LET'S NOT LOSE THAT RHYTHM

by Peter Rechniewski*

[This is an edited extract from Rechniewski's essay 'The Permanent Underground: Australian Contemporary Jazz in the New Millennium' in Platform Papers 16, (Currency House), and was published in The Australian newspaper on April 8, 2008.]

That Australia produces many fine young jazz musicians is not in doubt. But does jazz have a future or is it caught in a time warp, reproducing musical gestures that are merely variations of past styles? Some who believe that jazz is a dead, or else a heritage form, say that improvisation has supplanted it. For them, jazz is no longer the site of innovation but a formalised tradition that has forsaken experimentation in favour of eternal verities such as the blues and swing.

Non-jazz improvisation, on the other hand, offers many of the possibilities that staunch supporters of the jazz tradition have rejected: the use of electronics and computers, multimedia performances and so on. The argument that jazz is dead has its roots in the 1960s and '70s, in the debates among British and European avant-garde jazz musicians who sought to create a space for their work where it wouldn't be subject to endless comparisons with American jazz.

Peter Rechniewski: does jazz have a future or is it caught in a time warp, reproducing musical gestures that are merely variations of past styles?...

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The rhetoric of the debate was political, born of a wish to create new musical forms that were explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and not racially discriminating. Even at the time, some prominent musicians thought the exclusion of all jazz elements from a new improvised music was nothing short of a new orthodoxy. And today echoes of the argument that jazz has run its course can still be heard in Australia.

In the view of English critic Stuart Nicholson, American jazz is caught in permanent stasis, partly because highly influential musician Wynton Marsalis has steered the music into an aesthetic cul-de-sac and partly because the private jazz education system permits little time to nurture individuality. For Nicholson, the really vibrant, innovative jazz is being played in Europe, where it has been taken seriously as an art form for decades and where adequate public funding enables artists and private entrepreneurs to take risks.

English critic Stuart Nicholson: in his view American jazz is caught in permanent stasis...

Much of what Nicholson writes about the creativity of European and, especially, Scandinavian jazz could apply equally to Australia. The American style wars caused only a ripple in this country because the deeper issues involved - such as race - had no social foundation. Today, Australian contemporary jazz musicians are open to engaging with any music that interests them: from noise and rock (Bucketrider) to Afro-Cuban (Barney McAll), music from Papua New Guinea (Aaron Choulai), music of the Pacific Islands (Aron Ottignon) and minimalist influenced improvisation (the Necks and Band of Five Names).

In their range of voices and quality, Australian musicians contribute more than would be expected of a small country, writes musician and critic Roger Dean. "From a period of largely imitative modern jazz, we have emerged with a vibrant heterodoxy which can compete with that of any country or region. Its only problems are those of exposure, travel, distance and free trade."

What would a series of snapshots of the Australian contemporary jazz scene reveal? Of the capital cities, Melbourne has the most performance venues, and in Bennetts Lane it boasts Australia's leading jazz club. Further, the high profile of jazz in Melbourne is attributable to the publicity generated by events such as the Melbourne International Jazz Festival, Stonnington Jazz and the Melbourne International Women's Jazz Festival. The Wangaratta Festival of Jazz in regional Victoria, which sponsors the National Jazz Awards, is widely considered Australia's leading jazz festival.

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Sydney, by contrast, is lacking performance opportunities, not helped by a restrictive licensing system (liberalised under new legislation), high commercial rents and poker machines. In the past three years, no new jazz venues have been opened by the private sector to replace those that have closed. This has left the country's largest concentration of jazz musicians with a steadily declining number of opportunities to perform and develop their audience. They rely increasingly on the showcase performances provided by the Sydney Improvised Music Association and the Jazzgroove Association. But the modest funding of these organisations prevents them from stepping into the breach left by the closure of venues.

Brisbane's contemporary jazz scene has grown rapidly, but from a much smaller base. The city has two excellent jazz festivals. And while the pool of musicians remains small, the educational institutions that teach jazz turn out high-quality students: Kristin Berardi, for example, who last year added the National Freedman Fellowship to her victory in the Shure Vocal Competition at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 2006.

Kristin Berardi (above) and Elliott Dalgleish (below): two musicians of outstanding ability, coming out of Brisbane...

There is also a core of jazz-improvising musicians of exceptional ability - saxophonist Elliott Dalgleish, violinist John Rodgers and drummer Ken Eadie, for example - who tour internationally but choose to base themselves in Queensland rather than in one of the leading jazz centres.

The Perth scene is relatively well-funded, has stable, well-established presenting organisations, and in the West Australian Youth Jazz Orchestra, founded in 1982, features Australia's only orchestra with a permanent training program. In 1999, Frank Foster, a former leader of the Count Basie Orchestra, became a patron. However, Perth has no jazz festival and insufficient venues.

Saxophonist Frank Foster, a former leader of the Count Basie Orchestra: in 1999 he became a patron of the West Australian Youth Jazz Orchestra...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

It's the same story in Adelaide, where the jazz scene has been particularly slow to develop. However, it has a presenting organisation, JazzSA, that has recently undergone renewal, and together with the musicians' initiative Creative Original Music Adelaide, established in 2006 - and Paul Grabowsky's assumption of the artistic directorship of the Adelaide Festival from 2010 - there may be signs that things in the south are looking up.

Paul Grabowsky: with his becoming artistic director of the Adelaide Festival from 2010, there may be signs that things in the south are looking up... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN ART ORCHESTRA

Nevertheless, the absence of a national jazz organisation and magazine points to a weak jazz culture that is incapable of raising the genre's profile. It is not surprising that a successful group such as The Necks and a highly visible musician such as Grabowsky, who emerged from the jazz milieu and continue to perform at jazz festivals, have been careful to construct their public profiles by distancing themselves from the jazz scene. Their reasons may differ, but the message is clear enough: an association with jazz is not a good look.

The Necks, L-R, Chris Abrahams, Lloyd Swanton, Tony Buck: an association with jazz is not a good look...

Jazz organisations have failed to establish jazz as an important element in the national arts discourse and the problems facing jazz tend to be subsumed within those facing contemporary music in general. Despite increased funding from commonwealth and state agencies, the jazz sector is fragile.

Reflecting on these issues, I have concluded that the sector needs a national jazz plan to guide the actions of the funding bodies and introduce strategic thinking. A campaign of audience development is critical for raising the profile of jazz in the media and offering support to artists and presenting organisations. Crucially, we must address the paucity of adequate venues, especially full time, dedicated venues in Sydney and Melbourne. The plan should recognise the important role of band leaders as entrepreneurs and presenters, and facilitate access to project funding. Special support should be directed to emerging artists and a number of large ensembles. Touring circuits and the creation of new festivals, as well as developing existing ones, are important elements in reaching a larger audience.

Such a transformation will present a challenge to the jazz community.

At the national level it will need to demonstrate a unity of purpose and level of co-operation that it has struggled to achieve in the past, while strategies to solve local problems will also have to be devised. With regard to additional funding, $1.15 million should be sought: the objective is to raise the level of public funding for jazz to $2.4million, or double the existing amount.

The case for increased funding is compelling, not only because of demonstrated need, but also because of inequity in relation to other musical idioms. Jazz has made do with little, but it should not be expected to accept its poverty as a natural and enduring state. A modest improvement in funding would be an important step towards liberating jazz from its imprisonment in a permanent underground.