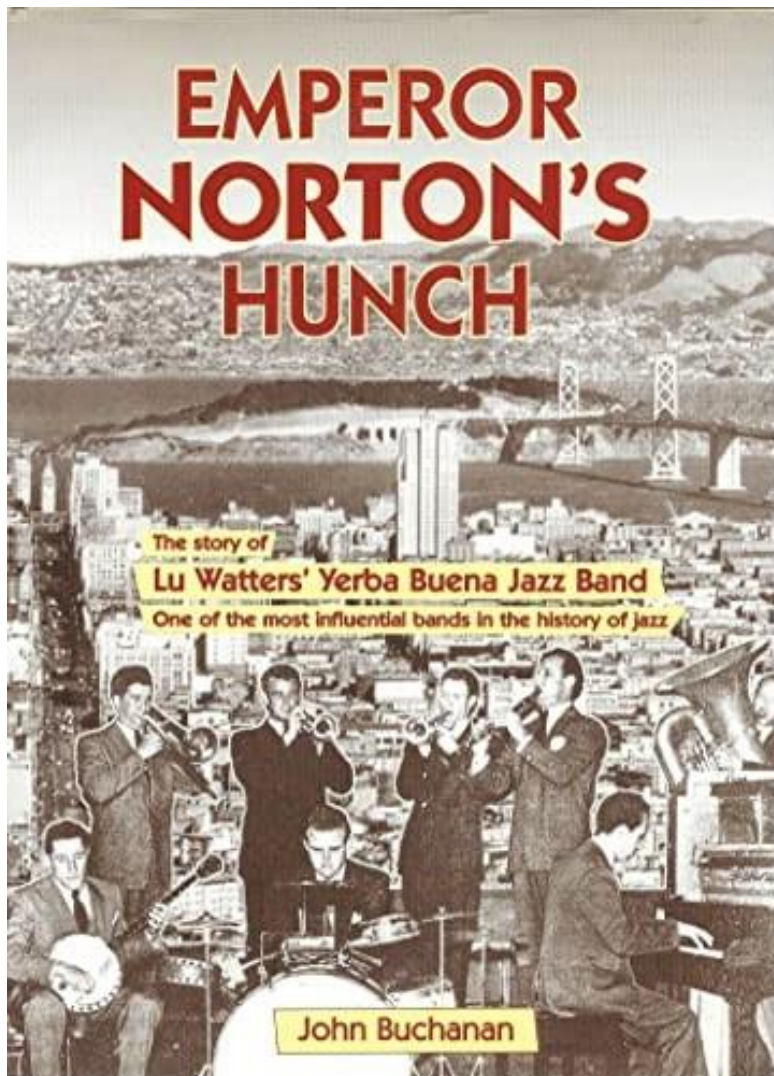


## FOREWORD TO JOHN BUCHANAN'S "EMPEROR NORTON'S HUNCH"

by Peter J F Newton\*

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John Buchanan had a dream. I don't know just when he decided to translate dream into reality. What I do know is that about four years ago he presented to a large audience at Sydney Town Hall the first of several well-organised tributes to Lu Watters and the Yerba Buena Jazz Band. He uses the finest traditional jazz performers locally available and some brought from interstate. These concerts, these well-rehearsed bands, are clearly imbued with the Lu Watters' spirit. But what exactly is that spirit?

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*\* In 1996, when this was written, Peter J F Newton was an historian & broadcaster, and editor of the Sydney Jazz Club's "Quarterly Rag".*

Let us examine the claim that his band was one of the most influential jazz bands in the history of jazz. Is this simply a statement out of hyperbole or is it a claim that can be upheld on examination of the aural and documentary evidence? I have considered just that (after informing John of some initial misgivings about the magnitude of the claim) and now find it to be proved to my satisfaction, and sustainably so. The jazz history books (a whole raft of them) tell us that in 1941, or thereabouts, several elements of the Great Jazz Revival were separately in train, one of them attributable to Lu Watters' Yerba Buena Jazz Band.



*Lu Watters Yerba Buena Jazz Band, L-R, Bill Dart, Wally Rose, Turk Murphy, Bob Scobey, Watters, Ellis Horne... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN BUCHANAN'S "EMPEROR NORTON'S HUNCH"*

This is not the place to rehearse the rise and subsequent decline from mass appeal of the traditional jazz revival, but we can consider the word 'influence'. My interpretation of this term is a two-fold one: the influence that comes out of immediate or near-immediate inspiration for others to follow a chosen path in other places; and the influence that percolates down from the legacy left for later generations to examine. Note that I am not concerned here with whether such influence is a good or a bad thing — performers, listeners and critics will always make that final diversified judgement. Evidence of the legacy of the Lu Watters' band is found throughout the world in a healthy spread of LPs (now declining in numbers to collectible respectability), cassettes and CDs. San Francisco style bands are particularly widespread in the American West. Most are prolific recorders of their music, they are well supported by fan clubs and by dedicated newspapers and letters,

they appear at many festivals and some tour with their own fully accoutred second liners to many other countries. There is a comparable tendency beyond the USA too – in countries as culturally different as Canada, Thailand, Argentina, Japan, the Scandanavian group, Russia, Germany and, of course, Australia. Lu had, as you will discover in the book, an Australian connection. His mother was born in Australia and he came ashore in Brisbane in the 1930's while employed as a cabin boy, but never played there. Some of his former colleagues including Pat Patton in the '60s and Turk Murphy and Bob Helm in the 70s, played for audiences and are represented on local recordings.



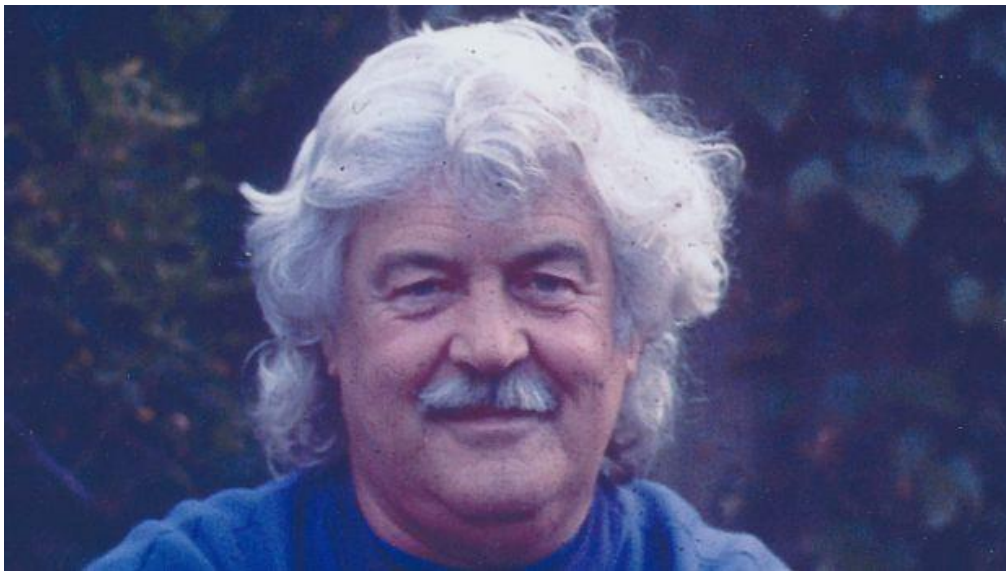
*Lu Watters stalwart trombonist Turk Murphy (left) on a visit to Australia in 1975, pictured with pianist Dick Hughes and ABC broadcaster Eric Child... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN*

This book is not principally about influence or legacy, important though these aspects may be. Rather it is a dedicated seminal work by an unashamed disciple of the San Francisco sound. John Buchanan has gone to much trouble to seek out and interview the remaining members of the Yerba Buena Jazz band and its followers. John has also followed the path that all putative historians must take if their work is to be believed. He has checked contemporary reviews and articles, spoken briefly to a few authors of 'San Francisco' oriented books and articles and selected suitable quotations to reinforce his story. He has consulted with collectors, historians and discographers in Australia too. I'm pleased to say that John has also attempted to place the band within its proper historic and social contexts. In today's ecopolitical jargon it's what is called 'value adding'. How valuable is for you, the reader, to judge.

Not everyone approved of the Lu Watters band, and there are still some traditionalists (purists is too arcane a word to use here) who recoil at its powerhouse

brassiness and the predominance of the banjo (or banjos). Indeed the band and some of its successors seem to have generated a passionate, love/hate relationship down the years which otherwise was reserved by 'traditionalists' for the 'moderns' (usually for the silliest of reasons). In the January 1959 issue of *Jazz Journal*, reviewing an LP of the 29 March 1942 session, Australian writer Tony Standish gave one of the most astute commentaries on that tendency which, for its insight, deserves reincarnation:

*Reaction to Lu's ideas usually takes one of two forms, depending on when and how the listener discovered jazz. If like me, he sailed into it during the revival storms then, also like me, he may react favourably. On the other hand, if his tastes were formulated during the big band era of the middle and late thirties, he will nearly always sniff disdainfully at the rawness and the rowdiness of it all. It is no use anyone try to tell either of them otherwise....*



*Australian writer Tony Standish: an astute commentary in the January 1959 issue of "Jazz Journal"... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

Standish then continued with a valuable assessment of the band's major strengths:

*Lu and his friends knew, in those days, where they were going and they pursued their goal relentlessly and with some success. Their jazz often attained a gargantuan loose-limbed swing — a true ensemble swing.... It was rough and impolite music but it had character.*

The ability to swing (or 'rock' as Lu preferred — he would readily mention that this was the term often used among the 'hot' bands of the late twenties to describe something that was 'really going'), to produce music of character, to fire the passions (be it love or hate). Aren't these really the stuff of jazz as you and I like it?

The internationally respected pianist Graeme Bell met Lu Watters briefly in 1975. He records in his *Australian Jazzman: An Autobiography* (Child & Associates, Sydney, 1988, p 365) that Lu had tried "to pick up the threads of authentic jazz which, he felt,

had become very frayed indeed". The result was an influential sound, a knockdown *joie de vivre*; balanced by a "tinge of sadness", a music that you can love or hate, but never never ignore.



*Graeme Bell (left) who, with his son Jason and wife Dorothy, met Lu Watters in California in 1975. Watters, in his dressing gown, was not well at the time... PHOTO COURTESY GRAEME BELL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AUSTRALIAN JAZZMAN*

Lu was certainly not a mere copyist of the past. The result was a sound that differed from that produced by the early musicians that Lu admired and this was what led to one of the major sounds of influence during and after the Revival. That is the spirit of Lu Watters and his Yerba Buena Jazz Band and I think you'll find that spirit satisfyingly present within the pages and pictures of *Emperor Norton's Hunch*.

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***Other articles on this site which may be of interest:***

Samuel Moore, "John Buchanan Honoured for Services to Jazz Music" at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-42>

Larry L Quilligan, Book review: "Emperor Norton's Hunch", by John Buchanan, Allegheny Jazz Society, October, 1996, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/book-reviews-21>