

FINANCIAL REVIEW

HOW JAZZ GOT ITSELF ORGANISED AND TOOK A PLACE AT THE FUNDING TABLE

by Shane Nichols*

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There's been an explosion in the amount of Australian jazz being composed and recorded. It's happening because our musicians discovered being cool was at the expense of being smart. Suddenly, jazz is all over the Sydney Opera House. In the SOH's Bennelong Bar, top names are presented free, six nights a week, making the venue technically Sydney's leading jazz spot. And lately there is also a jazz/avant-garde element to performances in the SOH's new Studio space.

Where to Get Your CD Reviewed



*[Editor's note: This new section of **JazzChord** is a service to NSW musicians, indicating where their CDs can be reviewed in the ever-changing and more complex media. In this edition we highlight Shane Nichols, who is a journalist in Sydney at the **Australian Financial Review**. His CD reviews now appear on the internet at www.allaboutjazz.com and www.afr.com. For some years Shane published a review of a jazz CD every Saturday in the arts supplement of the **Australian Financial Review**, **The Weekend Fin**. He is also the founder of the **Notes From Down Under** column on the international website allaboutjazz.com, and now publishes jazz CD reviews at www.afr.com.au. Email Shane at <snichols@mail.fairfax.com.au>. Next month: another leading jazz CD reviewer will be highlighted.]*

*In the Feb/Mar, 2002 edition of **JazzChord**, this column entitled "Where To Get Your CD Reviewed" was introduced, featuring a number of reviews of jazz albums by Australian Financial Review journalist Shane Nichols...*

**In 1999 Shane Nicols was best-known as a journalist at the Australian Financial Review, where he was an editor, deputy editor, sub-editor and reporter. He contributed reports on defence (including China's cyber strategy, small arms teams, advances in armour, Australia's LHDs, the F35's networking and sensors), IT, derivative financial products, real estate, personal finance, wealth management especially tax affairs, and social media. He was also a jazz and rock critic for many years (*The Australian*, *Rolling Stone*, *Hi Fi Australia* and *The National Times*).*

The acceptance of jazz at the Opera House - albeit through the tradesman's entrance - is both a joy and a worry. While it gives proper recognition to the indisputable fact of jazz's place in our cultural life - not to mention a host of well-paid gigs for musicians - it also suggests jazz is in the same boat as the classical music ensembles for whom life outside the funded confines of an elite institution is nigh impossible. Apart from the excellent Side On Cafe in Annandale, jazz venues in Sydney have been drying up at a distressing rate for years under the dread onslaught of the pokies. Jazz was once literally the music of the streets (as in New Orleans funeral wakes), then bordellos, then dance halls and nightclubs. And now, the Holy Opera House? What's going on?



Suddenly, jazz is all over the Sydney Opera House: What's going on?...

Theme: A funny thing happened to this outsider artform on the way to the opera house - jazz got itself organised. By taking a leaf out of the books of other high art bodies the jazz community has learnt how to lobby governments, apply for funding aid, devise strategies to develop the art and voice its common concerns, of which there are many. The advent of the Jazz Co-ordination Association in the early '80s, tertiary jazz studies which are producing highly developed graduates, and the birth of the Sydney Improvised Music Association and the Melbourne Jazz Co-operative in the '80s, have transformed Australian jazz. The result has been a huge proliferation in the composition and recording of distinctive local jazz which is routinely world class.

But to get there has seen a something of a cultural change within the jazz community itself. Playing in harmony hasn't been easy.

"When I was invited to stand as president of Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW in 1989," says Bruce Johnson, associate professor, School of English, University of NSW, "I thought . . . it would make little difference to anything. I shared the widespread scepticism about the value to jazz of institutionalised infrastructures, invoking facile bar-room cynicism in which 'street-cred' dictated that one stood back from engagement with cultural power blocs, and got on with the real business of just playing jazz. Ten years later I see things very differently. Not only is it clear that jazz should intervene to give itself a voice in the public arts consciousness, but that it can do so to outstanding effect."



President of the Jazz Co-ordination Association of NSW Bruce Johnson: not only is it clear that jazz should intervene to give itself a voice in the public arts consciousness, but that it can do so to outstanding effect...

Pointing to a lingering victim mentality in some quarters, Johnson argues that "jazz will remain underprivileged while its community glories in its own exclusion". Referring to the competition for arts funding, he says, "The side that fights harder will win, right or wrong."

"Why are such organisations [the major art music bodies] so massively privileged? It is not because they service more clientele, because they don't. It is not because they employ more musicians, because they don't. It is not because it resonates most harmoniously with the condition of Australian life in the 20th century, because it doesn't. It is not because it is 'better' music. The notion of what is 'good' music is constructed by those who have achieved cultural authority."

According to the most recent issue of the NSW Jazz Co-ordination Association's journal, *JazzChord*, in the March, 1999 round of assessments by the Music Fund of the Australia Council, it considered 323 applications requesting a total of \$6,308,328. It expended \$855,839 for 93 projects, ranging from \$80,000 to pianist/composer Mike Nock to develop a large ensemble involving emerging artists, to \$6,000 for brilliant young guitarist James Muller to study with Mike Stern in New York.



Australia Council Music Fund grants range from \$80,000 to pianist/composer Mike Nock (left) to develop a large ensemble involving emerging artists, to \$6,000 for brilliant young guitarist James Muller (below) to study with Mike Stern in New York.



Nock, now 58, is the sixth jazz musician to be the beneficiary of such a major Australia Council award during the '90s. He follows Don Borrows who in 1994 was awarded \$330,000 (a "Keating"), Sandy Evans in 1995 with \$33,000, a fellowship to Mark Isaacs of \$80,000 in 1996 (also for classical music); a Don Banks Music Award of \$60,000 to Bernie McGann in '97, and Dale Barlow who received an \$80,000 fellowship last year.

Solo: Mark Isaacs, meanwhile, wants jazz musicians to be even more self-determining in their careers, again taking a lead from the example of art music bodies which have found new ways to survive as arts funding gets tougher. He sees "direct funding" from government arts organisations to the artist(s) as an answer. Writing in the latest *JazzChord*, he says that instead of waiting around for gigs to come up, jazz artists should arrange their own tours; when seeking funding they should present themselves as corporatised partners with a product to sell. They should not be treated any differently from others such as film makers, exporters, or innovative manufacturers. They need to get away from patronage and its top-down hierarchy.



Mark Isaacs: I don't need a manager. I just need staff!...

Not surprisingly Isaacs practises what he preaches (he does in fact hold seminars for musicians on "self management"). He runs his own Grace Recordings label, organises and promotes most of his performances and keeps in touch with the media for publicity about whatever he's up to. "Business-wise, I see myself as running an organisation. I'd like less administrative work, but I don't need a manager. I just need staff!"

He's one of the new breed of musicians for whom the internet is an empowering and vital tool. Through email contact, he says, he is acquiring much more international work. Isaacs has been a keen user of the net, selling through online stores like CDnow, and also uses his site as a "portal" for others' CDs.

But the paragon of the new musician is, not surprisingly, Australia's most successful jazz entertainer, James Morrison. He has the inclination - "I've always been fascinated by technology" - and the financial resources (for example, his latest album, a three-CD set for \$39.95, has sold 12,500 copies) to gear himself up for the new age. Morrison, 36, is one of the leading examples anywhere in the world of the fully wired, self-empowered musician. On indefinite sabbatical from Warner so he can record for his own Morrison Records, he runs a state-of-the-art website that is already using MP4 technology for those who want to sample his music, when most sites are still using MP3. For him, technology is leading to a Promised Land.



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"When enough people have the technology, the whole thing will reach its potential as a medium," he says. With music off the net you could download just the tracks you want - or even merely "rent" the music if you wish. It's all product, not packaging. Therefore it'll be cheaper, and - the punchline - "we can sell more music!"

"People now have access to my product 24 hours a day, anywhere on earth," Morrison says. "It's levelled the playing field. It means total choice for consumers." It also means a direct interface between artist and audience. He envisages running jam sessions and clinics with the likes of Wynton Marsalis, but open to the public online, and then being able to record it and send it to purchasers immediately. Hear yourself playing with Wynton!

Riff: Getting directly to the consumer is a frustration shared by record companies and retailers too. Kieran Stafford, owner of the Sydney jazz CD mecca Birdland for the past eight years, bemoans the lack of a national magazine like the ABC's 24 Hours in which to advertise to jazz consumers. Birdland extensively uses direct mail and its web site to reach consumers, including a slickly produced glossy catalogue six times a year. But the great bulk of its sales are from the racks in the shop.



Birdland proprietor Kieran Stafford: he bemoans the lack of a national magazine like the ABC's "24 Hours" in which to advertise to jazz consumers... PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

Stafford thinks local jazz shoppers are well looked after. The availability of overseas jazz releases in this country is very high, in fact, considerably better than in the US. More Blue Note, for example, is on offer here than in any other market. Imports from places like Italy, Japan and Germany are much more readily available than in the US - something apparent to US jazz stars John Scofield and Charlie Hunter and Coltrane-freak rock poet/singer Henry Rollins, who all cut a path to Birdland when in town.

Even though the Australian jazz scene is on the up, there are some downbeat issues. According to Sydney Improvised Music Association president and artistic director Peter Rechniewski, "the total audience that comes to jazz is at least as big as classical

music, but in funding and sponsorship it's just not in the same league. Why? We didn't develop big ticket items - big events - and the sponsorship went away. But this is starting to change. The Melbourne International Jazz Festival [sponsored by The Age] has broken through after a shaky start. What's holding jazz back is money coming from public and private sources."



Sydney Improvised Music Association president and artistic director Peter Rechniewski: the total audience that comes to jazz is at least as big as classical music, but in funding and sponsorship it's just not in the same league...

The advent this year of the Side On Cafe in Sydney as SIMA's new venue to replace the Strawberry Hills Hotel (the pokies, again) has been strongly positive, the cafe now running two SIMA-sponsored nights of jazz a week and probably soon a third. Bennett's Lane in Melbourne (see box) is the paramount venue - a dedicated jazz club offering music seven nights a week, some presented by the Melbourne Jazz Co-operative. Even at these premier venues the ask is embarrassingly small - for a paltry \$8-\$12 you can hear exciting, creative music fit for bandstands anywhere in the world. It's the arts bargain of them all. Undervalued as it is, making a living from jazz is a perennial slog, despite the vibrancy of the scene around the country.

There are still elements of disharmony (traditionally, the jazz community's factionalism made the ALP look like boy scouts), and right now it is having one of its periodic Sydney vs Melbourne debates over funding levels - the Melburnians again claiming unfair bias toward Sydney in the Music Fund allocations when its own scene is patently very strong. But at least now there is something to fight over and the jazz community has a journal, *JazzChord*, in which to air the various issues. More than that, there is a gathering sense of what needs to be done to take the music beyond the century of its birth for the first time.

See next page for Blues in the black: the discs that sell and sell

Blues in the black: the discs that sell and sell

The great thing about retailing jazz is how much of it has longevity, even when the original release may have failed to set the market alight. These perennial sellers are not necessarily classics but they have a retail life that far outstrips the big guns of rock, and are, if anything, enhanced by the passage of time.

Here are some CDs that Birdland can't afford not to stock:

- * Sonny Rollins, *Way Out West*
 - * Sonny Rollins, *Saxophone Colossus*
 - * Miles Davis, *Kind Of Blue*
 - * Kenny Burrell, *Midnight Blue*
 - * John Coltrane, *Giant Steps*
 - * Thelonious Monk, *Monk at the It Club*
 - * Ben Webster, *Soulville*
 - * Oscar Peterson, *Night Train*
 - * Getz and Gilberto, *Getz and Gilberto*
 - * Bill Evans, *At the Village Vanguard*
 - * Cassandra Wilson, *Blue Moon Daughter*
 - * Keith Jarrett, *Koln Concert*
 - * Stanley Turrentine, *Blue Horn*
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