

OH! PLAY THAT THING!

by Clement Semmler*

Clement Semmler's book "Pictures on the Margin: Memoirs" was published in 1991. The last two chapters were entitled "Jazz Memories". The following is a reproduction of Chapter 17, "Oh Play That Thing: Jazz at Home and Abroad". Chapter 18 is entitled "Henry (Red) Allen: The New York Jazz Scene and a Tour of Harlem".

I have left the topic of jazz till last, as some readers will not share my love of jazz music. In our generation, jazz has become a universal language claiming the devoted interest of millions throughout the world. For many musicians as well as listeners, it is one of the main constituents of their emotional lives. As Eddie Condon, legendary American jazz guitarist, once said to me in New York, jazz is democracy set to music because, in its appreciation, differences of colour, religion and race simply fuse into a whole. Jazz has certainly brought me countless hours of enjoyment as well as the friendship of scores of people actively or passively concerned with the music. Without jazz my life would have been much the poorer.



Eddie Condon (left), pictured here with Australian jazz enthusiast Kym Bonython and trombonist Vic Dickenson: Condon said jazz is democracy set to music because, in its appreciation, differences of colour, religion and race simply fuse into a whole... PHOTO COURTESY LADIES, LEGS & LEMONADE

** Clement Semmler joined the ABC as a young man in 1942, thus beginning an illustrious career that saw him rise to the position of deputy general manager. On the way he popularised jazz music programs on radio, becoming one of Australia's foremost authorities on the music, and writing on many subjects, including jazz, for The Bulletin.*

I suppose my interest in jazz stemmed from a childhood and youth deprived of music. Until I was 18 and went to university our household boasted no musical instrument of any sort, far less a radio set. True, on one occasion I found in a backyard shed a rusting contraption that my mother said was an autoharp, but a desultory plucking of its few unbroken strings did little to assuage a latent musical appetite.

I can recall my first brush with rhythm, at the age of ten. I was travelling with my family down the River Murray from the small township of Swan Reach, where my father had sold up as a blacksmith, to Murray Bridge where he hoped to get work as a fitter on the railway bridge being built there. Our conveyance was the PS Marion, one of the paddlewheel passenger steamers that plied the river at the time. I have indelible recollections of two things from that trip — pork sausages for breakfast (a delicacy I had never before tasted) and, more important, at night on the deck several couples dancing to a wind-up gramophone playing *Last Night in the Back Porch*, a popular tune of the day. I was entranced — and the tune and its beat ran through my head for weeks afterwards.



The PS Marion, one of the paddlewheel passenger steamers that plied the Murray River, where Clem had his first brush with rhythm...

At Murray Bridge a schoolmate confided to me that there was a dance every Saturday night in the local town hall, where there was lots of "nooky". I nodded wisely, pretending to know what he was talking about, and one Saturday night climbed out of my bedroom window and scurried down to the town hall. Of nooky, whatever that might be, I could find none, but I was captivated by the sound of a pianist, violinist and accordionist playing dance tunes of the day. Thus the seeds of a later love of jazz were sown. This music was far from jazz, of course, but in the absence of any formal musical appreciation these primitive rhythms stirred my imagination. When, a little later, the talkies hit our town and I was able very occasionally to take in a Saturday matinee (and that usually by legerdemain involving a friend's pass-out), I saw a Hollywood musical called *The Broadway Melody* whence the tune, *Singin' in the Rain*, became for long afterwards the apotheosis of musical delight.

But the translation from the elementary rhythms of popular music to jazz only came at university in 1932. I heard, for the first time, recordings of real jazz; furthermore there was a pianist named Dean Hay, one of the leading lights of the Adelaide University Jazz Club, who, to my fascinated delight, played tunes he said were composed by an American Negro called Thomas (Fats) Waller. The first jazz recording I heard played at the club was Edward (Duke) Ellington's *Sophisticated Lady*. I didn't quite understand its convoluted rhythms, but I was strangely moved by the performance and the next day rushed over to Allans' music store in Rundle Street to buy, despite my chronic poverty, a copy to play on my landlady's primitive gramophone. The salespeople there hadn't heard of Duke Ellington, much less *Sophisticated Lady*, but they rummaged round and produced the only jazz record they had — a boogie-woogie tune called *Honky Tonk Train Blues* played by the pianist Meade Lux Lewis. That set me on the high road to jazz for the rest of my life.



Meade Lux Lewis: his boogie-woogie tune called "Honky Tonk Train Blues" set Clem on the high road to jazz for the rest of his life...

*PHOTO
COURTESY
DEFINITIVE
ILLUSTRATED
ENCYCLOPEDIA
OF JAZZ & BLUES*

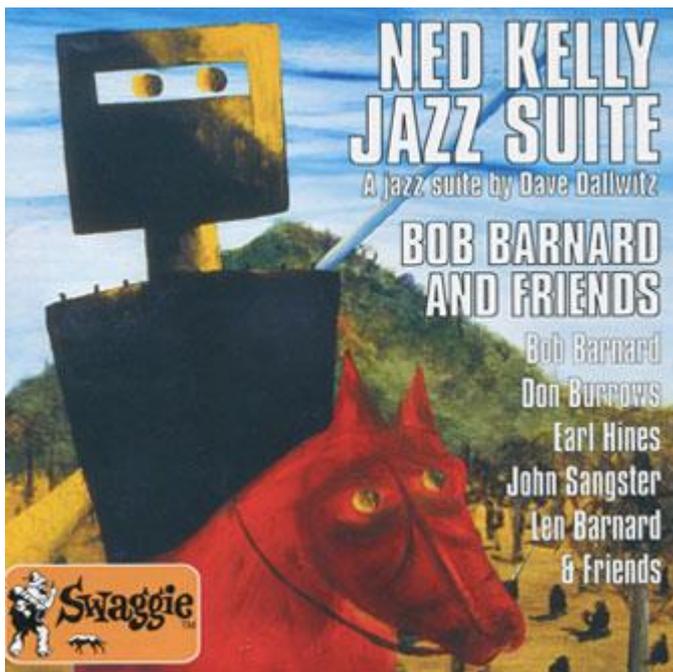
At the Adelaide Teachers' College in 1936 I met a fellow jazz enthusiast, a lanky young man named Dave Dallwitz, who was training to be an art teacher and who had extraordinarily long fingers. They were put to good use for many hours on the battered old piano in the common room as Dave showed me all about the blues and the New Orleans jazz that his idol, Ferdinand (Jelly Roll) Morton, had composed. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Until I left Adelaide in 1946 Dave and I regularly visited each other's homes to talk about jazz and play records into the small hours.



Dave Dallwitz, pictured in 1947: a lanky young man who was training to be an art teacher... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

Dave is now one of the two foremost composers and arrangers of Australian jazz (the other is John Sangster) and as a pianist and trombonist he has led a number of our best playing and recording groups, the most notable being the Southern Jazz Group, one of the founding bands of the first Australian Jazz Convention in Melbourne in 1946. His prowess as a jazz composer has spread internationally: he is listed in the prestigious *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* and his compositions have been recorded by famous American jazz musicians like the pianist Earl (Fatha) Hines and the tenor saxophonist Bud Freeman. Dave Dallwitz's compositions are unique in Australian jazz: he has used jazz idioms in the New Orleans or traditional (trad) style to illustrate regional characteristics of Australian landscape and history. For example, in *Nullarbor*, with almost uncanny craftsmanship, he has evoked, with jazz feeling, the lonely, melancholy feeling of the vast plain.

Dave's finest achievements as a composer have been his jazz suites. It was my privilege to write, in 1977, the sleeve notes for an album, *The Ned Kelly Suite*, probably his best composition to date, recorded by a group including Bob Barnard and Don Burrows, on the Swaggie label.



To demonstrate how sensitively and thoughtfully Dave composes, I quote from a letter he sent me on 28 March 1977 with a recording of the music before it was released, so I could write my commentary:

People playing the suite for the first time may say "This is terrific jazz but what has it go to do with Ned Kelly?" That is not the point. It was given this title because it was written under the spell of the legend and the location. I love the country where it happened and I happened to have just read the history of Ned, and so I wrote the suite. It doesn't describe anything, but it responds to the story, the location and my conception of the people concerned and their emotions.

Five of the movements celebrate places where the action occurred [“Strathbogie Blues”, “Jerilderie Rag”, “Stringy Bark Stomp”, “Ballad of Wombat Range”, “Kelly Country”]. I shall speak about the other six.

“Fire in the Brain” refers to the state of mind of the Kelly Gang as a result of its hopeless situation. They had to rebel. By the way, in every movement the performers have added their contribution. I suppose this reaches a fearsome pitch in the final movement, but it is very strong throughout, and certainly in “Fire in the Brain”. I shan't mention it again, but remember it when assessing each movement. They have done wonders.

“Dawn over Euroa” imagines the quiet, unruffled town on the morning before the Kelly incident. A kind of Vermeer frozen moment in time. In order to intensify the moment I have used the utmost economy melodically — just a repeated phrase, only the harmony changing (and how beautifully it changes at the hands of Sangster!)

“Shamrock Dreams” imagines the Kellys' thinking “It would have been better had we stayed in Ireland”. The pleasant, easy rag always reminds me of Ireland and Irish music. This is a beautiful interpretation of one of my best rags.

“No Regrets” and “Glenrowan Lament” attempt to probe Ned's mind on the day of his execution. The manliness of his acceptance of his fate (“I suppose it had to come to this”), but at the same time the melancholy wish, in the face of death, that things had gone differently. Even though it is my own composition that drives it, I must say that the performance by Burrows in “Glenrowan Lament” must rate as one of the highlights of jazz history. Too soon to judge? Not at all. Art as great as this needs no time to prove itself — it proved itself as Don thought of each phrase in advance...



Don Burrows: Dave Dallwitz rates his performance in “Glenrowan Lament” as one of the highlights of jazz history... PHOTO COURTESY VICTORIA GASTON

I once dubbed Dave a "Jazz Jindyworobak" — with his love of poetry he would appreciate that. He is also, for the record, one of Australia's foremost painters and print-makers, whose work is represented in the Australian National Gallery. Soon after I met Dave Dallwitz I met Kym Bonython, scion of Adelaide's famous newspaper family. We met at a friend's place in Angas Street where we listened to jazz: I was older than Kym, who was in his teens then — but again the meeting led to a lifelong friendship in jazz.



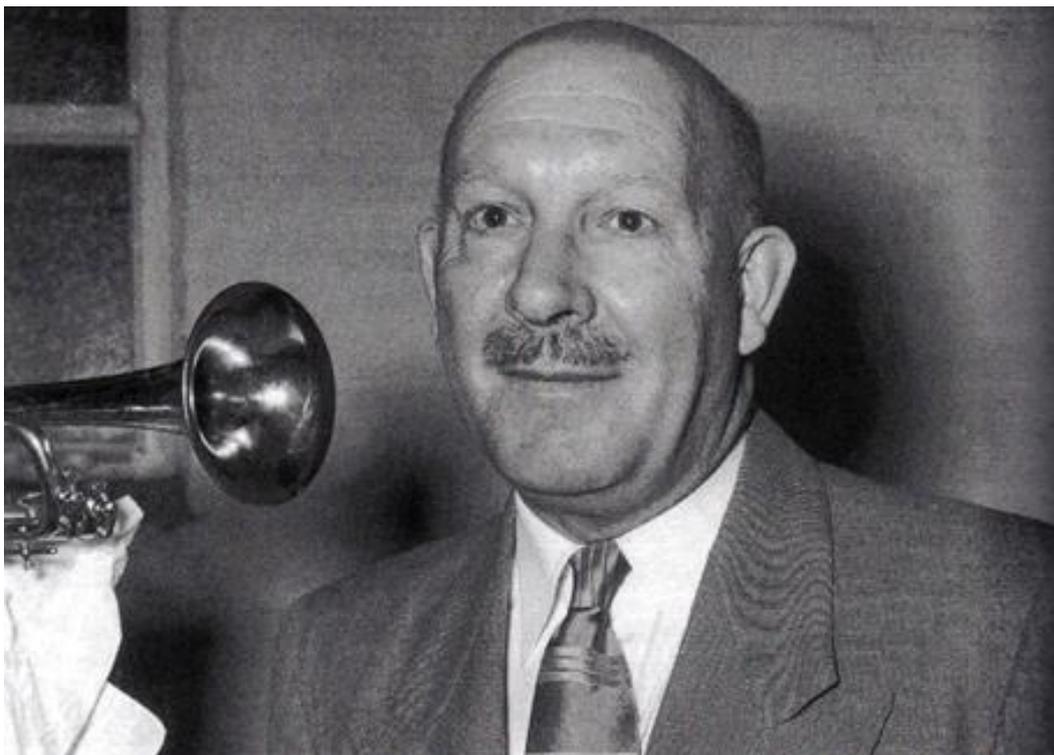
*L-R, Kym Bonython,
American pianist
Erroll Garner & Clem
Semmler at the ABC in
1972... PHOTO
COURTESY PICTURES ON
THE MARGIN*

Kym, as a schoolboy, had bought a kit of drums and in the late hours at his East Terrace home accompanied jazz records with thundering beats that echoed across the Victoria Park racecourse. After I began teaching at the Unley High School in 1938 a regular salary led to a considerable increase in my jazz record collection. I became interested in broadcasting at this time, writing talks and plays for schools broadcasts on the local ABC.

One day, towards the end of 1939, having scraped up an acquaintance with the program director, Bryan Carter (a pleasant but rather stuffy Englishman — in those days the ABC was packed with his fellow expatriates) I wandered into his office and told him I'd like to put a jazz program on the air. "Jazz?" said Mr Carter. "Jazz?" I explained as best I could, remembering Louis Armstrong's remark on one memorable occasion — "If a cat's gotta ask, man, he ain't with it". Mr Carter was manifestly not with it, and said he would have to consult "ther Program Committee" which I imagined as a mysterious body of gentlemen huddled in a back room formulating arcane rites of program strategy, including the rejection of crazy ideas. But to my great surprise Carter called me up a week or so later and told me "ther Committee" had agreed that I could give a trial series and it would pay me two pounds a session. Soon my theme, Duke Ellington's *Drop Me Off at Harlem*, became familiar to local jazz listeners.

Mine must have been one of the first jazz programs on the ABC, along with those that Ron Wills and Ellis Blain were broadcasting in Sydney at the time. After some six months or so, Carter told me that the all-powerful Program Committee had decided there should be no more jazz. Philosophically I accepted the decision, but jazz lovers in South Australia were numerous enough to protest this abrupt cutting off of supply and the program continued on till 1943 or 1944, after I had joined the staff of the ABC. I think Kym Bonython took over the program afterwards.

Soon after I began my jazz program, a group of jazz enthusiasts formed the Adelaide Jazz Lovers' Society, numbering about a dozen to begin with. One of its prime movers was William V Holyoak (whose brother Alf was a well-known tenor saxophonist with the orchestra at the Palais Royal on North Terrace) who had a magnificent jazz collection. Gil Wahlquist, a young journalist, was also a founding member (he is now one of the country's best-known winemakers in the Mudgee area of New South Wales with his Botolbar label); as were several talented young jazz musicians — the clarinetist Maurice le Doeuff, a trombonist Dave Hopkins and especially Errol Buddle, then only in his teens but destined to become one of Australia's best jazz saxophonists.



William V Holyoak: one of the prime movers behind the Adelaide Jazz Lovers' Society... PHOTO COURTESY DON HOPGOOD

I remember also Maurice Gerdeau, a slight, dark-haired man who worked in a city emporium and was an authority on Leon (Bix) Beiderbecke, to whom he bore a striking resemblance. How we worshipped Bix — and his *Singin' the Blues*! I was elected the president of the society and Bill Holyoak the secretary: we met on Sunday

nights in a backstreet office to which one of our members had access; and here in turn we gave talks and record recitals on the music of Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Bix Beiderbecke, Frankie Trumbauer and the other pioneers of the music, and later on the big black and white bands of Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Luis Russell, Benny Goodman, the Dorseys, Artie Shaw and others, whose recordings were beginning to appear in this country.

When, in 1942 I joined the ABC as education officer, since my duties were fairly flexible and I was looking after light entertainment activities in the branch, as already mentioned I used my contacts at the Adelaide Jazz Lovers' Society to arrange broadcasts by small jazz groups — I think the first of their kind ever in Australian radio. These included groups led by Maurice le Doeuff and Dave Dallwitz — and marked the radio debut of a promising young tenor saxophone player called Bobby Limb.



Promising young tenor saxophone player Bobby Limb made his radio debut courtesy of broadcasts arranged by Clem Semmler...

It was at this time too that I started writing jazz articles and reviews for a Sydney music magazine called *Tempo*, for which Ron Wills also wrote. *Tempo* was edited by Frank Johnson whom I later met when I went to Sydney (as I did Ron Wills) — "a round bustling man with curly black hair and a red face" (as Douglas Stewart described him in his book *A Man of Sydney*) — to whom I warmed immediately. In the days when there were no government subsidies for the arts, Johnson published poetry even though there was no money in it for him. Back in the 1920s he had

published a notable if shortlived literary journal, *Vision*, edited by Jack Lindsay and Kenneth Slessor. Johnson was one of Slessor's best friends and published some of the latter's early poetry including *Cuckooz Contrey* and a paperback edition of "Five Bells" that sold for five shillings.



Sydney music magazine "Tempo" was edited by Frank Johnson (above) who also published poetry even though there was no money in it for him...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

In 1946 in Sydney my circle of jazz friends gradually widened. I remember going along to the Gaiety, a sort of milk bar with ballroom attached, in Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, where a trombonist named Bill Mallen had an exciting big band; then there were jazz concerts organised by Bill McColl at the Sydney Radio Theatre on Sunday nights. I also remember hearing big bands led by Wally Norman and Billy Weston for whom Ken Flannery played trumpet. Flannery was one of the founders of the Port Jackson jazz Band which later on I heard on many boisterous nights at the Macquarie hotel down near the docks at Woolloomooloo — a bit of a bloodhouse in those days, but the atmosphere for jazz was tremendous. Here I met two of the band's members, Dick Hughes the pianist (who gave roaring imitations of Fats Waller), and Ray Price who played banjo and guitar.



Some of the musicians mentioned by Semmler are in this shot, taken in 1958 at the Macquarie Hotel, Sydney. Ray Price (banjo) is in front, then clockwise L-R, two musicians sitting in were Doc Willis (trombone) and Bob Cruickshanks (alto sax) and members of the Port Jackson Jazz Band, Bob Barnard (trumpet), John McCarthy (clarinet) & Dick Hughes (piano)... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

It was about this time that I met Don Burrows too and that splendid character and trombone player Doc Willis. He had played with Len and Bob Barnard in Melbourne but had then come to Sydney. He too played with the Port Jacksoners but later on. Jim Gussey was leading the ABC Dance Band in those years; I got to know the musicians, who had a special corner of the bar in the Criterion hotel, just round the corner of the ABC studios then in Pitt Street. I had already met pianist Graeme Bell and his trumpet-playing brother, Roger, at the first Australian jazz Convention in Melbourne in 1946. I attended at the insistence of Dave Dallwitz, whose Southern Jazz Group was one of the four main bands that began this annual highlight of Australian jazz.

Graeme Bell's Dixieland Jazz Band was the backbone of the convention: the other two were a group from Geelong and the Barrelhouse Four from Tasmania, led by Tom Pickering and the talented pianist Ian Pearce. It was an historic occasion for Australian jazz and I went back to Sydney determined to include jazz programs on the ABC as soon as I found my feet there. A couple of years later I was appointed assistant controller of Programs, responsible for organising the ABC's radio schedules. I decided that Australian audiences should hear some real jazz at a peak

hour and with the assistance of Ellis Blain, an ABC announcer and dedicated jazz lover who had already broadcast some jazz programs I instituted the Thursday Night Swing Club, which was modelled on a New York radio show I had read about. Not without some grumbling from my superiors, I scheduled it from 8 till 9 pm and relayed it to all states, alternating "live" jazz groups with recorded shows compered by Blain and Ron Wills in Sydney and Alan Saunders and Eric Dunn in Melbourne.



This band became The Barrelhouse Four with the substitution of Ced Pearce on the drums. Hobart, 1958. L-R, Tom Pickering (tenor), Rex Green (piano), Ian Pearce (trumpet), Michael Maxwell (drums). Ced Pearce's caricature appears on the bass drum... PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS

The jazz groups included the Bell band from Melbourne, Dallwitz's Southern Jazz Group from Adelaide, the Pearce-Pickering Barrelhouse Four from Hobart, Sid Bromley's Brisbane Canecutters, and from Sydney Kevin Ryder's Harbour City Six (which included Don Burrows) and Ken Flannery's Port Jackson Jazz Band. The program ran for 19 years, and I believed that it was a powerful influence on the growth of jazz appreciation in Australia. About the time the program began, Graeme Bell had taken his band to Europe to play at a youth festival in Prague. They were so successful there that they were invited to tour France, the Netherlands and England. At the Gare St Nazaire in Paris, customs officers noted their passport descriptions as "electrician", "clerk", and so on, and not comprehending the status of part-time

musicians, suspected them of trying to smuggle in musical instruments. There was only one way out. The band gave a concert there on the railway platform to prove its musical bona fides. This made front page news in the Paris newspapers and led to an invitation to play at the exclusive Hot Club of France.

When they got to London they took the jazz fraternity by storm. They opened their own jazz club once a week in the West End: there was such a surge of patrons outside on the pavement that the police suggested they open twice a week to reduce the traffic hazard. Their jazz showmanship was something new to Londoners and they were undoubtedly an inspiration to bands like those of Humphrey Lyttleton and Acker Bilk that later led the city's jazz scene.



This is a shot of the Graeme Bell band on their return to Melbourne in 1948. Semmler says he used every device he could to break down the stuffy resistance of the ABC's classically orientated Concert and Music departments to get them to agree to give the Bell band an ABC Australia-wide concert tour... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION

When Graeme Bell's band arrived back in Australia in the latter part of 1948, I used every device I could to break down the stuffy resistance of the ABC's classically orientated Concert and Music departments to get them to agree to give the band an ABC Australia-wide concert tour. In the end I succeeded; for the first time in its 16-year history the ABC toured a jazz band. In at least one capital city the band broke the attendance record previously set by the pianist, Eileen Joyce. One shattered state manager rang the Sydney head office with the startling news that the patrons were crowding and dancing in the aisles — an enormity without precedent in the ABC's hitherto sober concert history. Incidentally, since the ABC was at that time required by law to broadcast either direct or by delayed recording from every public concert it

presented, the Thursday Night Swing Club over that period was happily loaded with performances by the Bell band. About 1950 I heard of a jazz buff who was an announcer on the ABC's staff in Brisbane — Eric Child. He seemed a likely recruit for my grand jazz strategy for the ABC, so I went up to Brisbane to see him. It was certainly a meeting of jazz minds: there was a memorable all-night session at his home with his charming wife Angela plying us with mouth-watering Chinese dishes — the beginning of yet another, and for the ABC a most profitable, jazz friendship.



L-R, Clem Semmler, Eric Child and Duke Ellington, ABC studios, 1971... PHOTO COURTESY PICTURES ON THE MARGIN

Eric Child had played drums in jazz bands in London and Paris before the war. At the old Nest Club in London he accompanied famous visiting American pianists like Garland Wilson ("he had a left hand like a kick of a horse") and Gene Rodgers. He also had the distinction of having played briefly with the famous West Indian band led by Ken (Snakehips) Johnson. Child's good friend, Leslie Thompson, a Jamaican trumpet player, was a band member. The band was then at the Florida Club in Bruton Street ("the management didn't go along with my fair hair among all those black faces"). Most of the members of the Johnson band, including the leader, were killed when a German bomb scored a direct hit on the Cafe de Paris where they were playing in 1941. I treasure a couple of recordings of the band and especially admire the playing of one of the most brilliant clarinetists I have ever heard, Carl Barriteau.

I had always thought he was killed until, by a remarkable coincidence, I met him on a Pacific cruise ship in 1987. He was playing in the ship's band, and though in his seventies still with all his old skill. He showed me a jagged scar on his wrist — a shrapnel wound he had suffered in the blast. He had come to Sydney to live in 1970.



The brilliant clarinetist Carl Barriteau: he survived the German bomb which fell on the Florida club in London in 1941, and came to Sydney to live in 1970... PHOTO COURTESY ALCHETRON FREE SOCIAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

But back to Eric Child. When the war broke out he had joined the merchant navy as a radio officer. His ship, which was taking Australian soldiers from Malaya, was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in February 1942 in the Java Sea. A story that Child was floating on a drum when picked up may be apocryphal, but certainly the ship that rescued him and took him to Perth also carried another survivor, John Gorton, a later prime minister of Australia. Child joined the Royal Australian Navy as an instructor and served in various parts of Australia and in the New Guinea area before settling down in Brisbane where his pleasant speaking voice made him a welcome addition to the ABC's announcing ranks there.

Eric Child jumped at the chance of his own jazz program. A Saturday morning show — *Rhythm Unlimited* — began in March 1952 and was an instant success, not only because Eric was able to introduce new dimensions of jazz listening from his wonderful collection of records, but also because of his friendly and relaxed style of presentation. Through various title changes — *World of Jazz*, *Jazz on a Saturday* — it ran until February 1983, over 31 years, the longest-running jazz show in the ABC's

history. Eric continued a jazz program on the ABC until early in 1991. Incidentally, Eric Child's Saturday morning program got a fillip in the mid-1950s through the activities of Dick Hughes. One of my program assistants, on a working holiday in Europe, wrote to tell me she had met Hughes — even then in the forefront of Australian jazz pianists and a working journalist — who was prepared to tape interviews for the Saturday program with leading jazz celebrities in France and England. There was at the time a constant stream of American musicians and singers visiting Europe — a post-war reflection of the interest in jazz rekindled by American servicemen and US forces entertainment broad-casting. Hughes sent over some marvellous interviews —with English musicians like Humphrey Lyttleton and Chris Barber, and especially with American stars like Teddy Wilson, Jimmy McPartland, Mary Lou Williams, Sidney Bechet and Billie Holiday. I suppose Billie Holiday must rank with Josephine Baker as one of the most beautiful Negro entertainers of all time, she was certainly, in my view, the greatest woman jazz singer in its history, and Dick Hughes has a signed photograph of Billie Holiday at her most stunning that is the envy of his friends. Mary Lou Williams, a magnificent pianist, has been dubbed "The First Lady of Jazz": when Dick interviewed her in London he had the colossal nerve to ask her if he could take lessons from her. Remarkably, she agreed — and Dick is the only jazz pianist in Australia to have been tutored by the great Mary Lou.



Dick Hughes at the BBC in London interviewing Marian & Jimmy McPartland for Eric Child's program... PHOTO COURTESY DADDY'S PRACTISING AGAIN

As for Sidney Bechet, who is to the clarinet in jazz history what Louis Armstrong is to the trumpet, and the lover of countless women from Josephine Baker to the film actress Tallulah Bankhead, Dick ran him to earth at the Vieux Colombier nightclub in Paris. He not only got his interview — a rare feat since Bechet seldom even gave autographs — but was also invited to drink champagne with the great man. Dick remembers that Bechet wore an enormous emerald ring, which he claimed was a love-gift from Tallulah.



Dick Hughes in Paris in 1953 with Sidney Bechet... PHOTO COURTESY DADDY'S PRACTISING AGAIN

My continuing friendship with Dick Hughes has been one of the joys of my life in jazz. He is a superb jazz pianist and easily Australia's most formidable "stride" pianist — that exciting style of playing for which Fats Waller, James P Johnson, Willie (The Lion) Smith and others are famous — whereby striking left-hand bass patterns call for fast tempos and a full use of the piano's range. Dick has played throughout Australia with most of our leading musicians; he has led his own groups and recorded with them; and he has met and played with American jazzmen like Bobby Hackett, Pee Wee Russell, Bud Freeman; with the French violinist Stephane Grappelli, and a host of others.

He is a born raconteur and his book of jazz reminiscences, *Daddy's Practising Again*, is a gem. University educated, with a first-class honours degree from the University of Melbourne, he is one of the best-read men I have ever met and we have often argued far into the night, with suitable alcoholic lubrication of our vocal chords, about the merits of James Joyce, Proust, Brian O'Nolan, Patrick White and other writers in whom we share a mutual interest.



Semmler with Dick Hughes at the Hanrahan homestead, Bowral in 1987: Clem describes his continuing friendship with Dick Hughes as “one of the joys of my life in jazz”... PHOTO COURTESY PICTURES ON THE MARGIN

Kym Bonython, whom I knew in Adelaide became one of Australia's most colourful personalities: air ace during the war, then racing-car driver and promoter, and art and jazz entrepreneur. In the 1970s he brought to Australia on concert circuits some of the best-known jazz performers and orchestras in the world, including Dave Brubeck, Eddie Condon, Herbie Mann, Erroll Garner, Thelonious Monk and the bands of (Count) Basie and Duke Ellington. In the late 1950s I brought Kym into the ABC as a regular jazz broadcaster and his program, *Tempo of the Times*, ran for many years.



Kym Bonython (centre) is pictured here with Duke Ellington (left) and the South Australian Governor Sir James Harrison, Adelaide, 1970... PHOTO COURTESY LADIES, LEGS & LEMONADE

The 1950s and the 1960s were the golden age of ABC jazz. One of my last moves as ABC program head was to contract Arch McKirdy in 1965 to begin a nightly program, *Relax With Me*, from ten to 12 pm. I had long admired his work on the Sydney radio stations 2UW and 2GB – the last vestiges of jazz to be heard on commercial stations. McKirdy's easy and friendly style made the program an outstanding success. It was not only one of the most notable sequences of continuous jazz ever presented by the ABC, but it was also a brilliant compilation that covered the whole spectrum of recorded jazz. When McKirdy joined the staff of the ABC in 1972 in an administrative capacity, the program was handed over to Ian Neil, who had had considerable experience as a jazz presenter in *Thursday Night Swing Club* and its successors. Under the new title of *Music Till Midnight* Ian Neil continued, with impeccable taste, the standards set by McKirdy, until his retirement in 1983. Both Arch McKirdy and Ian Neil remain good and loyal friends.



Arch McKirdy (left) who in 1965 began a nightly jazz program, “Relax With Me”, from ten to 12 pm. When McKirdy joined the staff of the ABC in 1972 in an administrative capacity, the program, under the new title “Music Till Midnight” was handed over to Ian Neil (below)...NEIL PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR



From time to time overseas jazz musicians have come to Australia for extended visits. I remember two of them in particular. The first, the English pianist Arthur Young, in the early 1950s came to Australia on a duo-piano concert tour with Mary McLeod. Although the pair played light and popular classics and musical comedy pieces on their tour, Young was an accomplished jazz pianist and I had always treasured a number of recordings he had made with English jazz musicians like Danny Polo, Tommy McQuater, George Chisholm and others, and also as an accompaniment for a husky-voiced Melbourne jazz singer, Marjorie Stedeford, who became a popular London cabaret performer. His piano duets with the English pianist Reginald Foresythe are now collectors' items and he also composed jazz settings of a number of Shakespeare's songs, including *Blow Blow Thou Winter Wind* and *It Was a Lover and His Lass* which have become part of the repertoire of leading jazz singers including, latterly, Cleo Laine. Arthur Young was a stout, genial character. At the end of his concert tour he decided to stay in Australia, and he and Mary McLeod settled in Hobart where they took over the Mountain Inn on the lower slopes of Mount Wellington.



Husky-voiced Melbourne jazz singer, Marjorie Stedeford, who became a popular London cabaret performer... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Ellis Blain had returned to Hobart as the ABC's program director there at this time and on my occasional visits to Hobart we had some happy jazz nights at the Mountain Inn. Blain organised a series of broadcasts for ABC national radio called *Arthur Young Looks Back*, in which the latter played and reminisced about his career in England, and which was a program highlight in those years. Incidentally, Blain did much to revitalise jazz in Hobart with a series of local programs called *After Dark* featuring Tasmanian jazzmen like Tom Pickering, Cedric and Ian Pearce, Alan Brinkman and others.

Another visitor, Jack Lesberg, made his mark in Australian jazz early in the 1970s. One of the finest jazz bass players, he was born in 1920 in Boston and had played with almost every well-known musician — Eddie Condon, Benny Goodman, Sidney Bechet, Tommy Dorsey, Kai Winding and scores of others. I first met him in 1957 when he toured Australia with a band led by Louis Armstrong and kept in touch with him in the years that followed, hearing him play in various jazz spots in New York when I happened to be there. A most gentle and lovable man, great company and full of quiet humour, Jack Lesberg loved to talk about his fellow musicians, especially close friends like Max Kaminsky, and Ralph Sutton, whom he regarded as the best pianist in jazz.



This shot includes L-R, Jack Lesberg (bass), Max Kaminsky (trumpet) & Peanuts Hucko... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM P GOTTLIEB

Jack is distinguished as a classical bassist too, having played for many years with the New York City Symphony Orchestra. He wrote to me in 1970 about the possibility of work in Australia: I gladly arranged an audition for him with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and when he arrived in Sydney in 1971 he took up a position there, as well as becoming a driving force on the local jazz scene. He discovered a brilliant young pianist from Gosford, near Sydney. Chris Taperell, and with him formed a quartet which recorded and played all over the Sydney area as well as broadcasting on many occasions on the ABC.



Jack Lesberg discovered a brilliant young pianist from Gosford, near Sydney. Chris Taperell (left) and with him formed a quartet which recorded and played all over the Sydney area... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Jack Lesberg, Arch McKirdy and I made up a golfing trio, and when Jack married Pat, an American girl who joined him in 1972, Arch and I stood as witnesses for them at the Sydney Registry Office.



L-R, Clem Semmler, Jack Lesberg, his wife Pat, Arch McKirdy at the Lesbergs' wedding, Sydney, 1973... PHOTO COURTESY PICTURES ON THE MARGIN

Jack decided to return to New York in 1974; he has since toured Europe several times with a group called "Tribute to Louis Armstrong", with the lyrical cornettist Ruby Braff, the trumpet player Yank Lawson and others. When I last heard from Jack a year or two back, he was busily organising jazz festivals in Texas and Minnesota. Jack had a fund of amusing anecdotes about fellow jazzmen. I remember a couple about the trumpet player Max Kaminsky whose parents had emigrated to the USA from Russia in the 1880s and who had grown up with Jack in Boston. Kaminsky was a member of the famous wartime US Navy Band led by Artie Shaw that made a brief visit to Sydney in the early 1940s and was a sensation with the local jazz fraternity.

Max Kaminsky wrote an autobiography called *My Life in Jazz*, of which he was inordinately proud: according to Jack it was Kaminsky's habit to lie in wait for his fellow jazzmen at the various nightspots to flog the books off. One night he walked into Jimmy Ryan's Club in New York with a bundle of copies under his arm. Henry (Red) Allen spotted him and yelled out, "Look out boys, here comes Max Buy-der-book!"



Jack told how when Kaminsky returned to New York after the war he was summoned by a notorious gangster who owned a nightclub and wanted Kaminsky to form a band to play there. Kaminsky found himself sitting at a table in the gangster's den surrounded by four or five hard-eyed mobsters in striped suits with wide-brimmed hats, black shirts and white ties. At the sight of them Kaminsky's blood ran cold and he managed to get them to agree to a subsequent meeting when he could bring his lawyer. Of course he didn't have a lawyer, but he called up one named Miller whom he knew had experience in the entertainment business. Miller went into a backroom with the gangster boss: they talked and then Miller came out. He took Kaminsky by the elbow, hustled him up the street a little, hailed a taxi and before he took off hissed in Kaminsky's ear, "My advice is this, man. Run for your life!" That was the end of the deal.

Because of my friendship with Kym Bonython, I saw a good deal of some of the jazz celebrities he brought out to Australia for concert tours. In particular I enjoyed meeting Nat Pierce, a pianist greatly respected in the jazz world who, in a most versatile career had arranged music for the big bands of Count Basie and Woody Herman and had himself, towards the end of the 1950s, led a magnificent band at Harlem's famed Savoy Ballroom. He was delighted when I told him I treasured some of the recordings he had made at that time. Bespectacled, and with scholarly mien, Nat Pierce looked and behaved more like a university professor than a jazz musician.



Nat Pierce: bespectacled, and with scholarly mien, he looked and behaved more like a university professor than a jazz musician... PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA

Another I warmed to was the pianist Erroll Garner, an affable, amiable man with a fantastic playing technique. He was entirely self-taught and he told me he couldn't read a note of music. His playing was unique among piano jazz stylists. He had developed a characteristic four-beat fixed pulse of block chords with his left hand,

kicking the beat like a drum, and against these patterns he would embellish or vary a given melody with striking octave or chordal passages, sometimes lagging as much as an eighth note behind the beat to generate enormous momentum in his playing. His own composition, *Erroll's Bounce*, is a magnificent example of this technique. One afternoon, he sat down in a studio at the ABC and played for an hour or so for a few of us — just for the pleasure of playing — and it was a thrilling experience. He was incidentally the composer of *Misty*, a hit tune that was used as background music for the film *Play Misty For Me*.



Erroll Garner (left) with actor Clint Eastwood, who starred in the film “Play Misty For Me”...

We corresponded occasionally after he went back to New York. He died in 1977 in Los Angeles. There was also a memorable night in Melbourne in 1972 after a Bonython concert at the Dallas Brooks Hall in which the trumpet players Wild Bill Davison (an old friend from my Eddie Condon Club days), Clark Terry, Bobby Hackett and others took part. With Arch McKirdy, Kym Bonython and one or two others we went back to their hotel and played and talked jazz into the small hours. I met Wild Bill Davison in January 1956 on my first visit to New York, where I came face to face with jazz musicians who were almost legendary to me, as I had been

listening to their recorded performances over nearly 20 years. The first jazz joint I visited was Eddie Condon's Club in Greenwich Village at 47 West Third Street where news of my coming had been signalled by Kym Bonython (who by this time had got to know Condon well on his own New York visits.) I was given a right royal welcome, as a jazz fan from "down-under". It was my first experience of a genuine jazz spot and I'll never forget it. The club held about a hundred or so patrons seated and thirty or so standing at the bar. The decor was striking — a black ceiling and green and yellow walls. It was a smoky, cheerful, informal place: the musicians on the platform were not obscured by pot plants, and wore no uniforms or tuxedos ("but the guys have to wear shoes", Eddie told me, quite seriously). There was food of sorts and unlimited liquor (including a wonderful beer I drank for the first time called Miller's Highlife); but it was the music that counted, and what music! — happy, contagious memorable.



*Wild Bill Davison:
he chewed gum
during sets,
parking it under his
chair when he
played...*

On the several nights I sat in till the small hours there was Wild Bill Davison, of course, on trumpet (I was fascinated as he chewed gum during sets, parking it under his chair when he played), Cutty Cutshall on trombone, Bud Freeman on tenor sax, Pee Wee Russell on clarinet, Gene Schroeder on piano, and a few others I don't recall. In the breaks I talked with some of them: Wild Bill Davison (astonishingly youthful-looking, since he went back a long way — he it was who was driving his Packard back in 1932 in Chicago from which the legendary clarinetist Frank Teschemacher was thrown and killed in a collision), who said he was hell-bent on coming out to Australia one day; and Bud Freeman who had always been one of my jazz idols. I told Bud Freeman that his composition, *The Eel*, had long been one of my favourites, and for the rest of the night I could hear him, between numbers, reflectively noodling bits of it on his saxophone. But it was to be 15 years or so before Davison and Freeman eventually came to Australia.



*Bud Freeman: it was to be 15 years or so before he and Wild Bill Davison eventually came to Australia...
PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

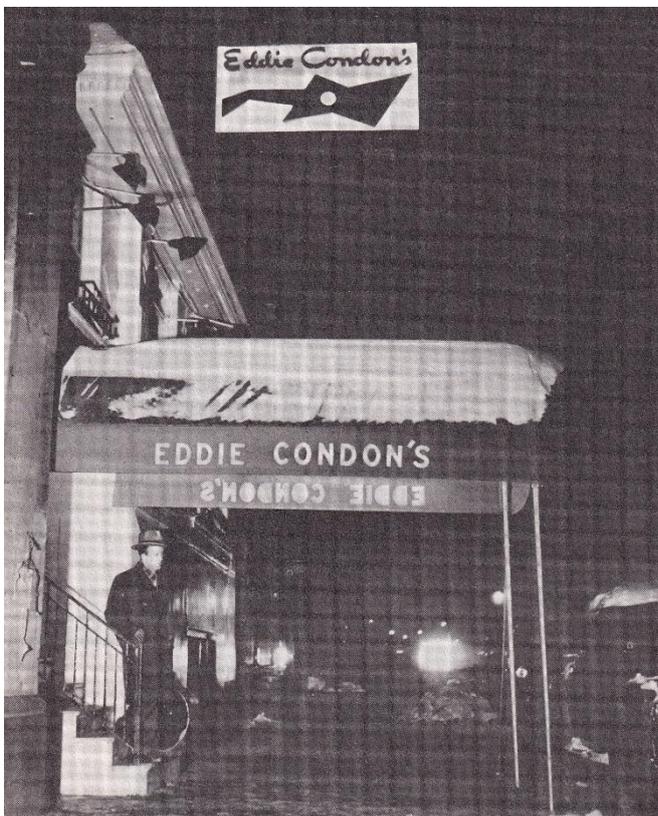
Eddie Condon stood me drinks and told me some marvellous stories. Like Jack Lesberg, he was a born raconteur with a great sense of humour. There was that night in Chicago, when nearly flat broke, he, Bud Freeman, Mezz Mezzrow and a few others were sharing a room in a fleabag hotel down near the stockyards. Every now and then the wind changed and they got the terrible effluvium from that dreadful place. One night they rubbed Limburger cheese on Freeman's pillow and he moaned and groaned all night complaining about the odour from the yards and couldn't understand how they could sleep through it. Condon was nostalgic about his Chicago days when he and fellow musicians like Bix Beiderbecke, Frank Teschemacher, Bud Freeman, Pee Wee Russell, Jimmy McPartland and others had their jazz eyeteeth cut, as it were. In those days gangland reigned supreme. One night Condon and a few of his friends were playing in a speakeasy and during breaks, Condon chatted up a very pretty blonde girl sitting at the bar. A little later the bartender whispered in his ear, "For Chrissake, lay off that dame!" "Why?" asked Condon belligerently. "She likes me." "Lissen, bud," replied the bartender, "she's the girlfriend of the guy who's

giving this party — Legs Diamond. He eats guys six nights a week. You don't want to be the seventh." "What's he ever done?" Condon demanded to know. Whereupon the bartender gave him a quick rundown on Diamond's career, and Condon changed his mind very quickly.



The gangster Legs Diamond: Eddie Condon changed his mind very quickly when the bartender gave him a quick rundown on Diamond's career...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Eddie Condon's Club, which started in 1945, had become New York's number one jazz joint. Condon told me that over the years his patrons had included Jack Dempsey, Bing Crosby, Johnny Mercer, Sugar Ray Robinson, the baseball champion Joe Di Maggio, the author John O'Hara and a host of other celebrities. But the bad news, he said, was that the next year (1957) the New York University would be resuming the site, and he would have to find other premises.



Eddie Condon's club on West Third was the first place in the world with a jazz musician's name above the door... PHOTO COURTESY THE EDDIE CONDON SCRAPBOOK OF JAZZ

When I got back to New York, three years later, I found the Condon Club uptown, at 330 West 56th Street, on the ground floor of the Hotel Sutton. It was not only uptown, but upmarket too. Instead of the casual atmosphere of the old club it was now elegant and sedate. Outside (it had its own entrance) was a bright, orange-coloured awning: inside were obviously expensive and opulent fixtures. Eddie proudly pointed out to me the red-carpeted cocktail lounge; the black bar shielded by a pink canopy, the discreet walnut panelling, and the main dining area with pink tablecloths, pink and black chairs and wall-mounted globular, white glass light fixtures. The bandstand was much roomier, with a shining brass rail running round it — and glory be, there were the same familiar faces ripping out that beautiful jazz: Cutty Cutshall, George Wettling, Gene Schroeder and the rest, except that during the week I was there, Wild Bill was playing up in Toronto, and that magnificent black trumpeter, Rex Stewart, of Duke Ellington fame, was sitting in for him. A wonderful, deadpan, laconic character — always urbane and droll.



Eddie Condon says that this was close to the regular band at his club, L-R, Condon (guitar), Cutty Cutshall (trombone), Wild Bill Davison (trumpet), Buzzy Drootin (drums), Edmond Hall (clarinet), probably Jack Lesberg (bass), unidentified pianist... PHOTO COURTESY THE EDDIE CONDON SCRAPBOOK OF JAZZ

I caught up with Eddie again when he came out to Australia in the early 1970s. He died, alas, soon after in 1973. His best epitaph was written by the famous music critic of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Virgil Thompson: "If hot jazz rubs elbows with Beethoven, Brahms and Bach, it is in a large part due to musicians like Eddie Condon".

In that first visit to New York in 1956 I also had a happy reunion with an old jazz friend of my Adelaide days, Jack Brokensha, formerly the percussionist with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, who had switched to jazz and later moved to Sydney where he led small groups successfully at the Roosevelt and other nightclubs of that era. In 1953 he decided to try his luck in Canada and then the USA with a quartet (later a quintet), the nucleus being my former Unley High School pupils, the pianist Bryce Rohde, and Errol Buddle, the saxophonist who had been a fellow member of the Adelaide Jazz Lovers' Society. By the time I reached New York, and against the toughest jazz competition in the world, they had achieved the big time. As the Australian jazz Quartet, they were sharing the billing in one of New York's top nightspots, the Birdland, with the Marion McPartland Trio. We had some memorable after hours sessions, and I took back to Australia several albums the quartet had made with the Bethlehem Record Company. Aided by the publicity from the playing of these I went to work again on the ABC Concert department and a year or two later, the Australian Jazz Quintet (as it became) toured Australia to packed houses.



The Australian Jazz Quintet toured Australia to packed houses in 1958, following their return from the USA, L-R, Bryce Rohde, Ed Gaston, Errol Buddle, Dick Healey, Jack Brokensha...PHOTO COURTESY ERROL BUDDLE

The third highlight of my first visit to New York was my meeting with one of my jazz idols, the Negro trumpet player, Henry (Red) Allen — but this deserves a chapter on its own, the last in this book. From New York I flew to Toronto to visit colleagues of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and it was here that I heard and met the remarkable blues and gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson. She was giving a series of concerts in the Massey Hall from which the CBC was taking broadcasts. Her superb bell of sound has hardly been done justice in her recordings: I daresay she could stand next to the Archibald Fountain in Hyde Park, Sydney and on a clear day be heard at the bottom end of Macquarie Street. She had a colourful entourage made up of minor priestesses, altar girls, a sharply dressed business manager, a portable harmonium, and a mysterious, sly-looking bearded character, dressed in black with a clerical collar, who seemed to be the boss of the whole show and was called "The Reverend". He stuck me up for a hundred dollars when I asked if I could do an interview with Mahalia Jackson to send back for Eric Child's Saturday morning jazz show. Arguing the publicity that would come from Eric's coast-to-coast program, I beat him down to fifty.



Mahalia Jackson, huge-bosomed and affable, she wore bright purple clothes with purple lipstick to match... PHOTO COURTESY MILWAUKEE COURIER

Jackson, huge-bosomed and affable, wore bright purple clothes with purple lipstick to match. She told me she had known the great blues singer, Bessie Smith, in her early days. Mahalia Jackson had learned to sing at street-corner gospel meetings. She had just returned from London, she said, where she had "killed" houses at the Albert Hall. I asked her why Negro blues and gospel singers and "shouters" had made such a mark on popular music in the present generation. "People know now that we sang our way out of slavery," she replied, not without some bitterness. "In the bad days, if you spoke up with your complaints you were flogged, but if you sang them, nobody touched you."

On this initial visit to the American continent, I dropped in to a record shop in Market Street, San Francisco, to ask about a night of jazz. The proprietor, interested to meet yet another in a long line of jazz-minded Australians, gave me a card to present to Doc Haugherty, the presiding genius of the Hangover Club, the foremost jazz dive in the city, I was assured. It was a small, smoky joint with a bar running its length and a raised platform at the end from which poured forth the music of yet another jazz giant in the pianist Earl (Fatha) Hines, whose records I cherished. He was leading a small and spirited group including a splendid clarinetist called Darnell Howard, who told me he had just finished a stint in Los Angeles with the trumpet player Muggsy Spanier from Chicago.



Earl (Fatha) Hines: pouring forth his music at the Hangover Club, the foremost jazz dive in San Francisco... PHOTO COURTESY THE WORLD OF JAZZ RODNEY DALE

The music blasted away for the patrons five deep along the bar, who kept their places as long as their glasses were full. Haugherty busily wiping and filling glasses and ringing the till, cleared me a tiny space, said it was nice to meet me, served me with my bottle of Blatz beer, and passed along. The big moment, for me, was still to come. The intermission pianist was, of all people, the boogie-woogie king, Meade Lux Lewis, an enormously fat man whose buttocks spilled over each side of the piano stool. According to legend, he had learned to play piano following the depressions of the keys on a pianola as its rolls were played. Lewis cheerfully played his *Honky Tonk Train Blues* for me and so my wheel had come wondrously full circle, for that was the first jazz record I had ever bought, back in 1934.

For over 20 years, on overseas visits, I was fortunate enough to hear and meet some of the world's most famous jazz identities. I look back here on the highlights. In 1962, when on a visit to Los Angeles to buy films from the MCA studios for ABC television, I caught up with Gil Rodin, who was to be my jazz guide for the night. First we headed for Chasen's restaurant in Hollywood. In the plush foyer hung a gold-framed oil painting of W C Fields, garbed as Queen Victoria, staring malevolently at incoming patrons. Each year, at the anniversary of his death, worshipful Fieldsians gathered here to gaze upon and toast the master. Over dinner Gil outlined the evening's jazz options. Red Norvo, Count Basie, the guitarist Barney Kessell, and, yes, Wild Bill Davison were in town. The pianist Ahmad Jamal with a trio was starting a season at Shelly's ManneHole, a jazz joint run by the drummer Shelly Manne. Out at the MCA-Universal studios in the San Fernando Valley there was a thirty-piece orchestra directed by Russ Garcia (who had arranged for the Stan Kenton band in years past), which would be dubbing some jazz themes on a feature film. Benny Carter, who had written the music, would be there, and a sprinkling of big name jazzmen who were finding these engagements more lucrative than nightclub work.

Benny Carter! — who ranked with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Sidney Bechet among the greatest names in the history of jazz — I could hardly believe my luck. So the MCA studios it would be, and perhaps a look-in on the ManneHole afterwards. Gil reminisced as we threaded our way along the Sunset Strip, a sleazy version of Sydney's Kings Cross with strip joints, bare-bosom restaurants and beat hang-outs with their inevitable group of untidy teenagers clustered outside.



Gil Rodin, perhaps the only genuine jazzman who had graduated into the flight of television executives...

A wiry, puckish and most likeable man in his late fifties, Gil Rodin was perhaps the only genuine jazzman who had graduated into the flight of television executives. I had first met him in Australia a few years before producing a variety program called *Revue* (with Digby Wolfe), for one of the television networks. Gil told me, running a New York club band back in the late 1930s with musicians including Irving Fazola, Eddie Miller, Nappy Lamare and a few others, he had been approached by an agent with a front man named Bob Crosby, none other than Bing's brother. They joined forces and became one of the most famous jazz bands of the 1940s as the Bob Crosby Orchestra with the Bobcats, though for the first few months Bob was infuriated by his continual billing as Bing's Brother (very large letters) Bob Crosby (very small letters). Bob, Gil continued, was easygoing and good to work with. Gil did the writing, arranging and organising, also played tenor sax. Sidemen like the bassist Bob Haggart (one of Gil's discoveries), trumpet player Yank Lawson and pianist Bob Zurke were added. ("Zurkey always took two big shots of hard liquor before he could open his eyes in the morning!")



Bob Crosby with his brother Bing Crosby: Bob was infuriated by his continual billing as Bing's Brother... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Gil Rodin was born in Russia, emigrating with his parents at the age of eleven to Chicago, where he grew up with the jazz greats of that city. Some became close friends, like Mezz Mezzrow, Gene Krupa, Frank Teschemacher, the Marsala brothers, Benny Goodman and the latter's brothers Irving and Harry. Gil learned to play trumpet in a school orchestra before his teens, then switched to saxophone "because every other guy played trumpet". When his father and mother died tragically within a

few months of each other, Gil decided to strike out for himself in California, where he ran into an old school friend, Ben Pollack, who was then leading a small band in San Francisco. Glenn Miller was writing and playing trombone in the band, and a friendship began which lasted till Miller's death during World War II; as Major Miller leading an Air Force band he disappeared on a flight from London to Paris. Pollack asked Gil to join the band and was persuaded to hire Gil's friend, the young Benny Goodman, as clarinet player. Goodman was wired to come immediately.



Three members of Ben Pollack's band, L-R, Benny Goodman (here playing flute), Fud Livingston (soprano sax) and Gil Rodin (clarinet)... PHOTO COURTESY BENNY: KING OF SWING

At the MCA studios they were waiting for the music copying to be finished; it was coming in relays in sheets; those concerned were working against the clock. Someone was one-noting the studio organ. Shelly Manne and bassist Ray Brown were playing noughts and crosses — punctuated by much back-slapping and cries of "Oh you dog!" Benny Carter came up, and we talked about his days as a house arranger for the BBC in London in the early 1930s. Carter, by now a leading figure in jazz as arranger, bandleader, composer, and multi-instrumentalist (though to me most memorable as an alto saxophonist) scarcely looked his 56 years. I warmed to him immediately: he was a pleasant, smiling Negro, a good conversationalist, and obviously revered by his fellow musicians. ("Everyone loves Benny," Gil told me later.) Carter said he had been in Australia briefly some five years back and remembered Graeme Bell, Don Burrows, and others. He was sorry to hear that Arthur Young had recently died in Australia, he remembering him from his own English days; he talked also of Danny

Polo with whom he had played in England and was de-lighted that I knew and liked the trombone playing of George Chisholm. "You know," Carter said, "the best English jazz players were Scotsmen — Tommy McQuater, Duncan White, Howard McFarlane..."



Benny Carter: he scarcely looked his 56 years... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Ray Brown came over ("the greatest bass player in jazz today," said Gil), and told us he had left the Oscar Peterson Trio and was working freelance in studios in Hollywood three or four days a week. Shelly Manne, small Panama hat perched on the back of his head, told us Jamal was 'the most'. A smiling, leprechaun-like little man came up and embraced Gil Rodin. "Willie Schwartz — the first clarinet player Glenn Miller ever had in his band", was Gil's introduction. "That was my father," quipped Schwartz. Joe Mondragon was there (the orchestra had two basses): like Russ Garcia, he had played with Stan Kenton in earlier days. We talked with Garcia — an amiable, drawling-voiced character with the widest smile I had ever seen.



Russ Garcia: an amiable, drawling-voiced character with the widest smile Clem had ever seen...

Garcia had written some of Kenton's best arrangements; like Quincy Jones, Pete Rugolo and Benny Carter he was presently making big money scoring and conducting soundtrack music. He told me he had a beautiful yacht: one day he hoped to sail into Sydney Harbour. Others I met in the orchestra included jazz old-timer and trumpet player, Mannie Klein, then working exclusively in films, and a brilliant young xylophonist, Joe Bunker. By now red lights were flashing; there was sporadic tuning up, technicians pressed buttons, the lights went off except for the small illumination of each music stand, and the screen threw up a pursuit sequence. The film, tentatively titled *Fame is the Name of the Game*, starred Jill St John. Garcia, watching and timing the film, conducted; the players had their backs to the screen. The score was in typical Carter jazz idiom: ensembles and solos blending with acting and sound effects. Twice through they ran: the third time was perfect to the last frame of the film. The playback was okayed and the musicians cheered, packed up and went home.

Gil and I drove back to the ManneHole. A smoky basement, it was crowded to the walls; at least a third of the audience was black. "You know, in this business you're not conscious of the skins people have got," said Gil as we squeezed in and ordered (a jug of beer at three dollars a throw.) "The way I was reared, and working with guys like these, I didn't understand this colour stuff. And neither did Benny Goodman, nor Glenn, nor would Shelly or any of us . . ." We listened to Jamal and his trio for an

hour or so before we left just after midnight. We agreed, out in the smoggy Los Angeles street air (only marginally cleaner than the fug of the ManneHole) that, granted we were old-timers in jazz, we'd still swap the hour of Jamal for ten minutes of Fats Waller, Teddy Wilson or Earl Hines. Jamal seemed to me, though obviously a superb technician, to have an excessively florid, arpeggio-ridden style, where often the thread of the beat became so lost in his patterns of embellishment that when he joined the rhythm of his drummer and bassist again, much of the mood was gone. Yet Jamal, a young crew-cut, light-skinned Negro, played easily and surely and with smiling recognition of his audience, and had it so rapt that between enthusiastic applause for each item, no-one stirred while he played.



Ahmad Jamal (above), pictured in 1959: a young crew-cut, light-skinned Negro, he played easily and surely and with smiling recognition of his audience... PHOTO COURTESY GETTY IMAGES

There were two postscripts to this night of jazz. One was that, sure enough, Garcia did sail into Sydney Harbour in his yacht in 1967. He did some memorable scoring and conducting with the ABC Sydney and Melbourne dance bands in the several months of his stay. The other postscript was that some weeks after my return to Australia I received a package from Benny Carter. In our conversations I had told him that I had always regarded his composition *Blues in my Heart* as the most beautiful in all jazz; now he had sent me a copy of a recording of the tune made with an orchestra he led in 1940, saying in a graceful note that he had been much moved by my appreciation of it. Another highlight of my jazz experiences was a night in New York, some four or five years later at the Village Vanguard Club, where I heard the pianist Thelonious Monk for the first time. He was scheduled to appear at ten o'clock: the place was full and everybody sat over drinks waiting for him to appear. About eleven-thirty he sauntered on to the stage, very sharply dressed, and began idly to finger a few notes on the piano. There were no catcalls, jeers, or signs of

impatience from the audience; just anticipation. Then he began to play as only Monk can — a performance of uncanny rhythmic surprises. Of all pianists in jazz, Monk is *sui generis*. He adds to the effect of an exaggerated simplicity of style by playing further and further behind the beat and leaving large gaps of space between notes. It is not that he sketches, his line is too positive for that: rather, he makes skeletons of the tunes he plays. His musical shapes are not indicated by suggestion, as the sketcher does (Mel Powell, John Lewis and Les McCann are pianists who have that sketcher style), but rather, he strips the melodic flesh to the bare bones. That night at the Village Vanguard Club, I first heard his composition *Round Midnight* which has since swept the world as a cult tune and became the title of one of the best jazz films made.

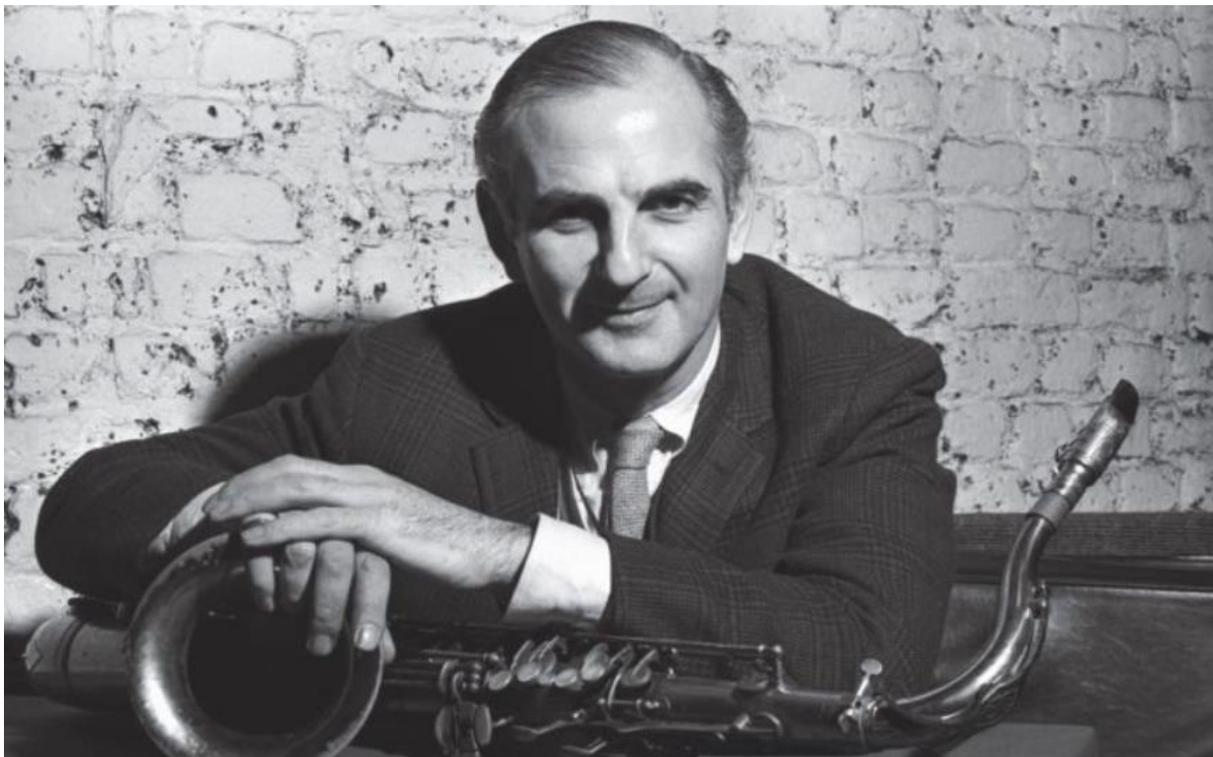


Of all pianists in jazz, Monk is sui generis; it is not that he sketches, his line is too positive for that: rather, he makes skeletons of the tunes he plays...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Kym Bonython told me years later that he had a terrible time with Monk when he toured him on the Bonython concert circuit with a small group in 1971. Monk would sit moodily in the dressing room refusing to go on despite cajoling, threats and despairing overtures. By the time he chose to appear, program sequences had to be hurriedly rearranged, but as Kym said rather ruefully, this sort of eccentricity was the privilege of genius.

The jazz scene in London in the 1960s and 1970s was nowhere near as extensive as that in New York or Los Angeles. There were some good bands like Chris Barber's and Ken Colyer's playing in pubs and clubs and occasionally jazz fans could catch the bands of Humphrey Lyttleton and John Dankworth in concerts. The BBC's Radio Jazz Club, though at a late hour, was always worth listening to — it featured many "live" bands and groups led by Alex Walsh, Kenny Baker and Sandy Brown (a magnificent clarinet player who was also a professional acoustic architect and designed recording studios all over the world).

The high spot of London jazz in those years was Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in Frith Street, Soho, where I spent many happy nights. I got to know Ronnie Scott well and also his club manager Pete King, a talented alto saxophonist, well-known in the English and American jazz scene. Scott, one of England's best tenor saxophonists, had played in his early days with Ted Heath's orchestra, just after the war. Then he worked in bands on transatlantic liners, mainly, he told me, to hear the new jazz being played in the USA by the likes of John (Dizzy) Gillespie, Charlie Parker and the pianist Bud Powell. After that, in between recording and playing as the leader of many English groups (the best known of which was The Couriers which I heard several times in the 1960s), Ronnie established his own jazz club in Gerrard Street in 1957, moving to larger premises in Frith Street in 1967.



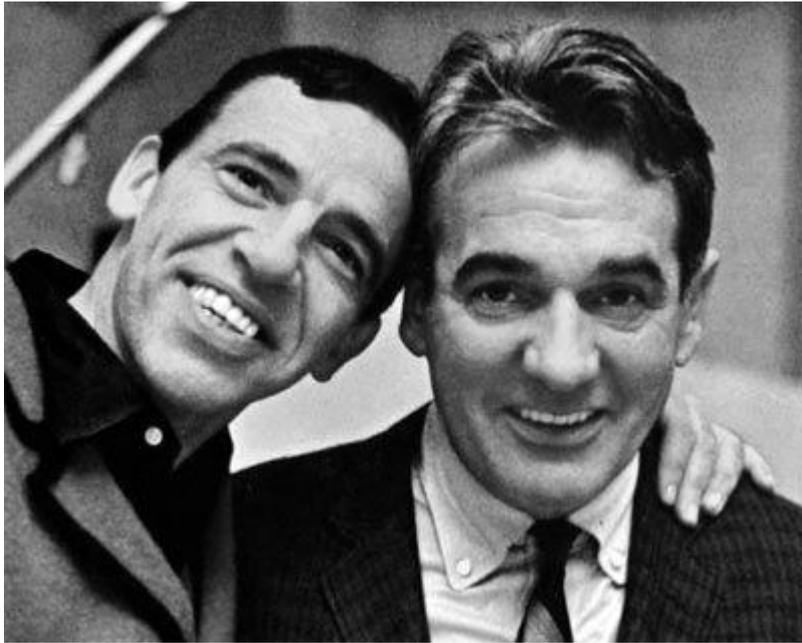
Ronnie Scott: his jazz club in Frith Street, Soho, must be ranked as one of the best and most well-run of its type in the world... PHOTO CREDIT DAVE BROLAN

Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club must be ranked as one of the best and most well-run of its type in the world, and I have visited many in my time. Beautifully appointed, a sort of miniature amphitheatre with individual tables for meals and drinks and tiered seating, its acoustics beyond praise, it was the Mecca for every jazz enthusiast who came to London. Here I heard some of the world's best jazz players and singers: the saxophonists Stan Getz, Zoot Sims and Sonny Stitt; the clarinetist Buddy de Franco; that charmingly idiosyncratic singer and pianist, Blossom Dearie, who made her name at the club; another equally famous and talented English singer, Cleo Laine; and that incredible singing group which imitated the sound of a jazz band, Lambert, Hendricks and Ross.



Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in London: beautifully appointed, a sort of miniature amphitheatre with individual tables for meals and drinks and tiered seating, its acoustics beyond praise... this shot features Stan Tracey at the piano, with American singer Ernestine Anderson performing... PHOTO COURTESY REEL ART

Annie Ross, the female member of the group and also English-born, was a strikingly beautiful woman, the niece of another well-known jazz singer of former days, Ella Logan. Annie Ross later appeared, with great success, in stage musicals and for a time ran her own club in London in the mid-sixties called Annie's Room which I found a fine venue for good jazz too. But for me the highlight of all the splendid jazz I have heard over the years at Ronnie Scott's remains the night in 1971 when the seventeen-piece band of Buddy Rich was packed on to the rather small stage. Rich, one of the most dynamic drummers in jazz (some rank with him with Gene Krupa and Chick Webb as the greatest of them all), was in his element that night and nearly blasted the roof off. Saturnine and gum-chewing, he played like a demon — but, then, he had played drums since he was four or five.



Some rank Buddy Rich (left) with Gene Krupa (right) and Chick Webb as the greatest drummer of them all...

In my latter ABC days one of our commissionaires was an ex-Sydney drummer, Dick Freeman, who had played with Frank Coughlan's orchestra in the pre-World War II days at the Trocadero Ballroom — at a time when big dance halls proliferated and orchestras like those of Frank Coughlan, Jim Davidson, Abe Romain and others were the entertainment attractions of Sydney. Dick told me that in 1923 he had seen Buddy Rich, aged six, performing as the boy wonder drummer, "Traps", at Sydney's Tivoli Theatre where his act was a show-stopper. At any rate, on that night at Ronnie Scott's, I saw a drummer who played with phenomenal speed and dexterity, essaying the most complex percussion patterns, yet with metronomic clarity. He drove his band to absolute frenzies of performance.



Buddy Rich as "Traps", The Drum Wonder, pictured in 1923...

Jazz has been a most fulfilling and rewarding part of my life, and in my 50 years' involvement with it I have seen it develop, gradually but inevitably into the musical force it is today. As far back as the 1920s its overseas focal point, outside the USA, was Paris, where black musicians like Sidney Bechet, Arthur Briggs, Bill Coleman, Big Boy Goudie and others found social equality and a wildly appreciative audience for their music, and where the Hot Club of France with its illustrious mainstays, the violinist Stephane Grappelli and the gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt, was already established. It was France too which produced the first international jazz critic, Hugues Panassie, and the first discographer (jazz record bibliographer), Charles Delaunay.



It was France which produced the first international jazz critic, Hugues Panassie (left), and the first discographer Charles Delaunay (below)...



Today, jazz is part of the musical culture of almost every country in the world from the USSR (where since 1962, under the aegis of the US State department, Benny Goodman and other celebrated American jazz stars have regularly toured) and every European country to Japan and Australia. There are flourishing jazz clubs in Berlin, Leningrad, Warsaw, Lisbon and Dublin. Jazz festivals are universal. In 1969 when I was flying from Belgrade to Milan, bad weather forced a landing and overnight stay in Ljubljana. "You must go to the jazz festival tonight," said the manager of my hotel – and go I did to enjoy a memorable night of jazz with visiting musicians from other European countries and the USA, as well as leading Yugoslav jazzmen.

Of course, in earlier days, jazz was unacceptable in polite society. When I first began my jazz program in Adelaide in 1940 I was regarded by many who knew me as at worst a musical yahoo and at best some sort of eccentric. The very staid and stuffy professor of Music at the Adelaide University's Elder Conservatorium at the time, E Harold Davies, spoke of jazz as "an excrescence or if you like, a Bolshevistic impulse in rhythm". He may well have had my program in mind!



The very staid and stuffy professor of Music at the Adelaide University's Elder Conservatorium, E Harold Davies, spoke of jazz as "an excrescence or if you like, a Bolshevistic impulse in rhythm"...

It took a long time for jazz to shake off that miasma of disrepute. Even when I was deputy general manager of the ABC in the late 1960s, its board of commissioners took exception to my jazz articles for the magazine *Quadrant* and minuted its disapproval that its deputy GM should indulge in what it regarded as a "demeaning activity". This intelligence was solemnly conveyed to me by Talbot Duckmanton, the general manager. I suggested he have a word with the magazine's editor, Peter

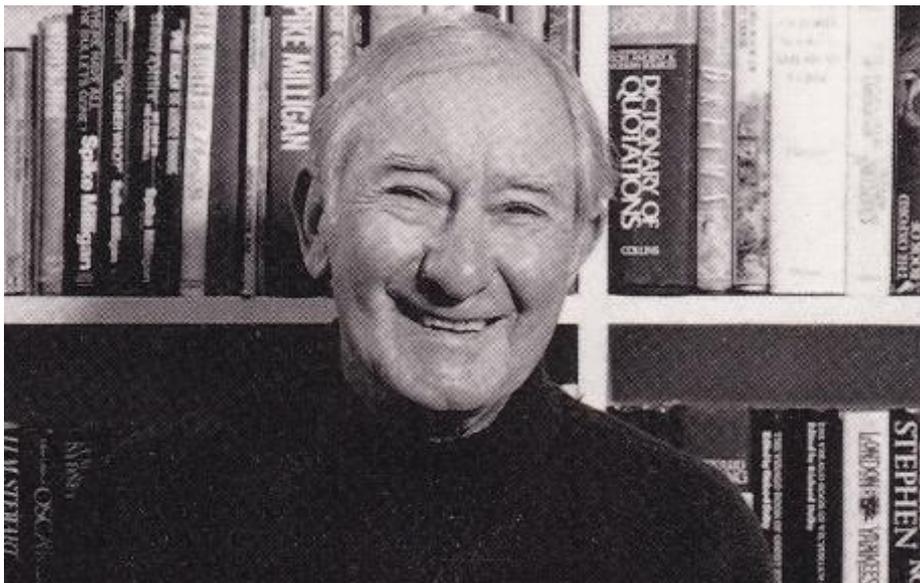
Coleman, about it to see if the latter felt it was "demeaning". I heard no more of the matter; although I suggested to Duckmanton that since at the time the ABC was running three or four jazz programs a week it was perhaps time that its commissioners descended from their remote peaks and took an interest in what was going on in the broadcasting world below.



ABC general manager Talbot Duckmanton (left), here pictured with the US President Lyndon Baines Johnson: Semmler suggested to Duckmanton that since the ABC was running three or four jazz programs a week it was perhaps time that its commissioners descended from their remote peaks and took an interest in what was going on in the broadcasting world below...

Now, of course, jazz is happily in the ascendant. In Australia there are now hundreds of jazz spots in its cities and larger towns, in clubs, pubs and restaurants and active jazz societies too — from Brisbane, Sydney, Wollongong, Kiama, Cootamundra (and, happily, Bowral) in the east to Perth and Bunbury in the west. The annual Australian Jazz Convention held in city and country venues all over Australia has reached heights of successful presentation and participation not dreamed of by Graeme Bell and Dave Dallwitz back in 1946. Every conservatorium of music (may E Harold Davies not turn in his grave) has a department of jazz studies: the Sydney Conservatorium, where Don Burrows has been the driving force, pioneered the way, and, like the Conservatorium of the Wollongong University, maintains house bands of young jazz students.

Above all, in older jazz musicians like Don Burrows, the trumpet player, Bob Barnard now recognised as one of the finest in the world, the saxophonist Dale Barlow, the guitarist George Golla, and pianists like Mike Nock (originally a New Zealander), Graeme Bell, Bryce Rohde, Graham Coyle and Dick Hughes, Australia has produced players of world class who, with the backing of the Australian government, through the Australia Council and the Foreign Affairs department, have played with distinction on overseas tours and at international jazz festivals at Newport and Monterey (USA), Montreux (Switzerland), Breda (Netherlands) and others equally famous.



Semmler: I believe that the broadcasting of jazz, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, had much to do with its burgeoning in the 1980s, and whatever part I may have played in this I count as one of my most satisfying achievements... PHOTO COURTESY PICTURES ON THE MARGIN

A younger crop of jazz musicians displays talents just as scintillating: James Morrison, an amazing trumpet and trombone player who in 1989 and 1990 played with an international all-star orchestra on an overseas tour; Andrew Firth, in his early twenties a clarinetist/saxophonist of remarkable virtuosity (and, incidentally, a South Australian from a remote bush township); and Tony Baldwin, who combines radio announcing with the jazz piano. Equally notable is the emergence of many accomplished women jazz musicians like the pianist Judy Bailey and the saxophonist Sandy Evans, and in more recent years the pianists Jane Galbraith, Fiona Bicket, Helen Jowsey and Maria Steinway. Then there are the Parrott sisters (Lisa on saxophone and Nicki on bass) and the fine blues singers, Kate Swadling and Jacqui Gaudion. The 1990s could well be an astonishing Jazz Age in this country. I believe that the broadcasting of jazz, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, had much to do with its burgeoning in the 1980s, and whatever part I may have played in this I count as one of my most satisfying achievements.