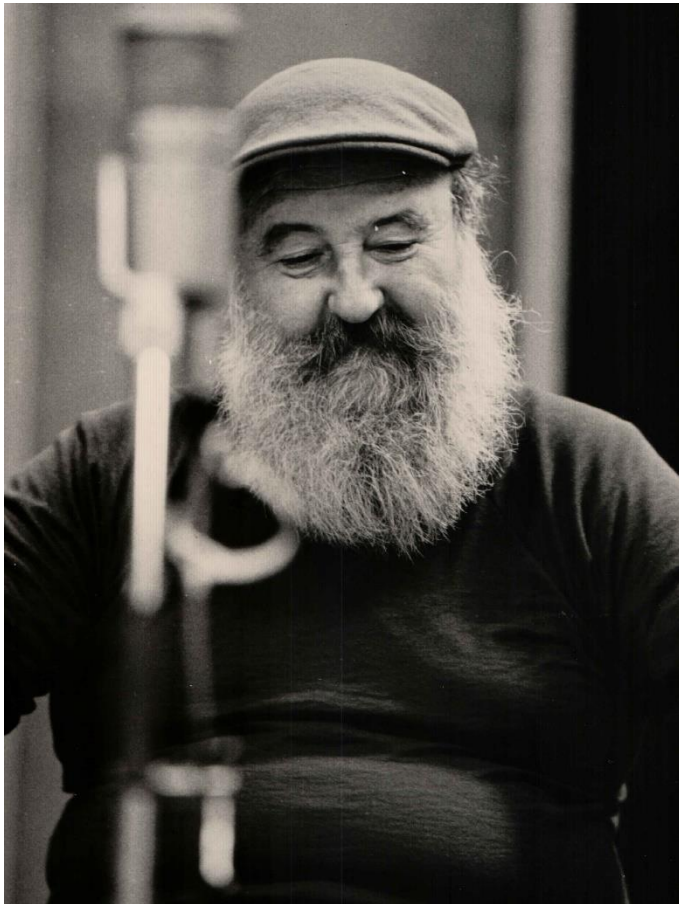


**SEEING THE RAFTERS: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF AN AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSICIAN** by John Sangster. 271 pp, published by Penguin Books Australia, 1988. ISBN: 0 14 010928 5.

**Reviewed by Ted Nettelbeck\***

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*[This review was submitted on February 2, 2022]*



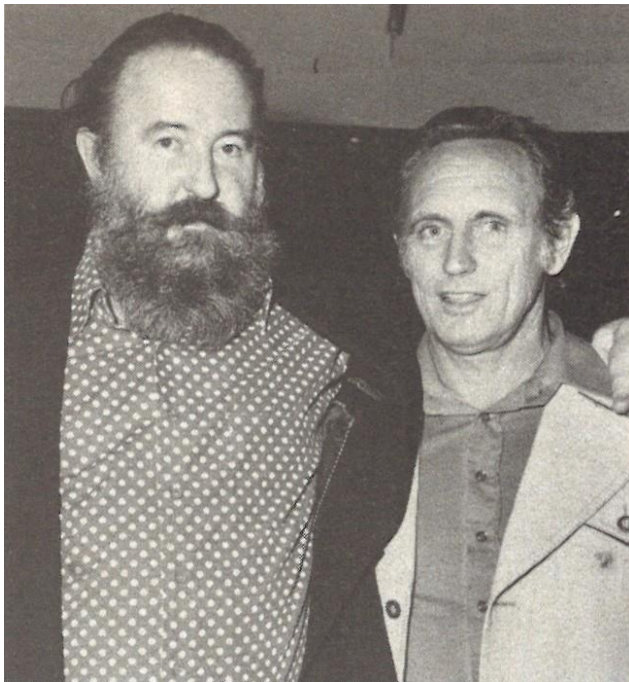
*John Sangster... PHOTO CREDIT  
PETER SINCLAIR*

I did not know John Sangster (17.11.28-26.10.1995), I never heard him play, and I had not previously read this book, published some 34 years ago. We were approximately contemporaneous; he was only seven years older than me and I have played with many of the musicians gracing the pages of this book. Some jazz musicians gossip and I was therefore well aware of the trajectory of Sangster's career, which began in his teens among the cream of Melbourne's trad scene during the late 1940s-early 1950s, notably with Graeme and Roger Bell and Ade Monsborough.

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However, by the mid-1960s, after moving to Sydney with the Bells and others more aligned with traditional and swing idioms, he had transitioned to exploration of more contemporary jazz and had won acceptance as a peer among the elite of Sydney's modern jazz musicians, including Don Burrows, who wrote the brief but affectionate Foreword to the book. I knew nothing about his experiments with rock but a little about his success in composing for film and radio (Johnson, 1987). I was also familiar with his early contribution to the 1967 CBS album *Jazz Australia*, his compositions for the 1973 *The Hobbit Suite* album and some parts, although not all, of his *Lord of the rings* recordings, which I had enjoyed and admired at the time when these were first issued.



*Sangster (left) with Don Burrows, who wrote the brief but affectionate Foreword to the book... PHOTO COURTESY SEEING THE RAFTERS*

However, I did not know, until very recently, that he had been acquitted, at age 17, of the murder/manslaughter of his mother, whom he had killed with an axe, following an altercation because she would not allow him to attend a jazz evening (Johnson, undated). That no mention is made in the book of this traumatic event is remarkable, although perhaps understandable.

Does this omission matter when considering Sangster's legacy? Although it is difficult to accept that such a traumatic experience had little or no effect on the later life of an adolescent still in his formative years, I suggest that this may be less of an issue when simply judging the quality of his music. This has been widely acknowledged as amongst the best, most imaginative that an Australian jazz musician has produced, in no small part because of his talent for bringing out the very best capabilities of his sidemen (Johnson, undated).

However, when considering Sangster's mature persona and his motives for writing this book when he did, I do think that the circumstances of his mother's death may have some relevance. This book was published as an autobiography – moreover,

according to the blurb on the cover, “an autobiography with the lot!” – and it is at least worth considering whether this was really his intention, especially since a later exploration of the circumstances surrounding the killing of Isabella Sangster has raised the possibility that Sangster’s apparent capacity to disregard so absolutely this dreadful incident has reflected “a will to obscure” (Stevens, 2013). Perhaps; but I think too that the omission might reflect what Sangster was trying to achieve; very much a rose-coloured, fun-filled account of a life full of interest.

Sangster begins his story at a time when he has already begun playing regularly with like-minded, committed young men on the fringes of Melbourne’s emerging jazz community. Within this context, events prior to this beginning could be held to be irrelevant to his story line; and, throughout the book, there is scarcely any reference to his parents or his family background and nothing that even hints at an earlier life or any antecedents to his music interests.



*The “Requiem (for a loved one)” album, which was dedicated to “Bo Diddley” (pictured below), Sangster’s close companion for something like 17-18 years, whom he obviously loved deeply...BO DIDDLEY PHOTO COURTESY SEEING THE RAFTERS*



Later in the telling of sundry adventures, there is brief mention of marital problems – always played for laughs – but that, with one other very notable exception, is it as far as more intimate details of his life are concerned. The exception is his relationship with the woman whom he has named “Bo Diddley”, who was his close companion (wife or partner; it is not clear) for something like 17-18 years. She died in 1980 and he dedicated an album of his compositions to her; *Requiem (for a loved one)*. It is obvious from his account of this loss that Sangster loved this woman deeply (see pp 202-3). Nonetheless, it remains the case that most of his storytelling is unflaggingly fun-loving; and it frequently seems more fable than an attempt at factual autobiography.

Throughout the book Sangster has presented himself as the epitome of the affable “Jazz Dag”; the Aussie nicknames (“Sango”, “Erko”, “Blokko”, “Fatso”), the blokey, informal argot (“On yer mate”), the phonetic rhyming slang (to feel “a bit butcher’s”; to entertain “septic tank[s]”; on the “eau-de-cologne”). His writing style is jolly and full of the whimsical banter so typical of some aspects of the 1950s Oz trad jazz milieu within which he began his career (“Jelly Oiled Mockton” [p. 46] did break me up). He never lets up in his determination that nothing is to be taken too seriously but his continuous “taking the mickey” (“Siddley-town”, “the Bigs Moke”; “our Revered Leader” for Graeme Bell and all subsequent band leaders) can become heavy-handed. But perhaps this is an attempt to mimic the informal spontaneity of jazz.



*Sangster describes this group as Hobbits, the “serious band, 1973”. L-R, they are Ian Bloxsom, George Thompson, Col Nolan, Len Barnard, Bob Barnard, John McCarthy and Sangster himself. The caption in “Seeing The Rafters” describes them as Blocko, Strop, Col, Sluggsy, Fatso, Darky and Sango... PHOTO COURTESY SEEING THE RAFTERS*

The opening chapters sketch his initial fascination with earlier jazz forms, the halcyon days of endless fun that followed, the characters involved in the boozy, “mouldie fygge” perspective on local jazz music and how all this resulted in his multi-instrumental skills with, principally, trombone, cornet, drums and, eventually, vibraphone, although he apparently thought nothing about tackling others, like a vast range of percussion instruments, earlier wind forms, or piano, when an occasion called for it.

The chapters that follow, covering touring with the Bell band in England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Japan, Korea, the initial move to Sydney, the peripatetic wandering between Brisbane, Rockhampton, and back to Sydney, are similarly outrageous but entertaining – and some of the anecdotes, while probably highly unreliable, are funny.



*The Graeme Bell band, with whom Sangster toured England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Japan, Korea in the early 1950s, L-R, Pixie Roberts, Kanga Bentley, Lou Silbereisen, Bell, Ade Monsborough, Sangster, Roger Bell, Bud Baker... PHOTO COURTESY SEEING THE RAFTERS*

Among the best in the book involves pianist Julian Lee, who was blind from birth, driving Don Burrows’ new Mercedes along George Street at 2 am, guided by Sangster, Burrows et al, until pulled over by a policeman. I have no idea about the accuracy of this story but in the telling it surely is amusing. By about halfway through the book – around about the very interesting collection of black and white photographs – he has covered his move into the studios for the recordings to accompany film, television advertising and theatrical work involving larger orchestras, much of which involved orchestrating and arranging skills, apparently simply acquired as the need arose, in addition to performing as a multi-instrumentalist.



*Among the best anecdotes in the book involves pianist Julian Lee (left), who was blind from birth, driving Don Burrows' new Mercedes along George Street at 2 am, guided by Sangster, Burrows et al, until pulled over by a policeman...  
PHOTO COURTESY RNZ ARCHIVE*

Beginning from Chapter 11, Sangster has described his years as a modernist, by the early 1960s principally centred around activities at El Rocco, the iconic downstairs coffee lounge in Sydney's Kings Cross area, above which he lived for some 15 years. He credits his experiences there, playing in many different combinations, with the opportunities that enabled him to develop his compositional and arranging aspirations.



*The famous shot of the Judy Bailey Quartet, taken above the El Rocco in Sydney's Kings Cross, where Sangster lived for some 15 years, L-R, Errol Buddle, Bailey, Sangster, Mike Ross...PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY*

This chapter appears to be in response to an article (author unidentified) published a little earlier, the veracity of which Sangster has challenged (see p 134). Sangster set out to correct this and he has included an extensive list of jazz musicians who played there, although his recollections about the timing of some of these activities may not be entirely accurate (see Johnson, 1983). His account then continues with his time in Burrows' band, particularly the opportunities this afforded to visit the US and see some of the avant-garde artists, like Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor, whom he admired.

He has also included his move into composing and performing music for film, animation, television, radio and theatre. The challenges of these achievements have not been addressed in any real sense, other than by maintaining the flow of nonchalant insouciance imparted by his humorous, although I suspect, very exaggerated, anecdotes about the foibles and failures of the characters involved. I did, however, come across a single example whereby he did reveal something non-trivial about his working methods; reflecting on a comment by Duke Ellington about the importance of memory to music making, Sangster made the aphorism that "imagination is only the re-arrangement of experience" (p 200). I thought this perceptive and interesting but have concluded that, as an explanation for creativity, it is insufficient.



*John Sangster, conducting his music, with Chris Qua (Smedley) in the background: Sangster moved into composing and performing music for film, animation, television, radio and theatre... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

Chapter 14 has summarised the background to the period during which Sangster performed many of his jazz suites, particularly those produced by EMI, based on the *Middle Earth* fantasy novels of J R R Tolkien. During this time, he collaborated with sound engineer Martin Benge and they set up their label, Rain-Forest Records (distributed by Larrikin), to market Sangster's music.



*Sangster (far right) in the recording studio with Martin Benge (centre) with whom Sangster set up their label Rain-Forest Records, with unidentified third person to the left... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE*

The final chapters then deal with relocating his home from central Sydney to Narrabeen, his return to small jazz ensemble gigging, including re-joining Burrows, and joining Galapagos Duck; a lengthy section headed “Some critics and criticisms” – some gentle but some not so; and much of it not about criticism but about the sounds of unusual, idiosyncratic instruments. The book ends in pretty much the way it began; amusing anecdotes about musicians partying, lots of alcohol, lots of recovery from same, always joking.

The main impression that emerges from this book is of a very complex character; an immensely talented musician, literally self-taught, dedicated to jazz in all its idioms, affable – and forgiving of those less gifted – but addicted to an alcohol-fuelled life style dedicated to having fun. There is nothing wrong at all in wanting to “have a good time” but it remains unlikely that most jazz musicians have been able to sail through their working lives without a care in the world, which is the impression that I take from Sangster's account of his “jazz life”. Moreover, there is no hint whatsoever of an anger-management problem and yet there is evidence from both Stevens (2013) and Johnson (undated) that the extreme violence, which marked



Sangster's youth, remained. A footnote in Stevens' blog has Sydney jazz critic John Clare stating "I learned that he...had a terrible, almost homicidal temper! He was famous for it, and I was the only person who did not know!" (Stevens, 2013, xxii).



*Critic John Clare, holding his grandson: Clare learned that Sangster "had a terrible, almost homicidal temper! He was famous for it, and I was the only person who did not know!"... PHOTO COURTESY REBECCA CLARE*

Sangster's Preface did acknowledge Eric Myers' "help in steering me towards Penguin Books. At last I know what a 'Jazz Co-ordinator' does. Had me baffled for a while there" (xi). However, the tone of this acknowledgement is pure Sangster as presented throughout this book; sardonic humour perhaps but also, I suspect, some residual of an opinion shared with some members of the Australian jazz community at the time, that, if someone is good enough, support is unnecessary and any arts funding should flow direct to the musicians involved, rather than to jazz advocacy and development, which was the principal function of the jazz coordination programs.

Moreover, it is clear, because he says so (“...jazz can’t be ‘taught’ in any ‘school’ except the hard-knocks one” [p 225]) that part of Sangster’s motive in writing this book was to cock a snook at what he perceived to be a change for the worse in the way in which jazz musicians learn their craft. His criticisms of this new approach were principally on the grounds that jazz skills could not be taught in any formal sense but only absorbed by those who immersed themselves in the examples of those already gifted with the knowledge.

At least as suggested by this book, Sangster was entirely self-taught; he had applied his talents to acquiring the skills that he needed, to do what he wanted, by watching and listening to others. However, by the time that the book was published, training in jazz studies was for the most part being delivered Australia-wide through the explosion in tertiary education courses available from around 1980. Of course, the “paying-one’s dues” path was all that existed when Sangster was starting out and, besides, it seems clear from his rapid progress from the outset, with all of the instruments that he mastered, that Sangster was truly musically gifted. In short, he seems to have been capable of acquiring music knowledge and skills in a way that most aspiring musicians cannot.

One would hope that, having benefitted from the publication of his book by a leading publishing house, Sangster really had appreciated the value of the jazz co-ordination program and particularly Eric Myers’ role in delivering its important aims. And, furthermore, for the record, if my interpretation of Sangster’s motives is correct, then my opinion is that his position about teaching jazz was nonsense; jazz skills can be taught, to at least a significantly useful extent, just as other skill sets required for sundry forms of professional practice can be taught.



*Sangster’s position about teaching jazz was nonsense; jazz skills can be taught, to at least a significantly useful extent, just as other skill sets required for sundry forms of professional practice can be taught... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE*

Andrew Robson's excellent 2020 book *Austral Jazz* has included a very sensible and well-informed discussion of this issue. Of course, none of this denies the fact that some individuals – some I have encountered are Frank Smith, Graeme Lyall, the Adelaide saxophonist Bobby Jeffrey, James Morrison – appear to achieve remarkable capabilities effortlessly. This book never even hints so; but it seems to me that Sangster was similarly endowed.



*Andrew Robson: his excellent 2020 book has included a very sensible and well-informed discussion of the issue of teaching jazz skills... PHOTO CREDIT BRIAN STEWART*

While preparing this review, I asked Eric Myers what he thought might have motivated Sangster to write the book and he opined that Sangster's history may have resulted in him believing that he had something to prove, particularly at a time when several other books about Australian jazz were appearing. This makes good sense to me. Books like Dick Hughes' *Daddy's Practicing Again* (1977), Andrew Bisset's *Black Roots White Flowers* (1979), Mike Williams' *Australian Jazz Explosion* (1981) and Bruce Johnson's *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz* (1987) had all received considerable acclaim by the time that Sangster wrote this book.

And Sangster might well have anticipated that an autobiography published by Penguin would help to validate his career – that of a self-made musician who had made his own way because he committed to doing what he loved. So what to make of his tall tales of his times around the Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney scenes? I do think that, although the different anecdotes would have had some basis in real life, a substantial part of his account is hokum; the style is flippant, his exaggerations not to be taken too seriously. I do not think that there was any intention to mislead; rather, he set out to tell an entertaining tale and his account of “the jazz life” is replete with leg-pulling. Perhaps Sangster saw this as a literary metaphor for the contradictions between the constant gigging to earn a living, but always with the intention to enjoy himself while entertaining an audience which, for the most part, was not musically knowledgeable, and his serious purpose, to compose and perform jazz music equal to models he had studied, like Ellington.

The comment on the book’s frontispiece, as a motif for the main message delivered, suggests that the title was intended to capture the joy experienced when playing in a group and the flow of musical ideas seems to accomplish something special (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990); inspiration can involve throwing back one’s head and “seeing the rafters”, an action well suited to a brass or percussion instrumentalist. Sangster may well have eschewed description in such terms; far too wanky a way of saying that playing should be “hot”, resulting in foot tapping and about “Having a Good Time” (p 1). Nonetheless, I’m fairly sure that my account of what he intended is nearer to the mark than simply “Your foot...tapping away like mad” or “Having a Good Time”. Despite his relentless attempt to maintain the Ocker image, and to give an impression that he never took anything seriously, it is obvious from his recordings that Sangster was an intensely dedicated, outstandingly skilled jazz musician who, certainly when in the recording studio, made every effort to produce the very best music of which he was capable.



*Bruce Johnson: As he pointed out previously, this book does not reveal much about the real John Sangster...*

This was a book for its time. Although maybe offensive to some in 1988, for the most part these stories – irreverent, sometimes contemptuous and with a disregard for the niceties of social and cultural conventions -- would have been accepted as entertaining and perhaps given the status of furrphies. But, more than 30 years later, I think it likely that his embrace of the image of someone indifferent to political correctness would make it difficult to find a publisher for a book of this kind.

This really does not matter now. As Johnson pointed out, this book does not reveal much about the real John Sangster. I agree. In fact, what is remarkable about this autobiography is that it scarcely reveals anything about the man behind the clowning and joking. Yet Burrows, who probably knew him as well as anyone, does hint in his brief Forward at someone much more substantial than the band-mate who never stopped “chortling”. Johnson also indicated that Sangster was much more complicated than he apparently wanted people to believe; and he (Johnson) has suggested that what is required is a biography that attempts to unpick the complexities of the man and how these relate to his contributions to Australian jazz.



*Sangster (far right), pictured with, from left, George Golla, James Morrison, and Don Burrows: Burrows, who probably knew Sangster as well as anyone, does hint in his brief “Forward” at someone much more substantial than the band-mate who never stopped “chortling”... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

27 years have passed since Johnson’s observations but, as far as I am aware, no-one has yet risen to the challenge. At the time, Johnson further commented that Sangster’s “body of work [is] unrivalled in Australian jazz. In terms of tonal palette, originality, stylistic and emotional range, the creative attention he applied to the question of how to realize lived experience in musical terms, and the sheer quantity of work he produced, he is comparable to Duke Ellington.”

It is to be hoped that somewhere soon a graduate student, in one of Australia’s tertiary jazz studies programs, and interested in the course of Australian jazz, will take on this important topic.

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