes. “Guthrie had a long way to go, in several areas,” he writes, “while drummers such as Andrew Dickeson, Scott Lambie and David Goodman gave remarkably complete and accomplished performances.”



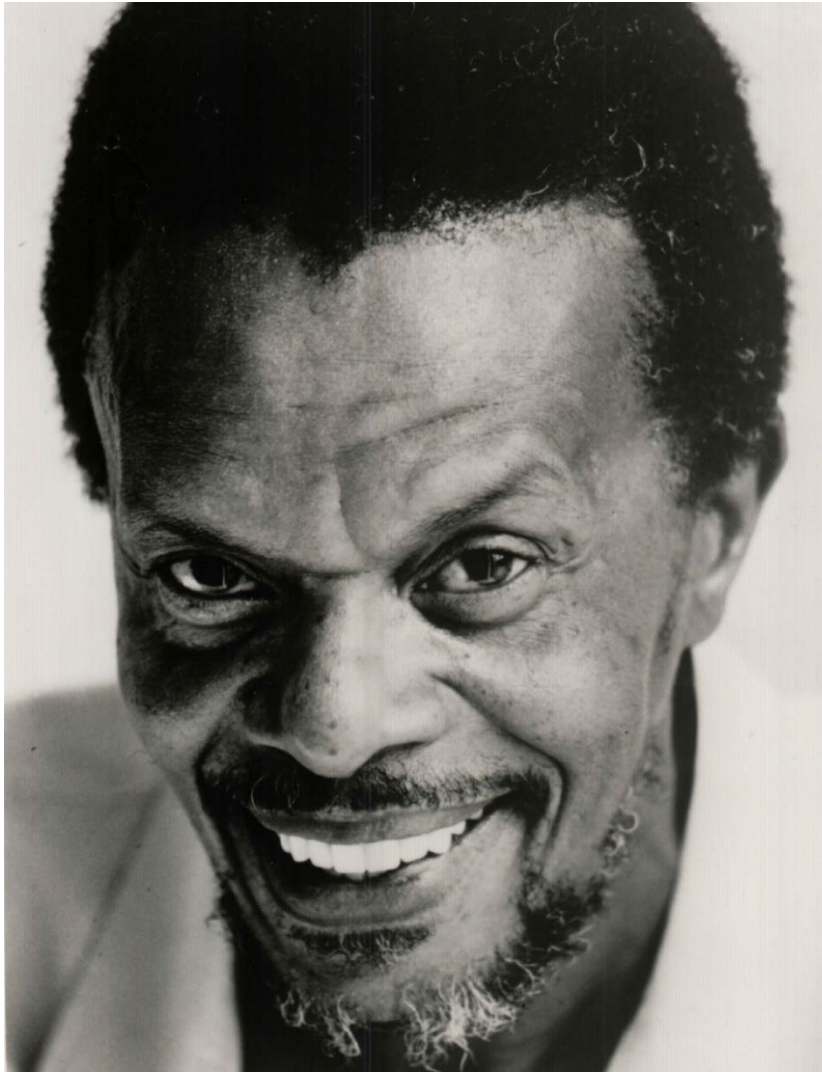
Sigmund Jorgensen: he attacked the Australia Council’s support of Wangaratta on the ground that a high proportion of the bands at Wangaratta came from Sydney...

Clare provides a summary of events at each festival, from 1990 through to 1998, including a survey of press reaction. He suggests that the jazz writer for *The Australian*, Kevin Jones — generally regarded as uninterested in most contemporary forms of jazz — reverses his attitude in the case of Wangaratta, and waxes lyrical about some contemporary jazz ensembles that are regulars there. But it's all very genial. I get a rap on the knuckles for suggesting, in the first two years, that the festival would be well-advised to put on its program one or two leading mainstream artists such as James Morrison, Don Burrows, Vince Jones and Kate Ceberano. Jones and Burrows have performed in subsequent years, of course, but Morrison and Ceberano have not been needed.

There are some great stories in the book, as Clare moves through petty disputes and eccentric actions of people we all know and love. He describes how, in 1993, the director of the Montsalvat Jazz Festival Sigmund Jorgensen, then involved in a campaign against the Australia Council's "bias" towards NSW, attacked the Council's grant of \$20,000 to Wangaratta. But Wangaratta was a Victorian festival, was it not? Sigmund said "that a high proportion of the bands at Wangaratta come from Sydney and hence the funding of Wangaratta is in a way a de facto funding of music in tinsel town..."



Dewey Redman: an example of an artist who may not be a household name, but has something significant or original to offer... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH



Horace Tapscott: another example of an artist who may not be a household name, but has something significant or original to offer...

A distinctive aspect of the festival has been its policy towards international artists. Here, Adrian Jackson has done wonders with limited budgets which, to some extent, have been a virtue. While other festivals gravitate towards celebrities such as Wynton Marsalis and Oscar Peterson, Adrian thinks in terms of artists who may not be household names, but have something significant or original to offer, such as Horace Tapscott, Kurt Elling, Steve Lacy, Dewey Redman and Sam Rivers. As John Clare says: "We are talking about a rich but virtually underground activity that has been brought into the open - to some degree at least."

This is a very interesting book with an important story to tell about a unique cultural event. I highly recommend it.

For more on the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz, see Eric Myers' piece "The Wangaratta Festival: A History of Its Gestation" in the JAZZCHORD ARTICLES folder at this link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-1a>.