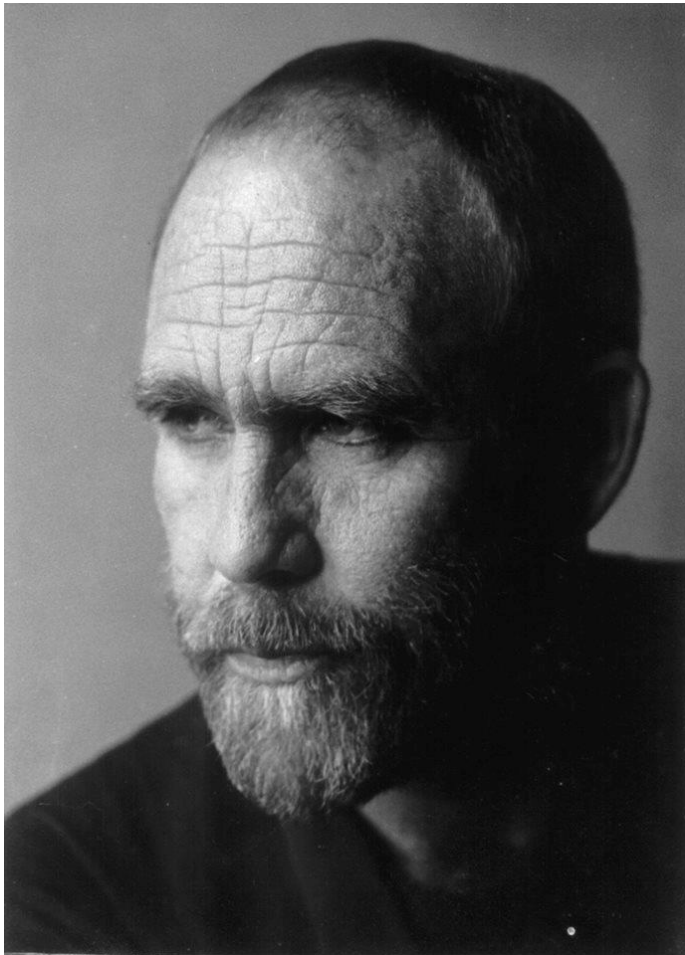


PRELUDE TO BERNIE MCGANN: A LIFE IN JAZZ

by Geoff Page*

This is the Prelude to Geoff Page's book "Bernie McGann: A Life in Jazz", published by Kardoorair Press, Armidale, in 1997.

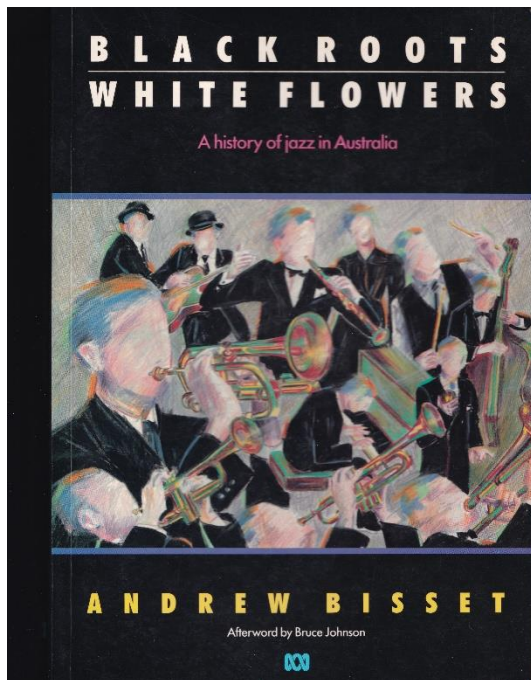
The story of Bernie McGann — considered by a wide consensus of critics and listeners to be the most original saxophonist in Australian jazz — is one of extraordinary persistence against decades of non-recognition and is, in many ways, a paradigm for the experience of jazz musicians in Australia more generally.



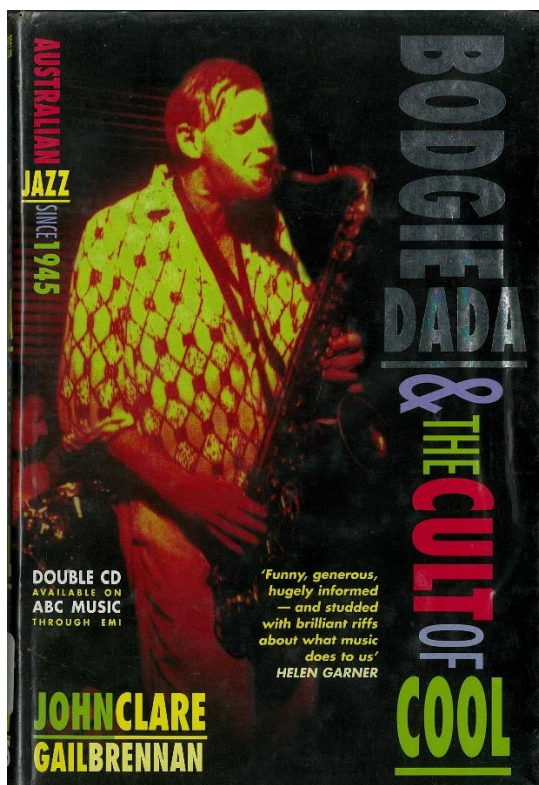
Bernie McGann, pictured in 1983... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH COURTESY BERNIE MCGANN: A LIFE IN JAZZ

**Geoff Page (born 1940) is an Australian poet, writer, retired teacher and life-long committed supporter of jazz. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoff_Page. Other than his biography of Bernie McGann (Page, 1998), he has published a memoir entitled "Aficionado" (2014) which traces, more or less chronologically, Page's life-long involvement with jazz.*

Jazz in Australia has a long and honourable history which has been well detailed in Andrew Bisset's book *Black Roots White Flowers* (ABC Enterprises, revised edition, 1987) and more recently in *Bodgie Dada and the Cult of Cool* by John Clare/Gail Brennan (University of New South Wales Press, 1995). It goes right back to the 1920s, with musicians such as Frank Coughlan, and includes such internationally-known figures as Graeme Bell, Don Burrows, Mike Nock and (more recently) James Morrison and Dale Barlow.



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It also features many others who have made a huge contribution to the art in their own country over many decades — Bob Bertles, John Sangster, Judy Bailey, Bobby Gebert and John Pochée being some of the more obvious. The density of both talent and achievement among such younger players as Sandy Evans, Tim Hopkins, Ian Chaplin, Lloyd Swanton, Jonathan Zwartz and scores of others is likewise remarkable — a tribute, among other factors, to the quality of jazz education which most of them have received at various conservatoria around the country, from Brisbane to Perth.

Among this bounty of impressive players over several generations, however, Bernie McGann stands out. He is one of the few with a uniquely personal style, developed with great integrity over several decades. Despite his (until recently) minimal recording output, he has become a legend to those who have followed Australian jazz since the late 1950s.

Some aspects of this legend have, understandably, been romanticised — but their basis is real enough. Certainly McGann did work for quite a few years delivering mail in Cronulla rather than compromise his music by playing in the Leagues clubs. Certainly, he did practise his alto sax for many hours a day out in the National Park, south of Sydney. There is no doubt, too, that he has played at some incredibly small and marginal venues over the years.



Certainly, McGann did practise his alto sax for many hours a day out in the National Park, south of Sydney... PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS PRODUKTIONS

Now 60 years old, Bernie McGann has a story — both musical and personal — worth the telling — and an achievement warranting both examination and celebration. It's a story that says much along the way about the development of modern jazz in Sydney (and, to a lesser extent, Melbourne) over the past 40 years. McGann's career, despite its setbacks, has been an important part of that growth, and is a useful way of understanding it as a whole.

This biography is based mainly on interviews with McGann himself, members of his family, and a number of well-known musicians with whom he has been closely associated. Documentation on the life and work of Australian jazz musicians is invariably slight and ephemeral — confined mainly to short 'puffs' in newspapers, sporadic reviews of their live performances, and their all too rare recordings (together with the liner notes of the latter).



McGann (right) is pictured here with Ken James performing with The Last Straw... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

In McGann's case the documentation problem is compounded by the fact that by the age of 50 he had, in effect, issued only two tracks under his own name. Fortunately this book has at least partly been able to overcome this limitation, through access to a range of private recordings which define several important stages in McGann's career — kindly made available by McGann himself, and colleagues such as John Pochée.

While the main emphasis of the book is on McGann's musical activities and development, the book also deals with key elements of his personal life as they become relevant.

A review of Geoff Page's book "Bernie McGann: A Life in Jazz", written by John Shand can be found on this website at this link
<https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/book-reviews/>.