

***AUSTRAL JAZZ: The localization of a global music form in Sydney***, by Andrew Robson. Published by Routledge, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-138-31602-7 (hard cover), 161 pages.

**Reviewed by Ted Nettelbeck\***

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*The author Andrew Robson in 2004: he has focussed specifically on a coterie of Sydney-based jazz performers...*

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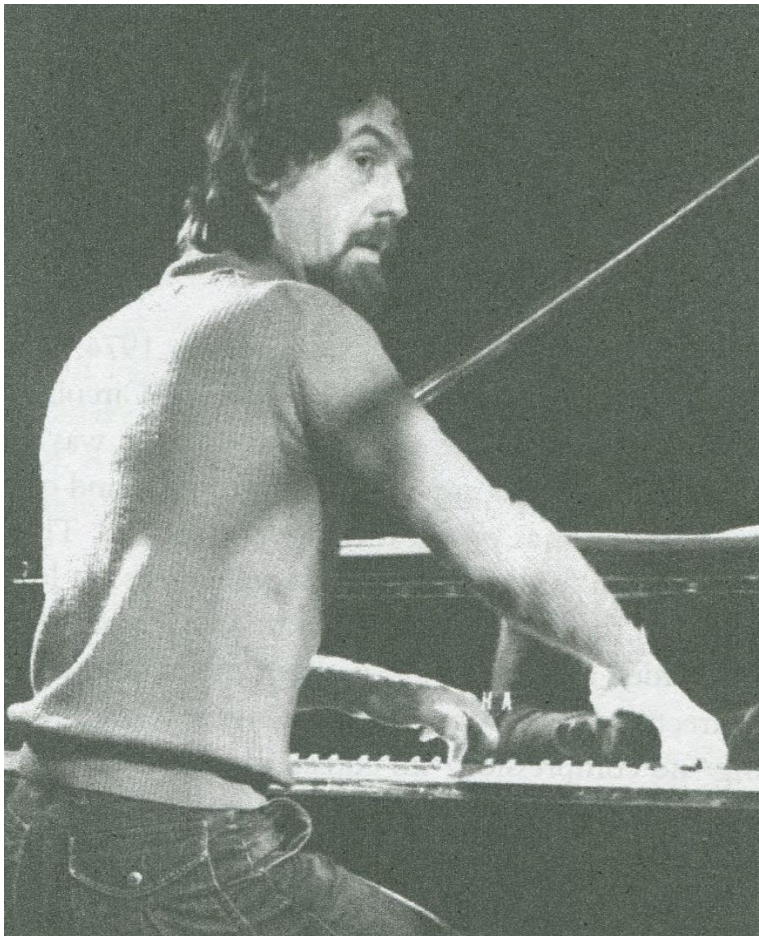
This excellent book forms part of the *Translational Studies in Jazz* series, founded by two academics at the Birmingham City University, as series editors. The series, which recently published Bruce Johnson's *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation*, aims to investigate circumstances that have resulted in jazz as a global music form. Consistent with this broad theme, Robson's book explores the emergence of a relatively new, local modern jazz form, which he terms "Austral Jazz", within Sydney's jazz culture from roughly the early 1970s. His ideas at one level are similar to Johnson's concept of a "jazz diaspora" (Johnson, 2020); both authors acknowledge the legacy of African-American and other US-based jazz musicians but challenge what Johnson termed the "canonical" version of US-focussed jazz history and regard local circumstances beyond the US as critical influences to an understanding of local jazz practices. However, Robson questions the accuracy of "scattering from a homeland", as implied by the term "diaspora", instead focussing on the influence of more microcosmic, local circumstances. Thus, when advancing his case, Robson sidesteps debate about whether there exists a more inclusive Australian "national" jazz style and he does not attempt to address jazz cultures elsewhere within Australia; and nor has he attempted a comprehensive review of Sydney's jazz scene. Instead, he has focussed specifically on that coterie of Sydney-based jazz performers who, he argues, have made unique contributions to the creative changes that mark "Austral Jazz".



*Robson's ideas at one level are similar to Bruce Johnson's concept of a "jazz diaspora", outlined in the above book...*

Robson's jazz education dates from the late 80s and he now has some 30 years' experience, both nationally and internationally, as a highly respected professional jazz musician. Awarded the PhD degree in 2016 by the University of Sydney, he is now a lecturer at Macquarie University. His writing style is scholarly but accessible and clear; given the dates of references included, it may be that the book has been derived from, or is an extension of, research undertaken for the PhD. Whether this is so is immaterial, except that it will motivate me to enquire further about Robson's writings; past and future.

An opening chapter headed "Introduction to Austral Jazz" provides a theoretical framework around which the book has been organised (I return to this theory below); an overview of content for the five chapters then follows. Each chapter is well supported by generous, informative notes that expand on the points drawn, and by a potentially useful discography and set of references. This organisation is entirely satisfactory when checking within the context of a given chapter but sometimes less so when attempting to locate something read at an earlier time because, although the Index is good, it is sometimes not equal to the detail required for the latter task. Throughout, the text is supported by illuminating photos, which add to interest. (My favourite is of the extraordinarily creative Roger Frampton [Figure 2,2], in full flight and 19 years before his tragic death in 2000).



*The shot of Roger Frampton on page 59 of Andrew Robson's book... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH*



Broadly, the theory holds that, because the development of individual creativity is fundamental to jazz performance, jazz style is inherently subject to continuous invention, which inevitably will be influenced by local circumstances and culture. Robson terms this “reidentification” – essentially a process of “reinvention” under local circumstances and therefore expressed accordingly. Moreover, to the extent that a “concentration of creativity” emerges within a single location, there will follow a trend whereby the music comes to be recognised as including local elements, sufficient to label the style as “new”. Robson proposes that such a concentration was provided by a number of concurrent events, principally the founding in 1973 of tertiary-level jazz studies at the NSW State Conservatorium (now the Sydney Conservatorium of Music), together with the opening of The Basement as a jazz venue. These circumstances provided the trigger for one kind of “cultural revitalisation”; this new concentration of jazz-directed activities revitalised Sydney’s jazz scene following a period of decline, growing a pre-existing group of jazz musicians by attracting successive cohorts of Conservatorium graduates and others committed to a career in jazz in Sydney. Increasingly, those involved would tend to draw inspiration from the examples of local artists, who were performing regularly, issuing local recordings and including local compositions in their repertoires. This trend, termed “self-fashioning” by the author, represented a major change from earlier practices that had principally drawn on US models for performance, and repertoire. The choice of “Austral” to describe this development is intended to include the relatively large number of jazz musicians, initially from New Zealand, who have settled in Sydney and made major contributions to its jazz scene.



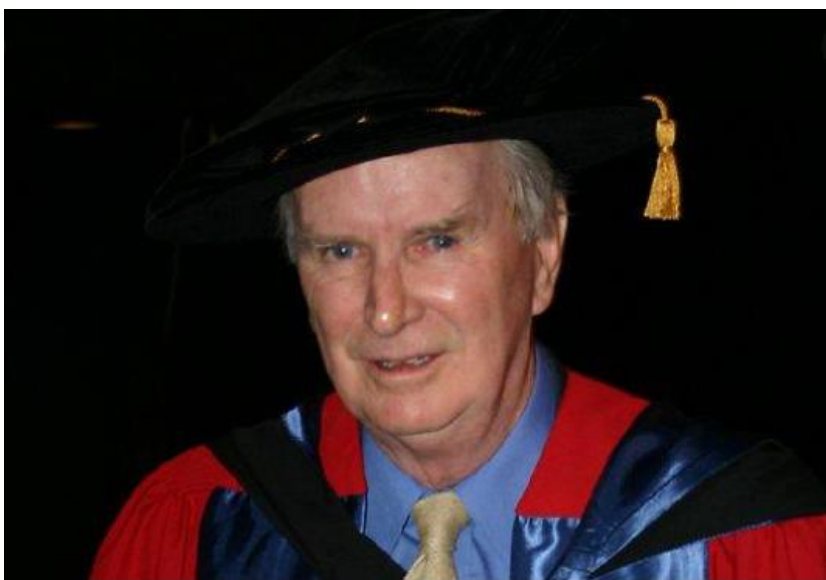
*Bruce Viles: the opening of his venue The Basement in 1973 was one of the concurrent events to which Robson draws attention... PHOTO COURTESY KAREN VILES*

Most of what follows relates to what Robson terms “reidentifications” caused by the fresh impetus introduced into the Sydney scene by particular changes to local circumstances, although in the book’s final chapter he also outlines recent

developments whereby jazz performers have begun to apply their practices to non-jazz forms of music. Chapter 1 describes the genesis to Austral Jazz, immediately prior its emergence in the early 1970s. Robson outlines the circumstances of Sydney's jazz scene during the late 1960s, providing informative summaries of the careers of Don Burrows, John Sangster, Judy Bailey, Bernie McGann, Charlie Munro and Mike Nock. In particular, he acknowledges Burrows' prescient vision for the value of jazz education, detailing Burrows' leading role as advocate for and establishment of Australia's first tertiary jazz studies program at the then NSW State Conservatorium, his involvement with the recently appointed and forward-thinking Director Rex Hobcroft – a collaboration expanded on in the next chapter -- and their recruitment of US saxophonist and jazz educator Howie Smith to head the program.



*Two key figures in the establishment of Australia's first tertiary jazz studies program at the then NSW State Conservatorium in 1973: Don Burrows (left) who exhibited prescient vision and the forward-thinking Director Rex Hobcroft (below)...*



He also includes a fascinating account of the involvement of Burrows, Sangster, Bailey and McGann as bandleaders in an APRA project that resulted in a 1967 CBS album titled *Jazz Australia*. There was some overlap in band personnel, particularly between Burrows' and Sangster's groups, and Graeme Lyall played in all but McGann's Quartet, but, significantly, the album presented only Australian compositions. I had long forgotten this recording, which I never owned but had heard soon after its release, with considerable interest principally because of my earlier time working with Graeme Lyall; Robson's account of how McGann, lesser known at that time and a decade younger than Burrows and Sangster, came to be included in the venture has provided pertinent insight into the then current dynamics and partnerships that had formed within what was actually quite a small local professional scene.



*The 1967 CBS album titled “Jazz Australia”: saxophonist Graeme Lyall played in three of the four groups featured...*

I had not previously come across a detailed historical account of the establishment of Sydney's jazz studies program, set, as it has been here in Part I of Chapter 2, within a background of artistic resurgence encouraged by the election of the first Whitlam Labor government. I have therefore found Robson's description extremely valuable, the more so because it has been informed by his interviews with those involved. I have been particularly impressed by Robson's analysis of the importance to the success of this incipient course of the initiatives and energies of the principal personalities involved – Burrows, Hobcroft and Smith; Robson's perspective underscores how important it is that change requires the advocacy of visionaries; and, without question, Australian jazz owes a great debt to the legacies of these three.

Howie Smith, in particular, appears to have been an inspired suggestion by Burrows, first, because of Smith's conviction that the Conservatorium-based program should particularly focus on practical aspects of repertoire and composition; but, second, getting this off the ground depended absolutely on Hobcroft's prejudice-free, receptive perspectives about the role of the Conservatorium in supporting Sydney's and NSW's music activities.



*Howie Smith (right) in action as a conductor in 1976: his appointment was the result of an inspired suggestion by Burrows...PHOTO CREDIT SCOTT WHITEHAIR*

Part II of Chapter 2 is an exploration of those circumstances, coincidental with the delivery of the Conservatorium jazz studies program, that Robson argues provided the necessary conditions for “Austral Jazz” to emerge. These were, first, the extraordinarily successful entrepreneurial initiatives of Bruce Viles and Horst Liepolt for many years at The Basement, a full-time jazz club, located within an easy walk from the Conservatorium, thereby providing jazz students with opportunities to listen to bands like Galapagos Duck and Jazz Co/op but also to perform. Second were the establishment, both in 1974, of radio station 2MBS, which supported local jazz activity and the formation of the Jazz Action Society (JAS), which successfully attracted funding from the Australia Council for the Arts to support its concert activities.



Chapter 3 opens with a lengthier consideration of the perennial debate about whether, ultimately, jazz can be taught, a topic briefly introduced to close the previous chapter. Part I of Chapter 3 also includes a thoughtful discussion about how establishing formal jazz education within the tertiary sector has helped to shift gender imbalance within the industry (a topic revisited a little later in Chapter 4) and influenced perceptions of the music’s “legitimacy”.

Robson’s conclusions about formal jazz education are sensible and balanced -- and he recognises the advantages of the formal approach. I agree with him; to a limited but nonetheless useful extent, jazz certainly can be taught. Of course, it is also obvious that the age-old method of on-the-job training can be highly effective; and it is the case that some relatively rare individuals have extraordinary talents that apparently thrive on the basis of little besides personal commitment and exploration. Moreover, it is equally true that excellence requires opportunities and a higher level of self-directed dedication beyond what even intense formal training can deliver. But, as Don Burrows appreciated, opportunity for formal education can serve to reinvigorate interest where opportunities for on-the-job experience are limited; a curriculum not only delivers basic skills – it can challenge and inspire wider participation in what opportunities do exist. And it can dramatically assist to grow an audience base. In any case, as virtually all disciplines in science, social science, education, engineering, physical and mental health, arts including classical music, and humanities have accepted, formal tertiary instruction can deliver massive economies of time when instilling the relevant background knowledge and important practical skills that provide the foundation to subsequent self-developed skills that often require very long periods of dedication; initial self-direction by trial-and-error can also work but can be very time consuming unless one is exceptionally talented. In my opinion, the same issues apply to jazz performance.



*Burrows: he appreciated that opportunity for formal education can serve to reinvigorate interest where opportunities for on-the-job experience are limited...*  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



The latter half of Chapter 3 provides a detailed consideration of the influence of the Keys Music Association (KMA) on Sydney's jazz scene, from 1973 until it ceased operations during the later 1980s. Not previously being aware of the activities of this organisation, I have found this account of particular interest, establishing as it does links between KMA and the early careers of so many of the current generation of Sydney's most outstanding jazz artists. KMA was established at around the same time as the Conservatorium program but independently from it, so that both initiatives ran in parallel for some time. Although there was some cross fertilisation between KMA and the Conservatorium, with a number of nascent musicians involved with both, the principal motivation driving KMA came from a collective of younger performers, inspired by more experimental, *avant garde* approaches to jazz improvisation than the Conservatorium program generally included, and concerned to organise their own performing opportunities. Robson's analysis of the activities of several bands active from the 1970s and into the early 90s strengthens his argument that the extent to which mutual influences among those involved shaped musical practices, as opposed to relying on US models, was a major factor in the emergence of Austral Jazz.



*Keys, the flagship orchestra of the KMA, from left; Robin Gador, bass, Azo Bell, gtr, Brett Butler, percussion, Searle Indyk, viola, Daniel Fine, alto sax & flute, Peter Fine, piano & clarinet, Paul Roger, drums & percussion, Peter Dehlson, drums & percussion, Mark Simmonds, tenor sax, clarinet, trumpet, Raoul Hawkins, trombone & bass... PHOTO COURTESY ENCORE MAGAZINE*

This theme, of new Austral Jazz entity continuing to evolve from the 1990s forward, is expanded in Part I of Chapter 4, which continues the description of important formative influences that have converged to drive changes to Sydney's jazz scene; the success of Peter Rechniewski's vision for the Sydney Improvised Music Association

(SIMA) as using several venues, but particularly the eight years at the Strawberry Hills Hotel, to promote both established and new jazz artists performing new, original composition; the emergence of Bernie McGann as the archetypal Australian jazz artist; John Clare's role as an influential jazz writer and commentator; the founding of Tim Dunn's Rufus Records and other labels, devoted to local releases; the ABC's contribution to radio and television broadcasting of local jazz.



*Important formative influences that have converged to drive changes to Sydney's jazz scene include the success of Peter Rechniewski (left) with SIMA; the emergence of Bernie McGann (below) as the archetypal Australian jazz artist; and the role of John Clare (far below) as an influential jazz writer and commentator...*





To this list I would add Eric Myers' work as NSW Jazz Coordinator and National Jazz Development Officer, administrative positions that he held for some 14 years until the end of 2001. Only part of Myers' responsibilities was located within the scene described by Robson but, nonetheless, his impact there, principally through organising overseas tours by several of the artists considered by Robson, was considerable. (Robson has included brief references to Myers' contribution; but, in my opinion, the extent of this contribution would warrant closer consideration).

Part II then reviews the activities of eight bands which appeared regularly in SIMA's Strawberry Hills program and which Robson believes provide exemplars of Austral Jazz development; The Necks, Ten Part Invention, The Engine Room, The Catholics, Clarion Fracture Zone, Bernie McGann Trio, Mike Nock Quartet and Wanderlust. A final section provides a thoughtful consideration of why, despite improvement in the number of women playing jazz, progress has not been more rapid.



*Two of the eight bands which Robson believes provide exemplars of Austral Jazz development are The Necks (left) and Clarion Fracture Zone (below)...*





As foreshadowed at the outset of this review, the final chapter provides a brief overview of ways in which some jazz performers are now becoming involved in larger scale music projects, by collaborating with a wide range of local and Asia-Pacific cultures (“geocultural connection”) or perhaps by engaging with European art music aspects relating to the jazz artist’s family heritage (“ethno-cultural connection”). Robson provides two fascinating case studies as examples of these two different kinds of reidentifications. The first is drummer Simon Barker’s engagement with traditional Korean music; the other is bassist Lloyd Swanton’s song cycle, composed to commemorate the experiences of his Uncle Stuart, who died as a prisoner of war of the Japanese during World War II. Both accounts make for very interesting reading and both nicely illustrate new directions in Austral Jazz.



*Two fascinating case studies are the engagement of Simon Barker (left) with traditional Korean music; and the song cycle Ambon, written by Lloyd Swanton (below) ...*



In summary, this has been an interesting, informative and enjoyable read, well written and an important contribution to Australian jazz literature. Robson has done an outstanding job, both in marshalling evidence to support his theory about the



*Andrew Robson on alto sax: an important contribution to Australian jazz literature. Robson has done an outstanding job... PHOTO CREDIT BRIAN STEWART*

importance of local circumstances in shaping both jazz expression and audience perceptions, and in the use of detailed examples, by means of which he has illustrated his ideas.

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