

## BERNIE McGANN: SLINGS ARROWS APATHY

by John Shand\*

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**S**axophonist Bernie McGann was once hired by a juggler, who tossed him some sheet music, counted in the tune and began juggling. McGann didn't play a note; just stood staring at the music, knowing he shouldn't have come. The juggler needed McGann, but McGann didn't need the juggler. He could keep endless ideas spinning in the air as it was. Yet he couldn't chase what he heard in his head while playing in clubs or big bands, let alone with a juggler. If he couldn't get gigs that let him do things his way, he'd rather live in the village of Bundeena on the southern tip of Sydney, rise at dawn, work as a postie in Cronulla, and have the afternoons to practise in the Royal National Park.



*Bernie McGann (left) had the most recognisable sound in Australian jazz...  
PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL*

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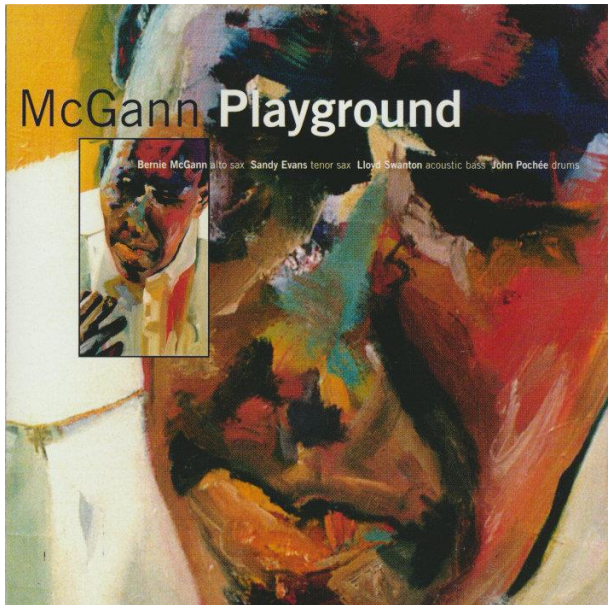
*\*John Shand has written about music and theatre since 1981 in more than 30 publications, including for Fairfax Media (later Nine newspapers) since 1993. He is also a playwright, author, poet, librettist, drummer and winner of the 2017 Walkley Arts Journalism Award.*

Although those who worked with him in the early '60s say his sound – the most instantly recognisable in Australian jazz – was then already in place, McGann was unimpressed by these early tapes. For him it was after the Bundeena practice phase that both sound and ideas began to align the way he wanted – from the mid-'70s on. One moment he could conjure the squeaks and rasps of native birds, then melt your knees with beauty, or from a matted tangle of jubilation and despair, rush up to a jaunty trill. He played the alto as though he'd meant to buy a tenor; as if the instrument were a life-long smoker, or the notes were sandblasted before they jostled from the bell: gruff, gritty, coarse-grained and intensely human. Sometimes a Cubist, McGann investigated a motif from multiple perspectives simultaneously, with improbable interval leaps and constant shifts in timbre, velocity and mood. The originality was so startling that, this being staid old Oz, he was royally ignored: an outsider – not just too alien for the mainstream, but cold-shouldered by the jazz establishment, too.

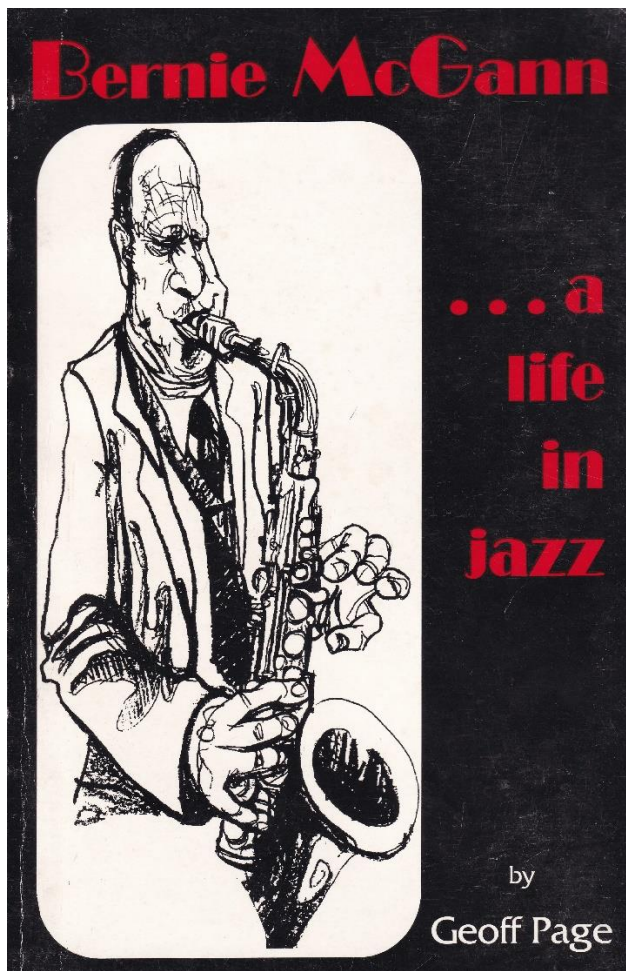


*McGann pictured during his Royal National Park practice phase, after which both sound and ideas began to align the way he wanted...PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS PRODUKZIONI*

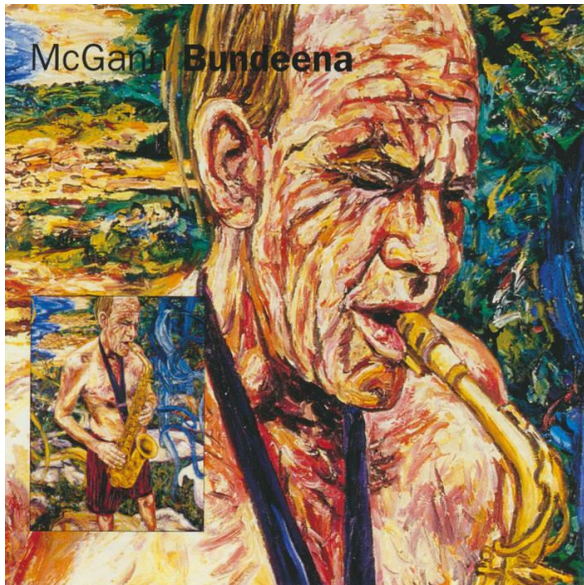
After 40 years of banging his head against that wall of apathy, it suddenly burst in 1997, and McGann, about to turn 60, was engulfed in a torrent of acclaim. In two golden months he won an ARIA for best jazz album (*Playground*), led the first Australian trio at the prestigious Chicago Jazz Festival, had a biography published (Geoff Page's *Bernie McGann... A Life in Jazz*) and won the Don Banks Music Award. He was the first jazz player to receive this latter \$60,000 acknowledgement of "sustained and distinguished contributions to Australian music".



*In 1997 a torrent of acclaim arrived, including an ARIA for best jazz album “Playground” (left), and a biography published, Geoff Page’s “Bernie McGann: A Life in Jazz” (below)...*



His late-career rush of albums included *Bundeena* (2000), the breeziest he made with his trio of bassist Lloyd Swanton (of the Necks and catholics fame) and drummer John Pochée, whose own highly idiosyncratic playing had spiralled through bands that either he or McGann had led during those 40 years.



*“Bundeena” (above, 2000), the breeziest album he made with his trio of bassist Lloyd Swanton (of The Necks and catholic fame) and drummer John Pochée, pictured below with McGann on the cover of their album “At Long Last”...*



On the unmistakably McGann-penned *Mr Harris* the saxophonist smears ideas on the musical canvas as thickly as George Gittoes does paint on the album's cover image, while the collective rustle of colours and textures is like being sonically brushed by foliage. Swanton's *Blues on the Prairie* goads McGann into altissimo cries and bleats as well as supreme bottom-end articulation, and *Maianbar*, named for the village adjacent to Bundeena, is somehow exotic: a dish with a foreign spice, and with McGann tenderly draping lines across the rhythm section's restraint.



*Bernie McGann in the studio with artist George Gittoes... PHOTO COURTESY KEN JAMES*

*The Last Postman*, more a lament than a ballad, has gorgeous bass harmonies, with his alto never more resembling a tenor. The hell-for-leather *Venus and the Dogstar* boasts full-throated exchanges with the drums, before McGann mostly saunters through *The Varkarsians* in the alto's upper range, where prettiness and anguish mingle: a nettle in a posy of flowers. *Let's Tangle* exemplifies Pochée's ability to pump air into a groove, so the saxophone rides on a gust of wind rather than solid matter, and on the slow grind of *Dirty Dozen* the horn huffs and puffs and growls like a bear, before nonchalantly sliding up to those ephemeral smoke-rings of sound. Never one for analysing or philosophising about music too much, McGann nonetheless thought about it deeply. Just non-verbally. We lost him in 2013.

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*"Bundeena" streams at [berniemcgann.bandcamp.com/album/bundeena](http://berniemcgann.bandcamp.com/album/bundeena); on disc from Birdland Records.*