

EMPEROR NORTON'S HUNCH, by John Buchanan. *Hambledon Productions Pty Limited, 1 Ballanda Place, Middle Dural, New South Wales, Australia 2158, 1996, 160 pp.*

Reviewed by Larry L Quilligan

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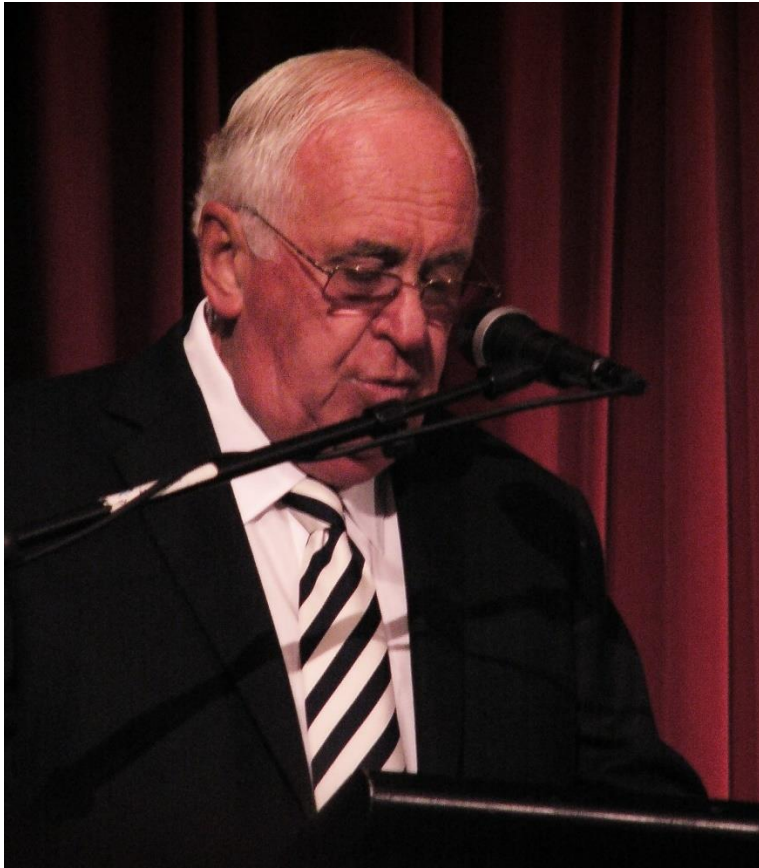
This is a book that this reviewer read from cover to cover in one sitting. Containing a total of 160 pages, that was not a feat of endurance. It was a thoroughly enjoyable return to the late 1930s, the 1940s and into the early 1950s when, to many jazz buffs and record collectors, "West Coast jazz" had an entirely different meaning than it has generally come to have these days. This well-researched work has investigated early California and Bay Area jazz history, which will delight many who have left their hearts in San Francisco.



Trumpeter Lu Watters at Hambone Kelly, 1948... PHOTO CREDIT KOONTZ PHOTO

Sub-titled "The Story of Lu Watters' Yerba Buena Jazz Band: One Of The Most Influential Bands In The History of Jazz," it is just that and is also the first book to have specifically done Watters and the YBJB in such a studious manner. There have been many previous written stories and commentaries on Watters and his disciples,

mostly in jazz publications, liner notes from recordings and other audio and video sources, but nothing quite like this labour of love by Buchanan, an Australian magazine publisher and jazz cornetist. It's edited by another Australian, Peter Newton, a transplanted Englishman and writer and linguist.



There's nothing quite like this labour of love by John Buchanan (pictured above) , an Australian magazine publisher and jazz cornetist...

This book continues the remarkable historical phenomenon that it is so often not Americans but rather the citizens of foreign lands who have been and continue to be the prime students, writers and discographers of this native American art form.

Author Buchanan had much help in putting together his book. It included two trips to San Francisco and many interviews including those with three members of Watters' Yerba Buena Jazz Bands — Bob Helm, Wally Rose and Harry Mordecai. Dottie and Ed Lawless, Watters buffs from way back, plus Ted Shafer, Phil Elwood, Donna Ewald and the San Francisco Traditional Jazz Foundation all helped (most of the 90 photographs in the text were by courtesy of Dottie and Ed Lawless).

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which generally encompasses early San Francisco and other jazz and social history and some of which resembles that of New Orleans. Parallels are drawn concerning the Barbary Coast area of the former and the Storyville district of the latter municipalities, especially as they affected the vice,

entertainment and musical activities of those cities. It's a fascinating historic portrait of one of America's most colourful and perhaps most scenic cities, San Francisco.

Part Two takes in the early lives of Watters and his musical associates and leads into the beginnings of what was to develop into the Yerba Buena Jazz Band with the first sessions at the Big Bear Tavern in the Berkeley Hills on the east side of San Francisco Bay. And then the evolution that led in 1940 to the place that became the first home of the band, the Dawn Club at 20 Annie Street in downtown San Francisco. That was where the band really caught on, despite the fact that they were not playing the big band "swing" music of those times' and were chided for playing the older forms of jazz called "cornball" and "nigger music" by some of their detractors. Watters and his musicians were invited to get into step with the times to which he is reported to have replied, "To hell with them; they can get into step with me!"



The first home of the Lu Watters band, the Dawn Club at 20 Annie Street in downtown San Francisco... PHOTO CREDIT ED LAWLESS

The band's pre-World War II and post-World War II interludes are well covered, as is their 1947-1950 residency in their own establishment, Hambone Kelly's, in the east Bay community of El Cerrito. Also covered, of course, are the reasons for the eventual decline and final closing of Hambone's on New Year's Eve, 1950.

A most detailed and as complete a Watters discography as I've seen (1941-1964) plus Notes and References completes this book. It's undoubtedly the best discography extant on Watters and Company.

Your reviewer first heard the music of Watters and his YBJB on their earliest Jazz Man recordings, December 1941 and March 1942. I'd never heard anything like it. They knocked me out. My subsequent exposures were their series of April and May 1946 Good Time Jazz recordings. But even those records had not prepared me for my first "live" encounters with the band in 1948 at Hambone Kelly's. They struck me like a ton of bricks! I've not fully recovered to this day.



Nesuhi Ertegun, jazz buff, record collector and producer of Jazz Man Records, Contemporary Records, Atlantic Records: an early and ardent follower of the Lu Watters band... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The late Nesuhi Ertegun (1918-1989), jazz buff, record collector and producer of Jazz Man Records, Contemporary Records, Atlantic Records, and, later, President-Special Projects, WCI (Warner Communications, Inc., Record Group), has probably described the Lu Watters YBJB sound as well as anyone can with only words and not the music to assist him. Ertegun was an early and ardent follower of the band and is quoted as having said, "I have never heard another group of young musicians where the art of collective improvisation is mastered to such a high degree. It is a vigorous band, driving and rocking all the time; at the same time it achieves an integration which is the result of musical temperaments that complement each other beautifully. The sound of the band is entirely different from the sound of any other band in the history of jazz. It has a very definite personal style of its own."

This is a valuable book. It can be used as a primer for anyone interested in the so-called "traditional" forms of jazz music, and especially for those interested in the genesis of what is now often called the San Francisco "jazz revival". It is an excellent reference source. And for all who experienced hearing the band on records and, especially, in person, it's indispensable. The distributor in the US will send you a copy for \$25, plus \$3.00 for shipping and handling (add \$6 shipping and handling for foreign orders). Orders should be sent to Donna Ewald, 1537 - 4th Street, #43, San Rafael, California 94901. Phone: (415) 455 5898. Copies are limited. You'd be well advised to order your copy now.

Other articles on this website which may be of interest:

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