

MY JAZZ ODYSSEY: CONFESSIONS OF A LIFETIME ENTHUSIAST by Ian Muldoon. Published by the author in 2021, not for commercial release. ISBN 978-0-6451902-0-5, 679 pages, hard cover.

Reviewed by Ted Nettelbeck*



Ian Muldoon: he selected 25 essays from among 36 submitted to Eric Myers, from July 2018 to February 2021, for publication on Eric's jazz website...PHOTO COURTESY RHYS MULDOON

This beautifully presented book, comprising 25 well researched, informative essays together with a list of the author's (current) favourite 50 jazz tracks and the albums from which these were drawn, has been printed on high quality glossy A4 size paper in an attractive, high-contrast type-face. The book is lovely to hold; according to the Tasmanian jazz pianist Viktor Zappner, it weighs 3.24 kg – an impressive tome, indeed! It runs to 661 pages of text, supported by an excellent index of all names referred to in the text.

**Ted Nettelbeck is a professional jazz pianist and academic. He retired as paid staff recently at the University of Adelaide, where he is now Emeritus Professor in Psychology, and relocated to Melbourne.*

The essays have been selected by the author from among 36, which he submitted to Eric Myers, from July 2018 to February 2021, for publication on Eric’s jazz website (link: <https://ericmyersjazz.com/index-for-essays-1>). All essays have been posted there, and with only a couple of exceptions, in the same order, as they appear in the book. A list of the 11, published on the website but not included in the book, has been included on front end page vi, along with the book’s publishing information.

My enquiry to the author, as to why he decided to publish in hard-copy materials already available on-screen, drew his response in two parts; first, he prefers the “feel, look, tactility of” a book; and, second, he aimed to redress his impression that few jazz books have successfully combined literary merit and aesthetic appearance, consistent with jazz music as an art form “of the highest level” (p xiii). I completely agree with his first point, not just because – like me -- many older readers feel more comfortable with personal practices established prior to the wide availability of digital reading post-1990; but I recognise the pleasures of contemplation that one can derive from actually handling, as well as reading, a good book. Moreover, psychological research has begun to confirm what many of us have long believed – that, compared to screen reading, paper reading of informational texts confers benefits of deeper comprehension. With regards his second point, I am more circumspect; I have read many books about jazz that I have thought met very high standards. However, I completely agree with his conviction that jazz as an improvisational art form deserves the highest respect; for me it is the most important musical genre to have emerged from the 20th century. And Ian has unquestionably met his aim of producing a book that celebrates his life-long involvement as a consumer of jazz music in all its forms.



Ted Nettelbeck, here on electric piano: psychological research has begun to confirm what many of us have long believed – that, compared to screen reading, paper reading of informational texts confers benefits of deeper comprehension...

To read this book is a sumptuous experience. It is nothing less than a paean to jazz, expressed in a highly personal, autobiographical style and beautifully illustrated by more than 1,000 photographs. The vast majority of these I have never seen before, but all have been carefully selected to support the text, in collaboration with the book's editor, Eric Myers, who has also contributed an Introduction.

Ian Muldoon's approach to writing is literate but idiosyncratic – original, emotionally loaded, impassioned, revealing of a long, interesting life – and unambiguously directed to the enthusiastic promulgation of all types of jazz. These include some forms of improvisation at the boundaries of experiments with sound, like the work of alto saxophonist John Zorn.



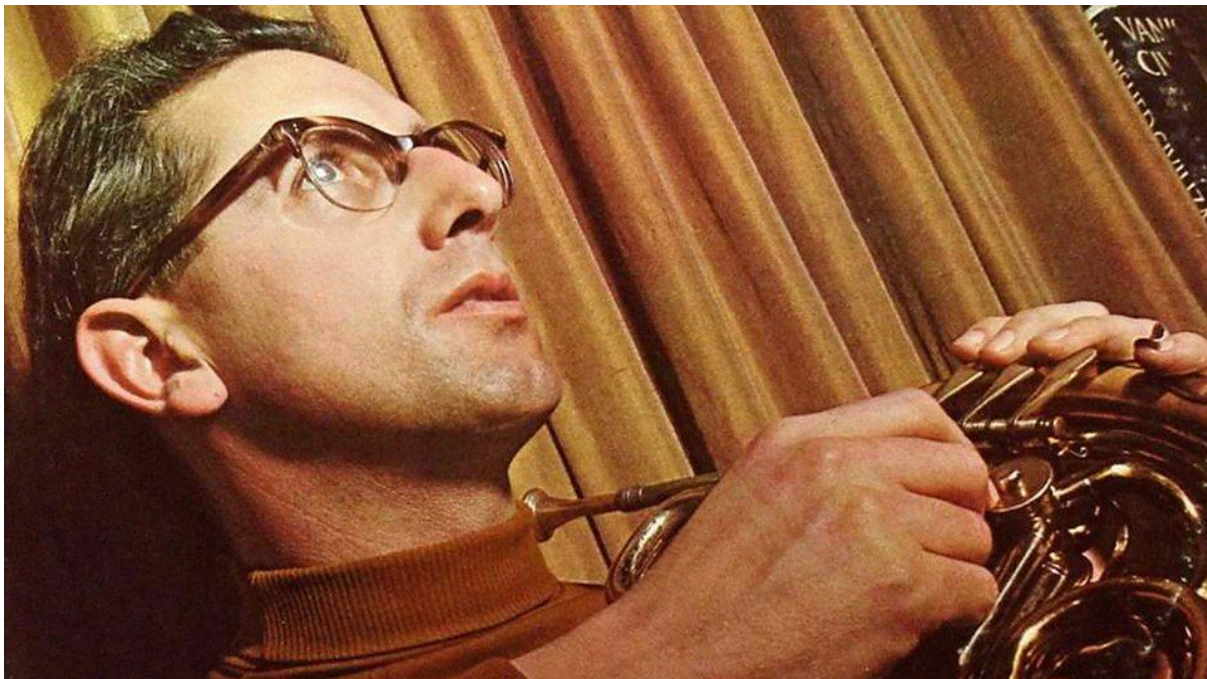
Ian Muldoon's approach to writing is unambiguously directed to the enthusiastic promulgation of all types of jazz, including some forms of improvisation at the boundaries of experiments with sound, like the work of alto saxophonist John Zorn (left)...

Muldoon's opinions are expressed with high conviction; he is definitely not of the school that holds jazz to be nothing more than "enjoyable entertainment not to be taken too seriously" (p 108). Quite the opposite; he promotes jazz as an art form of paramount importance. Nor does he avoid dissent when discussing his choices. For example, he prefers Yank Lawson to Bix Beiderbecke, an assessment that I suspect will surprise many, given the latter's standing in the jazz pantheon of all-time greats.

Also, he rates the US jazz French hornist Tom Varner as better than Barry Tuckwell on the instrument, and dismisses Return to Forever, opinions that are certain to be challenged by some. And, commenting on the local scene, he can be something of an iconoclast – gentle in his comments, but challenging majority opinion in some instances, nonetheless.



Ian rates the US jazz French hornist Tom Varner (left) as better than Barry Tuckwell (below) on the instrument...



Each chapter has been built around a central idea; a particular instrument like the double bass, the drums, the piano, the trumpet or the trombone (my personal favourite essay – in fact, I think it the best and most informative writing about the trombone as a jazz instrument that I have ever read).

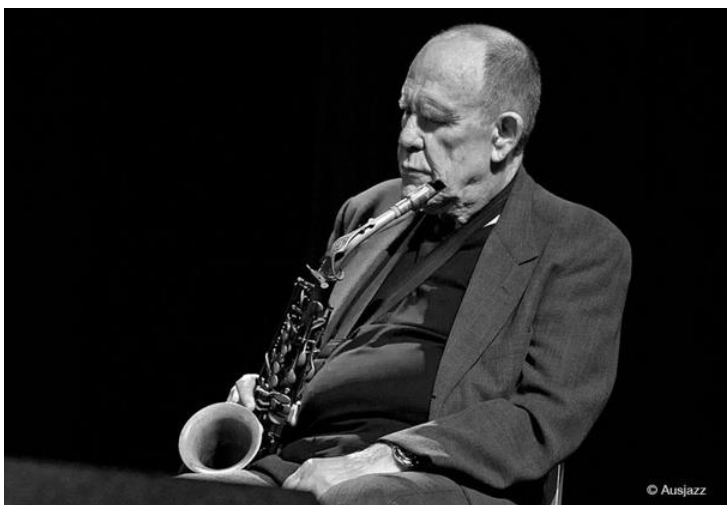
Another essay that I particularly enjoyed was his discussion of rhythmic “swing” as the foundation of jazz. The essay ranges widely over debate about what it is about the use of accent, syncopation and space that creates this feeling and includes, too, consideration of the conflicts within the jazz community, particularly during the 1950s-60s, about the validity of earlier forms of jazz versus bebop, “West-Coast” or “East Coast” styles, and the issue of the appropriation of African-American swing by white musicians.

Muldoon provides five favourite single-track exemplars of the ability to swing, none of which overlaps with the 50 favourite tracks which end the book. All are by African-Americans (Armstrong, Ellington, Basie/Holiday, Braxton, Monk) but Muldoon emphasises his conviction that any claim that “white folk can’t swing” (p 436) is absurd.

Other essays explore protest and politics in jazz; or the work of his favourite “saints” of jazz; Nina Simone, George Shearing, Michel Petrucciani, Art Farmer, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Bernie McGann. The writing is erudite and most of these sections provide considerable information about other major artists with whom his subjects have collaborated or performed.



*Ian's favourite "saints" of jazz include American Nina Simone (left) and Australian Bernie McGann (below)...McGANN
PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL*



Other topics cover the contribution of women to jazz (accompanied by a list of more than 200 female jazz performers found in his own collection), jazz in film, what defines jazz singing, individual Sydney-based artists (Lloyd Swanton, Phil Slater), even a single performance (Paul Cutlan and “The Coltrane Project”), and his reflections about unrecognized jazz artists.



Lloyd Swanton (above) & Phil Slater (below): two individual Sydney-based artists discussed by Ian Muldoon... SWANTON PHOTO CREDIT MARKUS LACKINGER; SLATER PHOTO CREDIT REUBEN WHITE



The latter essay topic is principally about the French hornist Tom Varner but opens with an account of a performance by Sydney jazz singer Julie Amiet, heard in 1974. I was unaware of both these artists, underscoring Ian Muldoon's point that too many first-rate jazz artists remain unnoticed, even by those, like myself, purporting to be well informed consumers of jazz. I was surprised, however, to find Mike Nock discussed in this chapter; I do not doubt at all that, like a large majority of Australia's jazz musicians, he may not have reaped the rewards that his artistic achievements warrant. But he has certainly long been justifiably widely recognised as a significant international artist who also has been and remains one of the very best contributors to Australia's jazz scene.



Sydney jazz singer Julie Amiet, whom Muldoon heard in 1974. Ian Muldoon's point is that too many first-rate jazz artists remain unnoticed...

Most chapters include references to recorded music examples, well described, as well as to lists of recording personnel, changing band membership, collaborations, and Ian's favourite players of different instruments. Lists are something of a feature of the book – there is even comment about the validity of lists. But, Ian Muldoon is a deep thinker, and within these broad topics he engages the reader with flights of ideas and opinions that range widely across astonishingly diverse, sometimes only loosely related themes, like the characteristics of musical settings, their acoustics, art theory, theatre, philosophy, the impact of music on the psyche, jazz history, literary fiction and history, religious disputes, record cover art and notes, reminiscences of songs' lyrics, poetry, film soundtracks, the impact of language on attitudes and behaviour, the role of popular music in jazz, jazz producers and impresarios, feminism, sexism, world politics, different styles of music education, race discrimination, "vocalisation" as a source of instrumental improvisation, communication through music, the history of famous jazz recording studios, performance venues, audience behaviour – in fact, a vast knowledge of an immensely wide range of topics related in some way to the music to which Ian Muldoon must have committed from a relatively early age.

The breadth of detail provided is impressive; some more ephemeral, for example, as regards what Manfred Eicher’s acronym “ECM” (as in ECM Records) stands for (“Edition of Contemporary Music”). But, for the most part, these anecdotes and details relating to the careers of major jazz stars will be of considerable interest to those who have not invested in background research to the extent that Ian Muldoon has. I have never previously encountered the suggestion that Hoagy Carmichael was influenced by Bix Beiderbecke when writing *Star Dust* but now, having considered this, it seems plausible. Nor had I heard of Ben Model, who improvises accompaniment to silent films in New York – surely one of the most interesting gigs one could ever wish for!

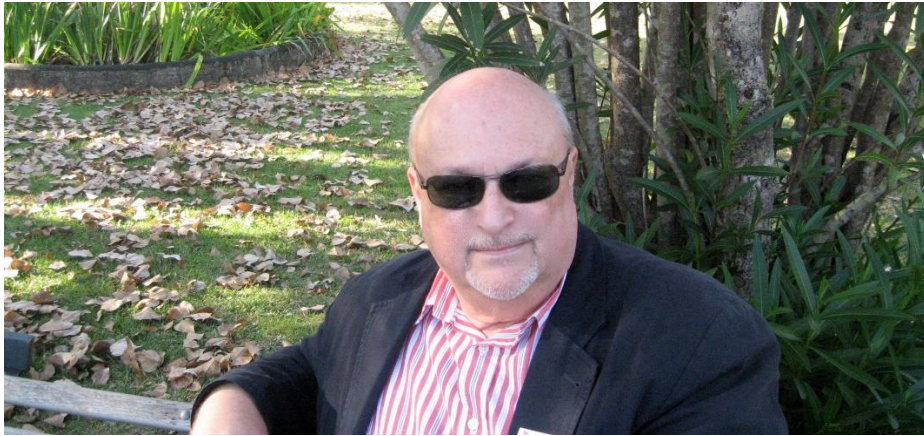


*Hoagy Carmichael (right) pictured here with Tommy Dorsey: it seems plausible that Carmichael was influenced by Bix Beiderbecke when writing “Star Dust”...
PHOTO COURTESY INDIANA UNIVERSITY*

It is obvious from Ian Muldoon’s account that he has always attended live music performance and a notable feature of these essays is the recognition given to Australian jazz artists. There is no hint of cultural cringe here and favourable assessments of local musicians are interwoven with opinions and discussion about the works of artists from the US, the UK, Europe, Canada, most of whom have higher international profiles than the Australians.

On the whole, Ian Muldoon avoids comparisons in terms of being “better than” or “equal to”; but he leaves the reader in no doubt that he regards many local artists as worthy of the highest accolades. My impression was that, among the many, a few, like saxophonists Sandy Evans, Bernie McGann, Mark Simmonds, bassists Linda May Han Oh, Lloyd Swanton, drummers Allan Browne, Simon Barker, pianists Andrea Keller, Judy Bailey, Paul Grabowsky, Roger Frampton, Barney McAll, trumpeters Scott Tinkler, Eugene Ball, Miroslav Bukovsky, trombonist Shannon

Barnett, and singer Gian Slater have impressed and pleased him more than most. In short, our best are “up there with the best” anywhere; and he acknowledges the important role that jazz promoter Peter Rechniewski has played in creating opportunities within Sydney’s jazz scene.



Ian acknowledges the important role that jazz promoter Peter Rechniewski (above) has played in creating opportunities within Sydney’s jazz scene...

The penultimate essay, headed (in part) as “Nostalgia...”, is an account of how different piano trios have treated the standards now generally referred to as The Great American Songbook. The “nostalgia” in the title is as much about the unbounded reworkings – or, as Muldoon would prefer, “reinventions” (p 614) – of so many great compositions, as about “the sweet ache of nostalgia” (p 597) for the past. Along with comments about individuals and larger ensembles, the main focus is on several piano trios, most of which will be familiar: Peterson, Jarrett, Meldau, Hersch, Mal Waldron and a particular favourite of Muldoon’s, Ahmad Jamal. Also included are two trio pianists not previously known to me, the American Bill Charlap and Melbourne-based Natalie Bartsch.



*Ahmad
Jamal: a
particular
favourite of
Muldoon’s...*

I was surprised that Bill Evans did not get a guernsey here; but delighted to find coverage of Mike Nock's lovely 2-CDs set, *An Accumulation of Subtleties*, recorded in 2010 to mark Mike's career of 50 years since *Move*, recorded by the Three-Out Trio in 1960.

The title of the final essay is taken from a quote by Sonny Rollins: "...jazz is not necessarily a style. Jazz is something else... an attempt to reach into the unknown...it's ephemeral" (p 623). Inter alia the title provides the opportunity to discuss the use of an instrument infrequently used in jazz, the cello. The chapter closes with an account of an Adelaide 2012 performance by Three Lanes, a trio of piano, recorders, and electronic and acoustic percussion/tape machine, led by Andrea Keller. Ian Muldoon could scarcely have found a more apposite group to underpin his final message, that the future of jazz has no limits.



Three Lanes L-R, Andrea Keller (piano), Genevieve Lacey (recorders) & Joe Talia (revox B77, electronics & percussion): Ian Muldoon could scarcely have found a more apposite group to underpin his final message, that the future of jazz has no limits...

Having first read the essays, I was less surprised by the diversity of styles among the 50 tracks of "favourites" recommended for interested readers than by the realisation that, despite some 70 years' experience listening to a wide variety of jazz, there were several musicians listed of whom I was still completely unaware. Moreover, I cannot remember previously listening to more than about of a third of the tracks named. These choices confirm a markedly eclectic appreciation, ranging from "classic" Armstrong in the mid-1920s, pre-World War II Ellington, 1950s' Chicago trad, late swing, the "golden years" (1950s-60s) of small ensemble "modern" jazz, East Coast-

West Coast styles, highly popular late 50s Brubeck, early avant-garde (Dolph), 90s avant-garde, complete with African/Asian/South American “little” instruments (the wonderful Joseph Jarman of the Art Ensemble of Chicago fame), Archie Shepp, still active aged 84 years, contemporary avant-garde (Ambrose Akinmusire), Australian avant-garde (Sydney’s Microfiche), the redoubtable Dollar Brand (Abdullah Ibrahim), singers as diverse as Bessie Smith, Holiday, Little Jimmy Scott, Armstrong, Ella, Tormé, Joe Williams, and some of Australia’s (Grabowsky, Swanton) and New Zealand’s (Broadbent) best practitioners.



Archie Shepp: still active aged 84 years...

Each list entry is well documented (album, date, instrumentation and personnel), with a brief description of its special appeal to the author. Given my depth of ignorance about so much of this material, I am looking forward to being able to explore this list further.

Ian Muldoon was born just prior to World War II and exposed to the jazz of the time while fairly young. The earliest shellac 78 rpm gramophone recordings of Armstrong’s Hot Five (1925), or Ellington’s early recordings during the “Harlem

Renaissance” of the mid-1920s, or Morton’s Red Hot Peppers (1926), had been recorded only a little over 20 years earlier than when he began listening to them.



Jelly Roll Morton: his Red Hot Peppers (1926), had been recorded only a little over 20 years earlier than when Ian Muldoon began listening to them...PHOTO COURTESY KEN BURNS' JAZZ

His interest and commitment to learning more about how different jazz musicians approach improvisation only grew and intensified as he became aware of the emerging bebop and the increasingly diverse range of styles that followed post the mid-1940s. It is not uncommon for people to continue to hold a special affection for the music of their youth but, while Ian has clearly done that, it is also apparent from these essays that he has never stopped exploring and thinking about the wide variety of approaches to jazz improvisation that have emerged during the past 100 years.

By listening to and reading about the music and by mixing with and chatting to the musicians, he has developed a vast repository of knowledge about every aspect of this music that few could match. His knowledge base of recorded jazz is certainly far more extensive than mine, the more so because he appears to be intimately familiar with the work of those Sydney-based (and to some extent Melbourne-based) jazz musicians, including successive generations of tertiary-trained students, who, from around the early 1970s to the present, have consciously adopted approaches to individual improvisational creativity influenced by local culture; what Andrew Robson (2020) has termed “Austral Jazz”.^{*} For this reason, it seems to me that this book could provide a useful text for expanding the curriculum of current Australian tertiary programs in jazz studies, which appear to focus principally on the so-called modern jazz canon, defined principally in terms of US musicians.

^{*}Robson, A, “Austral Jazz: The localization of a global music form in Sydney”, (2020).

Of course, I acknowledge the relevance of this approach to jazz training; but it is now some 80 years since “modern” jazz emerged in New York; (think of the Parker-Gillespie *Ko-Ko*), more than 60 years since *Kind of Blue* was released, more than 50 years since Albert Ayler died or “Jazz (went) to college”, and almost 40 years since Jarrett recorded the first of his Standards Trio albums.

Muldoon’s coverage of contemporary jazz trends, including many Australian examples, provides a useful starting point for anyone interested in expanding their jazz experience. I hope too that, where someone has the opportunity to read this book, it will encourage them to explore the amazing repository of information about Australian jazz where the essays first appeared (<https://ericmyersjazz.com>), created by Eric Myers in 2015 and maintained by him since.

In summary, this book has been a pleasure to review. It is a compendium of a vast and varied array of information about international and national jazz music in the very broadest sense. The coverage (principally) of some of the more important figures in the Australian East Coast scene is outstanding and I warmly congratulate Ian Muldoon on what is a massive achievement.



Ted Nettelbeck was surprised by the omission of Melbourne stalwarts Ted Vining (far left), Brian Brown (second from left) & Bob Sedergreen (far right), pictured here with David Tolley (third from left)... PHOTOS FROM CARLTON STREETS ALBUM

The book presents a highly personal perspective and was never intended to be comprehensive. However, to a marked extent, his tastes appear to be very similar to mine, although I have not always agreed with some of his assessments. Moreover, I was surprised by the omission of Melbourne stalwarts Bob Sedergreen (no-one swings harder), Brian Brown and Ted Vining, all of whom have well-deserved national reputations and who have massively impacted Melbourne’s jazz scene.

But I was particularly delighted to note at least passing references to old friends and acquaintances like Bruce Gray, Bob Barnard, Bill Munro, Joe Lane, Frank DiSario, Tony Gould and Paul McNamara, all of whom have made major contributions to local jazz.