

TRADITIONAL JAZZ IN SYDNEY: THE ROAD TO THE NINETIES

by Peter J F Newton*

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Just on 50 years ago the world, then still deep into war, saw the onset of an increasingly popular form of music, a revived traditional jazz, which retained its mass appeal for at least the next two decades. The term 'traditional' when applied to jazz means many things to its listeners. In essence it is an umbrella term used simply to categorise a number of jazz varieties from its early 20th Century prototype in New Orleans to the several styles of 'hot', essentially black, jazz that rose to flower in the war years and gradually decayed in the '20s - from the black-inspired jazz of Bix Beiderbecke and the white Chicagoans of the '20s, to that of their dixieland disciples of the early 40s; the pre-Swing predominantly black big bands; and the many forms of piano and vocal jazz that co-existed with a this band music.



American trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke: inspired by black jazz...

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By the 1940s, some musicians, in reversion to the perceived triteness and commercialism of swing looked elsewhere for inspiration and excitement, some backward to the classic era of jazz, others ahead to the frenzied complexities of bebop. The great traditional jazz revival, spearheaded in California in 1942 by the two-beat rhythm of Lu Watters Yerba Buena Jazz Band had, by the end of World War II, become mirrored in other American cities, and varieties were emerging in Britain, France and most of the State capitals of Australia at about the same time.



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 revival was not simply an emasculated version of earlier traditions, for not only did its young performers place great importance on its emotional and improvisational content, but also on its essential 'hotness' and 'blackness'. Indeed, parallel to revival by white musicians was the re-emergence of elderly but still very capable black New Orleans musicians who, like trumpeter Bunk Johnson and trombonist Kid Ory, were skilled in the old traditions, as well as an earlier revived interest in those who had never really dimmed their improvisational flame such as reed players Sidney Bechet, George Lewis and Jimmie Noone.

The directions followed by traditionalists in Australia during the revival and the several 'trad' booms are described in Bruce Johnson's *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz* (1987) and need not be restated here. Suffice it to say that by the late 1940s there were in Australia a number of exceptionally good traditional jazz bands including those led in Melbourne by Graeme Bell and Frank Johnson, Dave Dallwitz's Adelaide-based Southern Jazz Group, the Pearce-Pickering groups in

Hobart, bands which appeared at the inaugural Australian Jazz Convention in Melbourne in 1946.



By the late 1940s there were in Australia a number of exceptionally good traditional jazz bands including those led in Melbourne by Graeme Bell (above, pictured in 1945) and Frank Johnson (below, pictured in 1949) ...

Members of the Bell Band, L-R, are Cy Watts (trombone), Pixie Roberts (clarinet), Russ Murphy (drums), Bud Baker (guitar), Roger Bell (trumpet), Graeme Bell (piano)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Members of Frank Johnson's Fabulous Dixielanders, L-R, Geoff Kitchen (clarinet), Jack Connelly (bass), Johnson (trumpet), Geoff Bland (piano), Warwick 'Wocka' Dyer (trombone), Bill Tope (banjo), Wes Brown (drums)... PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS



This unique Convention attended mainly by professional and amateur traditional jazz musicians supported by bona fide members of jazz clubs, still convenes once a year at a selected Australian city or town as keeper of that flame that still burns brightly across this underpopulated continent. It has met several times in Sydney the last being during the Bicentennial year.

By 1950 Sydney was supporting a number of popular bands including Duke Farrell's Illawarra Jazz Gang, The Harbour City Dixielanders, the Riverside Jazz Band and perhaps most importantly the Port Jackson Jazz Band. Formed originally in 1944 by trombonist Jack Parkes, by 1948 with an almost new personnel, the Port Jacksons successfully took their music, under the direction of banjo player Ray Price into the concert hall although the subsequent country tour was financially disastrous.



The Port Jackson Jazz Band, pictured in 1945, L-R, Bob Cruickshanks (reeds), Ken Flannery (trumpet), standing Lynn Healy (drums), Keith Silver (banjo), Jack Parkes (leader, trombone), Kevin Ryder (piano)... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY'S JAZZ AND OTHER JOYS OF ITS VINTAGE YEARS

The band broke up and reformed several times during the 50s and 60s, usually under the leadership of Price. Members of the band have included trumpeters Ken Flannery and Bob Barnard, clarinetist John McCarthy pianists Jimmy Somerville and Dick Hughes - all still vital forces in today's traditional jazz in Sydney and the late John Costelloe, a fine trombonist. In its more recent revivals, under the leadership of Price and then Dick Hughes, the band has made guest appearances with visiting performers such as the late Woody Herman and at jazz festivals.

Of particular importance to the traditional jazz movement in Sydney was the establishment in 1953 of the Sydney Jazz Club (it became a co-operative in 1967). The Club achieved great popularity during the 50s and 60s at such venues as the Real Estate Institute, the Ironworkers Hall, George Street and the Abraham Mott Hall in

the Rocks area (a hall not only renowned for its marvellous atmosphere of bonhomie but also because it was an acoustic nightmare). Many bands were introduced as 'house' bands, some of them attracting a great following.

It was during this period that a number of today's most respected traditional jazz musicians in Sydney first listened and learned at the Club. Many of them are playing at this festival. But the popularity that then attracted crowds of up to a thousand also attracted violence leading to a decision by the Club's directors to scale down operations from weekly to monthly dances at Abraham Mott Hall.

The '70s saw a gradual decline in the Sydney Jazz Club's influence for a number of reasons including more relaxed licensing laws, the upsurge of television, the increased competition from other musical styles, particularly rock-and-roll. From the '60s onwards, to their lasting benefit local musicians such as Geoff Bull, Barry Wratten, Pam and Llew Hird, the Edser Brothers and many others made extended trips to the jazz mecca, New Orleans, where they listened to, played with and sometimes recorded alongside that city's legendary jazzmen.



Pamela & Llew Hird: amongst others who made extended trips to the jazz mecca, New Orleans... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ LOVERS FACEBOOK

In the '80s, the Club changed its direction, forming a loose association with such hotels as the Vanity Fair, The Strawberry Hills and The Vulcan. It has concentrated on the presentation of quality jazz performances by visiting traditional and mainstream performers, organised over the past five years a regular traditional jazz week in Sydney, supported training schools for bands and singers, assisted in areas of jazz administration and with jazz festivals and jazz broadcasting, pioneered a series of piano and trumpet summits, and put on regular concerts in tribute to such jazz giants as Jelly Roll Morton, Sidney Bechet, Joe 'King' Oliver and Louis Armstrong.



The Sydney Jazz Club has supported a series of concerts organised by John Buchanan (pictured above) in memory of Lu Watters and Turk Murphy and using leading Melbourne and Sydney musicians..... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN BUCHANAN

Most recently the Club has supported a series of concerts organised by John Buchanan in memory of Lu Watters and Turk Murphy and using leading Melbourne and Sydney musicians. Both concerts were outstanding and attracted unexpectedly large audiences. From time to time, the Club holds special events at the Mott and has

supported especially fine performances by Geoff Bull's Olympia Jazz Band and such American veterans as trombonist Louis Nelson, bass player Chester Zardis, banjoist Emmanuel Sayles and pianists Alton Purnell and Sammy Price.



American veteran trombonist Louis Nelson (far right) sitting in with L-R, Mal McGillivray (drums), Dave Ridyard (clarinet), Don Heap (bass), and Geoff Bull (trumpet)... PHOTO CREDIT (PROBABLY) NORM LINEHAN COURTESY PAUL FINNERTY

One of the Club's most popular attractions is still the monthly picnic held at Berry Island on the Sunday after the third Friday, and other social events such as harbour cruises are arranged. Still a vital force in traditional jazz, the Sydney Jazz Club is the oldest surviving club of its type in Australia.

Since those earlier revival days, traditional jazz in Sydney, as is the case elsewhere, has undergone some stylistic and technical changes. Predominant in the early groups were an adherence to the traditional seven or eight piece line-up (one or two trumpets or cornets), clarinet, trombone, piano, banjo, string bass or tuba and drums), a two-beat rhythm and tight ensemble playing. The period was also marked by an interest in writing and performing new tunes, some of them now part of the standard repertoire.

During the jazz booms of the late '50s and early '60s this line-up was sustained, although not to the exclusion of smaller groups. But the quality of the music often suffered through an increasing lack of originality, the banality of some of the tunes played, and the inevitable return to the more exploitative commercialism decried by the early revivalists.

Many of our best performers did not succumb to this but have maintained both their integrity and their popularity. There was also a tendency for some groups to merge traditional and mainstream (a term used from the mid-fifties to describe swinging small group arrangements that were neither traditional nor modern). Some bands have effectively introduced such instruments as the saxophone, hitherto thought (a historically incorrect notion) by some 'purists' to have no part in traditional jazz.

Drummers, with a few notable exceptions, moved further towards the more modern styles of playing, bringing a looser swing to the performance. Two-beat has generally been replaced by four beats in the bar! Fewer bass players mastered the art of 'slapping' the string bass, most seeming to prefer a more modern technique. And amplification, so often sneered at by the purists, was now seen to be an integral part of the performance - even to the extent of using the electric bass and, mainly for expediency, the portable electric piano.



Some 'traditional' bands have extended their repertoires to include tunes by such modernists as John Lewis (above) and Thelonious Monk (below)... LEWIS PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE; MONK PHOTO CREDIT EDDY POSTHUMA DE BOER



Some 'traditional' bands even extended their repertoires to include tunes by such modernists as John Lewis and Thelonious Monk, a tendency not always welcomed by some fans. Over the past decade, there have been a number of social changes in Sydney that have fundamentally altered the face of traditional jazz in this city. Paramount among these is the rapid disappearance of many of the pubs and cellars traditionally used for performances. In the unseemly haste in recent times to dehumanise the central city area, the loss of these relatively cheap places of entertainment has had a bad effect on audience numbers (and tourist dollars) throughout the music industry. As a consequence, jazz has had to move into the more opulent social and sports clubs - a move which is a deterrent to some fans who object to dress regulations and other forms of regimentation.



Alongside our older jazz performers such as Graeme Bell and Kate Dunbar (above) we can hear the best of the present generation such as Paul Furniss (below left) and Bob Henderson (below right)... PHOTO ABOVE COURTESY GRAEME BELL AUTOBIOGRAPHY



At those hotels that remain, the publicans have to pay the band a proper rate and seek a reasonable return on beer sales, so they have had to increase prices accordingly - yet another deterrent to some fans. Despite these problems, traditional jazz survives; whether it will continue to do so into the next century is dependent on two factors - gaining players and audiences from the ranks of today's children.

There is an ongoing debate on the best ways of presenting traditional jazz to the 'now' generation in the schools, through the encouragement of performance and training, and through more accessible public concerts at appropriate venues. Whatever is to be done, it must be done in a non-patronising way, always remembering that children are influenced by their peers and by the rich array of competing types of music.

Ideally, the establishment of a Sydney Jazz Centre, perhaps in one of the many disused finger wharves, would provide an appropriate place for the practice and promotion of all types of jazz. It should not be too difficult for politicians and planners of Sydney's future to see the likely benefits of such a venture.

Yes, traditional jazz survives in Sydney, sometimes merging with slightly more modern styles, but still retaining much of its earlier vibrancy. Alongside our older jazz performers such as Graeme Bell and Kate Dunbar, then Dick Hughes, Doc Willis, Alan Geddes, the brothers Barnard, Wally Wickham and John McCarthy, we can hear the best of the present generation in Paul Furniss, Geoff Bull, Bob Henderson, Johnny Bates, Roger Janes, singers Carol Ralph and Lee Gunness, and a host of other fine artists.



UK trumpeter Mike Hallam: one of many talented migrants from a host of countries... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE

To this should be added the array of fine talent brought to the local scene by migrants from a host of countries, for example trumpeters Mike Hallam and Eric Holroyd from England, multi-instrumentalist Tom Baker and reed player Jack Wiard from the United States. At festivals, in the clubs and pubs, on our glorious harbour - these are the faces of traditional jazz, the makers of its rich and various sounds, in Sydney 1992.