

## ON ARTHUR JAMES RECEIVING THE OAM

by John Sangster

---

*[This article by John Sangster appeared in the Jan/Feb 1994 edition of Jazzchord. In the 1994 Australia Day honours list there was one award for a member of the jazz community. Arthur James, the manager of the famous El Rocco, which operated as a jazz cellar in Sydney's Kings Cross circa 1957 to 1969, received the OAM, "for exceptional service to the development of Australian jazz." The testimonies of various leading musicians who played at the El Rocco were enough to secure the honour. In August, 1989, John Sangster wrote the following regarding Arthur James's role in the development of jazz in Sydney. The origin of Sangster's statement is unknown.]*

I've been lucky enough to have spent the first half of my life as a musician in the 'trad' or Dixieland' idiom, where the emphasis is on dancing and having a good time, and generally whooping it up; and the second half of my life in the 'modern' jazz framework, where the audiences prefer to sit and actually listen to the musicians.

The ten years I spent playing with, and composing for, the various groups at Arthur James's El Rocco jazz club were, I think, highly significant, not only for my own musical development, but for a host of other 'modern' jazz players and composers.



*Arthur James... PHOTO CREDIT BRUCE JOHNSON*

It's no exaggeration to say that Arthur James's patience, encouragement and enthusiasm, against very heavy odds, right through the 60s, was directly responsible for the emergence of such overseas 'ambassadors' for Australian jazz music as Don Burrows, whose quartet I was a founding member of, the Mike Nock Trio, Judy

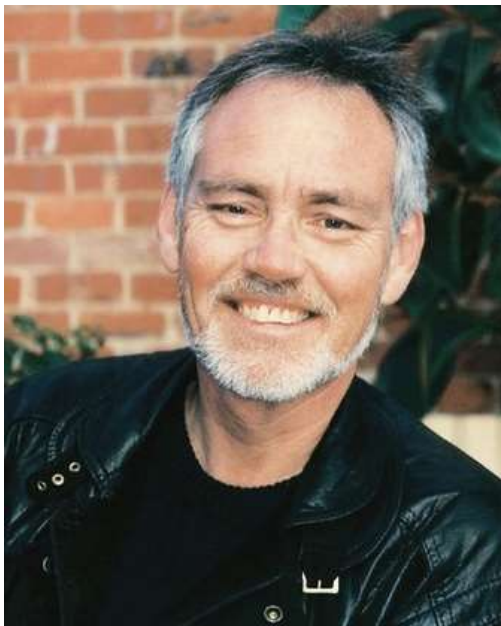
Bailey (with whom I also performed, and still, on occasions, do) and many others who are now 'household names'.



*John Sangster at the vibes: his ten years playing with, and composing for, the various groups at the El Rocco were highly significant...*

*PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

Not only did Arthur provide the outlet, the venue for our concerts, our rehearsals and our experimentations, but he actively encouraged a spirit of 'stop talking about it, stop practising at home with your records, come on and do it in front of an audience'. Which experience was, to my mind, absolutely vital to the young musicians and budding composers.



*Graeme Lyall: he and John Sangster virtually pioneered the 'avant-garde' or 'psychedelic' movement in Australian modern jazz at the El Rocco...*

From this atmosphere emerged such fine musicians as Graeme Lyall... Graeme and I virtually pioneered the 'avant-garde' or 'psychedelic' movement in Australian modern jazz, at the El Rocco.

Not all of our 'progressive' experiments were greeted with wild enthusiasm by our mentor Arthur James; sometimes we went 'too far out', but the audiences loved it. I'd been to two World Expo's with Don Burrows, and had brought back all kinds of fresh and new ideas and approaches to the music, which dear long-suffering Arthur sometimes went along with.

Which tolerance, during those early years of their musical development, gave encouragement and impetus to such important figures as Bob Gebert, Bernie McGann (who has become an internationally-known and respected composer and player, both through his recordings and his cultural tours abroad) , and John Pochée, and many more.



*Important figures at the El Rocco, 1968: back left, John Helman, then clockwise, John Pochée, Keith Barr, Bob Gebert...*

Overseas critics and reviewers claim to discern a definite 'Australian' sound and character in these musics, which I for one am all in favour of. We began to write, to invent our own music, to take it overseas and perform it for the whole world. And this was engendered, to a very large extent, by our sponsor Arthur James and his El Rocco jazz cellar.

One of the hardest things in those days was to talk a record company into releasing a record of our music. We believed we had something to say, and wanted more people to hear us. It was largely as a result of reviews of, and articles about, the El Rocco, and our photos in and on the cover of such magazines as *Music Maker*, that I finally managed my first three-album contract with Festival Records...

Arthur, far from being your average 'get-rich-quick' entrepreneur, had more than his share of setbacks and financial difficulties. He also managed to handle our crowd of

young incipient prima donnas, pour oil on troubled waters when necessary, and generally keep the music coming out and the audiences coming in.

Similar testimony has been given by Don Burrows. In Kevin Lucas's film *Beyond El Rocco* he said: "Whilst there have always been some amount of clubs around, there wasn't one that gave the opportunity the El Rocco gave, and I think it was because there were no restrictions on the musicians, their musical experimentation, and which, in fact, was encouraged by the management.



*Don Burrows: if we weren't on that night at the El Rocco we would always drive back to the El Rocco as fast as we could after our TV shows...*PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

"I remember when I was doing TV shows with other famous musicians like Errol Buddle, John Sangster, and Graeme Lyall. If we weren't on that night at the El Rocco we would always drive back to the El Rocco as fast as we could after our TV shows, to catch the last set of somebody else's. It was that sort of place, which usually does not apply these days, and the reason was the unpredictability of the El Rocco, inasmuch as the music being performed, written and tried out was pretty new."



*Sangster (left) pictured here with the ABC broadcaster Eric Child... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

In his article in the Australian *Jazz Magazine*, “The El Rocco: An Era in Sydney Jazz”, published in 1983, Bruce Johnson\* summed it up: “While the music always must come first in any assessment of this kind of subject, the fact remains that Arthur James was essential in making the El Rocco what it was, and as such, is a major figure in the cultural history of this country.”



*Judy Bailey, performing at the El Rocco. The bassist Rick Laird is in the background, obscured... PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY*

---

\*Bruce Johnson’s article “The El Rocco: An Era in Sydney Jazz” appears on this website at this link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/essays-6.>]