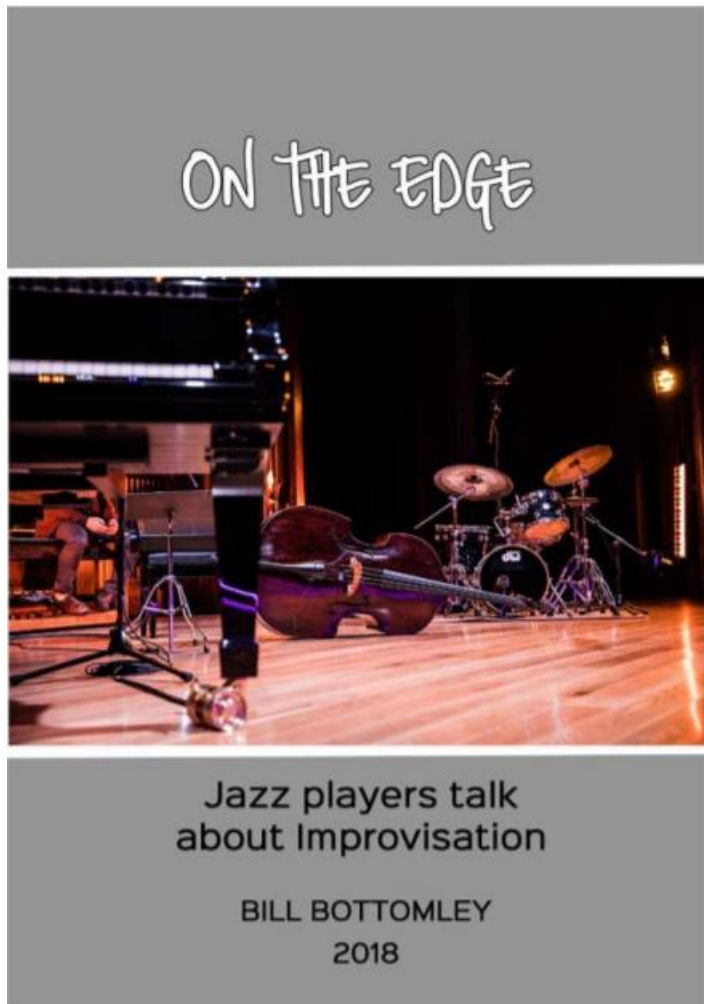


ON THE EDGE: JAZZ PLAYERS TALK ABOUT IMPROVISATION.

Published and edited by Bill Bottomley, 2018, 79 pp.

Reviewed by Ted Nettelbeck*



This delightful, very short book sets out to try to understand what a jazz musician experiences when engaged in the processes of improvisation. The Contents are organised under the headings of *Intro*, *Main Theme*, and *Coda*. The *Intro* provides an informative definition for improvisation, including jazz soloing but, as Bill Bottomley emphasises, available definitions do not attempt to capture the

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communicative aspects of improvisation. He uses the metaphor of spoken (as opposed to written) language to draw attention to the truth that the best jazz musicians are able through their music to communicate at some level with an audience, including of course other musicians with whom they are playing. I thought that Bottomley understated somewhat the extent to which an artist engaged with performing within the written Western European canon will communicate with an audience but I certainly agreed with his opinion that a good jazz performance is one of the wonders of music making.

Before reading this book, I did not know anything about the author but his *Intro* provides a little bit about his music credentials. An anecdote included in the *Intro* about Dick Letts's exceptional transposing skills led me to enquire further and Dick confirmed that Bottomley is a talented musician, a life-long jazz enthusiast and long-time contributor to Sydney's arts scene. The *Intro* also includes a link to Bottomley's website, where I have spent a most enjoyable few hours exploring the wealth of materials on offer. He is obviously an enormously talented visual artist, who has worked in a diverse range of mediums, principally drawing and photography. He has also posted quite a lot at his website and elsewhere that suggests wide-ranging and ongoing social and environmental concerns. He appears to be inquisitive, very smart, sceptical and something of an iconoclast. I suspect too that he has a sharp sense of humour; you will never encounter a sheet of music like the score in the photograph for the *Intro*; it's a mirror-image but as seen in reflection using a second mirror!



Bill Bottomley: a talented musician, a life-long jazz enthusiast and long-time contributor to Sydney's arts scene... PHOTO COURTESY BILL BOTTOMLEY

The genesis to the book was a series of (mostly) telephone interviews conducted between June and August 2018 with ten jazz musicians active around Sydney: In the order interviewed they are Tony Gorman (sundry wind), Wallace Carslaw (guitar, bass), Steve Brien (guitar), Dave MacRae (piano), Joy Yates (voice), Sandy Evans (saxophones), Mike Nock (piano), Alister Spence (piano), Brett Hirst (bass) and Kevin Hunt (piano). Interviews have been transcribed and then published, first on Bottomley's website but subsequently by Dick Letts, one a month, in the Music Trust's electronic magazine *LoudMouth*. Only a very small number of print books have been produced but interested readers of this review can read the essays in the Main Theme section by accessing the website as follows:

<https://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/bill-bottomleys-jazz-interviews-brett-hirst/>



Bassist Brett Hirst: one of the ten jazz musicians active around Sydney who did telephone interviews with Bottomley between June and August 2018... PHOTO COURTESY BILL BOTTOMLEY'S BOOK

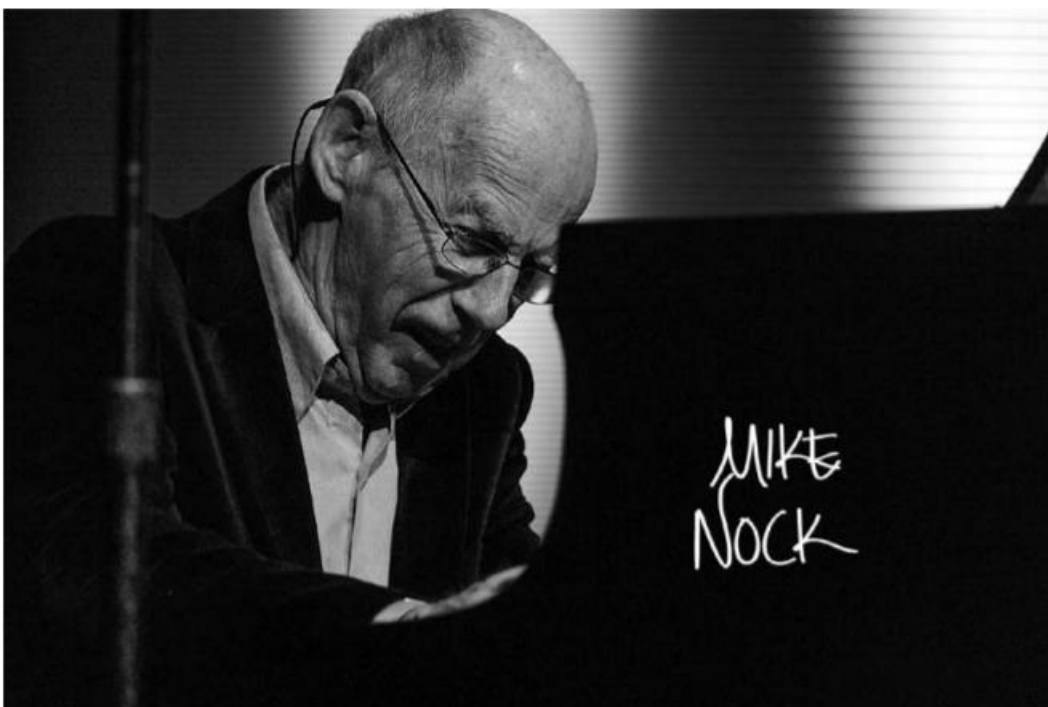
All ten interviews are available; if a reader experiences any difficulty when navigating the website, using the link but changing to the required name (eg, mike-nock or alister-spence to replace brett-hirst in the link above) will produce the essay.

All ten participants are major artists in the national and international jazz scene, with professional experience ranging from about 20 to around 60 years. Most of their names will be familiar to followers of Australian jazz but Bottomley has in any case provided brief biographical notes at the beginning of each essay. What contributors

have to say in response to Bottomley's questions reflects a wealth of experience with jazz improvisation. The substance of these responses suggests that Bottomley has not used a single set of questions; but, in broad terms, questions appear to have been directed towards what it feels like and level of consciousness about context, structure and content when improvising; the extent of spontaneity; and the use of previously learned motifs.



*Two others of Bill Bottomley's ten musicians: Tony Gorman (left) and Mike Nock (below)...
PHOTOS COURTESY BILL BOTTOMLEY'S BOOK*



So, does Bill Bottomley accomplish what he set out to? Certainly, his interviews have challenged the respondents to try to describe both how they approach improvisation and their experiences when doing so; and in every instance what the musician has to say is of considerable interest. Predictably, these accounts tend to be idiosyncratic, they vary in length and in the relative emphasis given to different topics; and there are several different interpretations of what Bottomley meant by “pre-hearing”, a term that he has obviously included in his questioning. For some this has meant “preconceived”, in the sense of prepared material, learned by rote and dropped into a specific context; for others, personal or familiar “licks” known from past experience to work well in certain contexts; for still others, it has meant to pick up from a motif from a previous soloist; or memory for melodic material previously heard but used spontaneously in the moment. There is also clearly a shared understanding that an early stage to learning how to improvise requires developing a sound background knowledge about basic stylistic aspects of jazz melody, harmony and rhythm. But, in short, there is clearly consensus that use of learned material is inevitable; but originality and spontaneity is most valued -- and should always be striven for.

Many of the contributors are or have been deeply involved in formal jazz education and it has been obvious from their responses that, before they had been asked to participate in Bill Bottomley’s project, most had long already engaged deeply in thinking about how expertise in improvisation is achieved. Overall, despite some apparent differences when searching for metaphors to express the experience of performing (a “conversation”; expression/communication through “spoken language”; traversing a “landscape”, making a “painting”) several common themes do emerge.



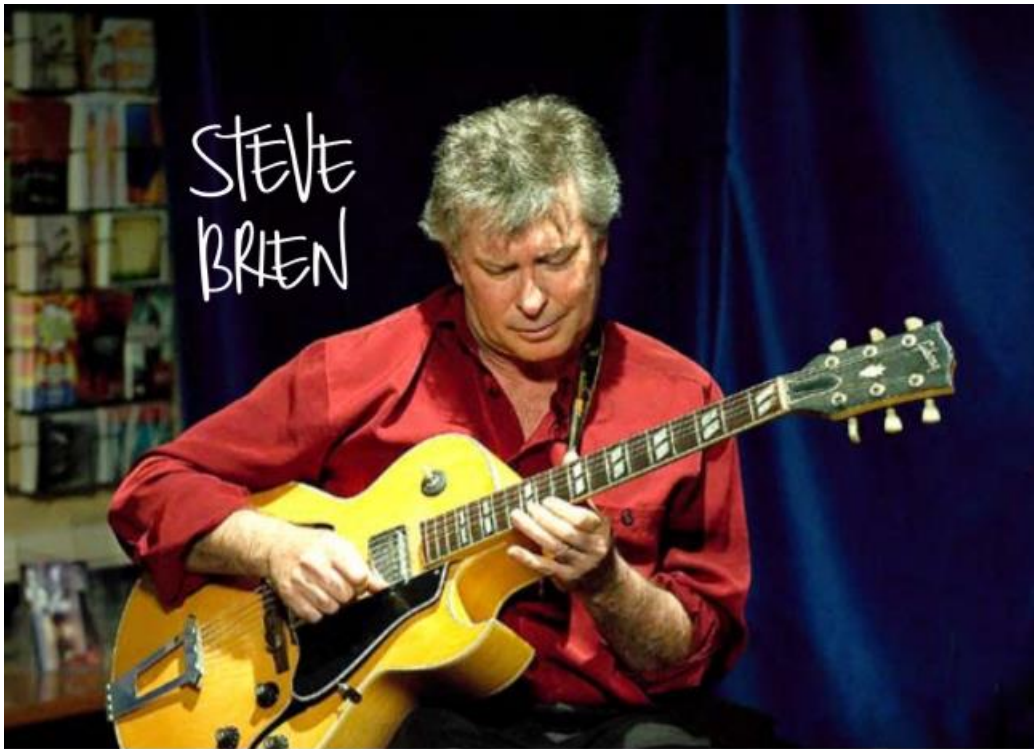
Joy Yates: interviewed twice for this publication... PHOTO COURTESY BILL BOTTOMLEY'S BOOK

There is general consensus that improvisation uses previously learned materials, some of which will have been acquired from others, and which are initially assimilated into current practices, before eventually becoming fully integrated into a performer's individual style. Most of those interviewed confirmed that it was important for a performer to develop a personal style that avoided being unmistakably derivative. Most agreed that these "building blocks" are then refigured spontaneously during performance. All recognised that executive brain processes controlling performance had to be pre-conscious because, during performance, there is insufficient time for conscious, considered thinking. Achieving this skill requires considerable (life-time) commitment to prior preparation, principally by means of practice directed to achieving the necessary technique. Central to this is achieving a required "muscle memory"; essentially being able to make highly specific movements under very severe time constraints, to the extent that these become habitual, without consciously thinking about it (cf, the automatic reactions of an experienced driver manoeuvring a car in traffic). All respondents emphasised that this is done "in the moment". Several noted that it is not possible to play something new every time but all emphasised that spontaneity is the primary goal; and that, occasionally, the outcome can surprise oneself. (This point reminded me that pianist Paul McNamara had at one time reflected on the contribution of "serendipity" to improvisation). Several respondents addressed a question about dealing with a mistake when performing by advising "to put it behind you and move on". Without doubt, this is sound advice; but it did occur to me that someone might usefully have also discussed how one can usefully learn from mistakes. This is obviously also a necessary skill, particularly given that an improviser will be operating much of the time at the extreme limits of ability, a capability only patiently acquired by learning how to perform confidently just beyond one's comfort zone.



Paul McNamara (left): he had at one time reflected on the contribution of "serendipity" to improvisation...

In response to a question about whether the instrument in skilled hands becomes “an extension of self”, most considered this an ideal but few reported achieving this other than occasionally. There was broad consensus about the importance of listening to others, as well as oneself, when playing in an ensemble; and some spoke of the importance of developing rapport within an ensemble. The importance of an audience as an extra source of energy was raised. On the other hand, responses to Bottomley’s interest in how the artist “feels” when engaged in successful improvisation failed to generate much of interest. Some acknowledged feeling “good”, while others admitted to experiencing something more akin to elation. But Mike Nock found the question unanswerable because his music is his form of self-expression, which will differ, depending on immediate circumstances to which he is responding. Bill Bottomley appears to accept this perspective in his Coda, in which he briefly attempts to sum up what he has learned from the project; ultimately, expressing feelings in words is inherently ambiguous and therefore difficult.



Steve Brien: his response warrants special mention... PHOTO COURTESY BILL BOTTOMLEY'S BOOK

In my opinion, Steve Brien’s response warrants special mention. It is by far the longest, reflecting an impressive concern to engage with the project and an interest in pedagogy, a characteristic bound to prove useful to students intending to learn how to improvise. Saying this, however, is in no way intended to diminish the other contributions; I have thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and have found something of interest in each of these essays. The ideas, attempted explanations and thoughtful suggestions provided by the interviewees point several directions that the interested student of jazz improvisation will want to consider and explore. But, in the end, improvisation is such a personal set of skills that tuition cannot do more than

set the exponent on the right path. A frontispiece on page 2 sets out a quote from the late, great soprano saxophonist Steve Lacy, presumably a comment when asked about improvisation:

“It is something to do with the ‘edge’. Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap.”



Steve Lacy: his aphorism on the book’s frontispiece will resound with any jazz musician, as it clearly did with Bill Bottomley...

To achieve this requires a great deal of dedication – and likely at least a modicum of natural talent. This aphorism will resound with any jazz musician; as it clearly did with Bill Bottomley – he used it to title his book.

Editor’s Note: Bill Bottomley’s complete book is on the internet at this link
<http://www.billbottomley.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/On-the-Edge-for-Web.pdf>.