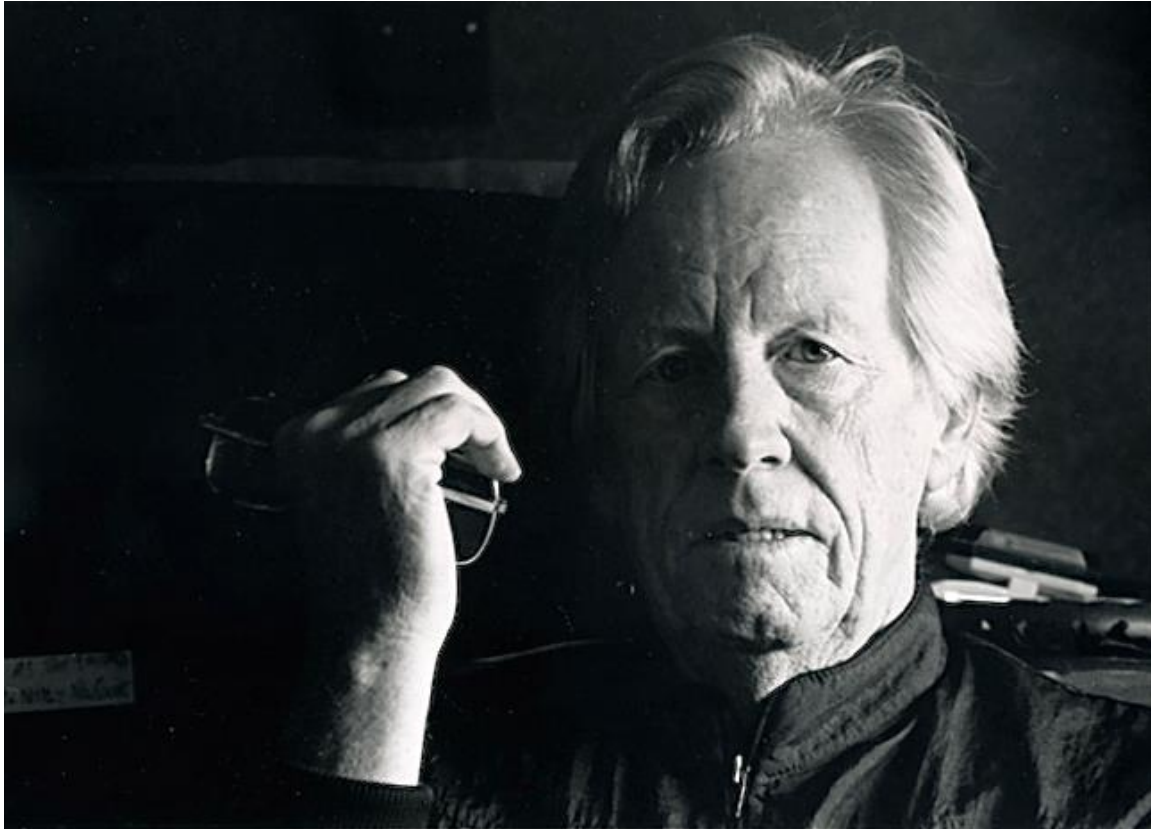


BRYCE ROHDE: A CUSHION OF AIR

by John Shand*

This article was posted on www.australianjazz.net on Monday, October 7, 2013, and can be read there at this link <http://australianjazz.net/2013/10/bryce-rohde-a-cushion-of-air/>



Bryce Rohde: a sound on the piano characterised by muted luxuriance, translucence and mysterious depth... PHOTO CREDIT BRYCE ROHDE

The writer John Clare once hit upon the perfect adjective for the sound that Bryce Rohde extracts from a piano: 'pearly'. All the wondrous aspects of a beautiful pearl are in place: muted luxuriance, translucence and mysterious depth. The lines that flow from that sound dance and float across the rhythm with singular elegance. An element of surprise in where the melodies lead is never far

**John Shand has written about music and theatre since 1981 in more than 30 publications, including for Fairfax Media since 1993, until 2018 when the company was bought by Nine Publishing. He is also a playwright, author, poet, librettist, drummer and winner of the 2017 Walkley Arts Journalism Award.*

away, so that a sense of adventure is implicit, but muted rather than broadcasting its presence.

These qualities, in turn, also characterise Rohde's substantial body of compositions, the most famous of which is probably the glorious *Windows of Arques*, used as the theme music for *Jim McLeod's Jazztrack* on ABC Classic FM for all those years. Rohde's place in Australian jazz and his influence upon it has been obscured by the fact that he has resided in the US for half a century, making few concert appearances in this country during that time. But the albums, such as *Windows of Arques*, are superb documents of his music, while a brief account of his life swiftly reveals the various ways in which he has made an impact.



Jim McLeod: Rohde's glorious composition "Windows of Arques" was used as the theme music for his "Jazztrack" program on ABC Classic FM for many years... PHOTO COURTESY JIM McLEOD'S JAZZTRACK

Rohde, who turned 90 on September 12, was born in Tasmania and moved to Adelaide aged two. He subsequently took up piano, studying classical music for seven years before starting to play popular music during World War II, and then developing an interest in jazz. After the war he joined the Alf Holyoak Sextet, a Benny Goodman-style band, and became a credible jazz pianist the old-fashioned way: on the job.

The AJQ Years

In 1953 he and the vibraphonist/drummer Jack Brokensha headed for Canada at the suggestion of the multi-reeds player Errol Buddle, only to be jailed upon their arrival in Halifax with no funds and no means of support. They were bailed out by Buddle and the New Zealand drummer Don Varella, and settled in Windsor, Ontario, just across the border from Detroit. Initially little work came in, however, and in a 1982 interview for *Jazz Magazine*, Buddle told Eric Myers: 'One night for dinner I remember we had between the four of us enough money for three apples and half a loaf of bread.'

Eventually they fell into work in Detroit's leading jazz club, the Rouge Lounge, backing a singer called Chris Connor. When she left town the club owner, Ed Sarkesian, stuck with what soon became known as the Australian Jazz Quartet. Besides Rohde on piano, Buddle on tenor saxophone and bassoon., and Brokensha on vibes and drums it had an American, Dick Healy, playing alto saxophone, flute and bass.



The Australian Jazz Quintet performing in the US in the mid-50s, L-R, Bryce Rohde (piano), Errol Buddle (bassoon), Dick Healy (flute), probably Jack Lander (bass), Jack Brokensha (vibes)...

The different sound combinations set the band apart, with Buddle's bassoon being a source of particular notoriety. Sarkesian spoke to the American Booking Corporation's president, Joe Glaser (who managed Louis Armstrong and represented Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Gerry Mulligan, Stan Getz, Chico Hamilton and George Shearing), and Glaser liked what he heard. Initially they were sent out backing singers, including Helen Merrill and Carmen McRae, before becoming a drawcard themselves.

'From then on we just worked consistently and recorded consistently, and people liked the sound combination,' Rohde told Jim McLeod for his 1994 book, *Jim McLeod's Jazztrack* (ABC). 'We used to go out on 30-day bus tours and do one-nighters. A bus full of all these wonderful, famous people. I wish I'd paid more attention. I was just having too good a time.'

They played their very cool-school jazz from colleges to dives to the most prestigious theatres, including Carnegie Hall. In 1955 the constraint of not having a bass when

Healy played reeds saw them add firstly Jimmy Gannon, then Jack Lander, and finally Ed Gaston on bass, turning them into the Australian Jazz Quintet, a guise in which they worked and recorded solidly through the rest of the 1950s. Buddle told John Clare for his book *Bodgie Dada and the Cult of Cool* (UNSW Press, 1995) that they were the fifth-highest paid jazz band in the US, after Armstrong, Brubeck, Mulligan and Shearing.



Joe Glaser (left) pictured here with Louis Armstrong whom he managed: Glaser signed up the Australian Jazz Quartet, which became the fifth-highest paid jazz band in the US, after Armstrong, Brubeck, Mulligan and Shearing...

In 1958 they accepted an offer to do a capital-city tour of Australia, which, with Buddle having announced that he would like to resettle in Australia, would be the AJQ's swansong. They played some farewell US concerts and then caught a ship in San Francisco. The Australian tour went well, even if the scale of the band's success in the US had barely registered on the Antipodean radar.

Sydney and George Russell

Rohde then settled in Sydney and soon formed the Bryce Rohde Quartet with Gaston on bass, guitarist George Golla and drummer Colin Bailey. They were a mainstay of the El Rocco in the first years of the new decade. The band also did a national tour supporting the popular US folk band the Kingston Trio, which, unexpectedly, proved a pivotal event in Rohde's career. The bassist with the Kingston Trio David Buckwheat, was obsessed with George Russell's book, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organisation*. 'He used to sing in his hotel room, just play a chord and sing melodies to these different chords,' Rohde told Jim McLeod. 'I thought, "That's beautiful-sounding stuff. What is it?" So he gave me a copy of George

Russell's *Lydian Concept* book and that's what started it. He actually gave me a second one and said, "If you ever run into anyone who'd appreciate it as much as you seem to, give them the book." I did that one day much later, and it was [bassist/composer] Bruce Cale I gave it to.'



The Bryce Rohde Quartet, L-R, bassist Ed Gaston, drummer Colin Bailey, guitarist George Golla, pianist Rohde... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIANJAZZ.NET

Perhaps the pithiest summation of Russell's book was offered by the British trumpeter and author Ian Carr (quoted in *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*: 'It encourages improvisers to convert chord symbols into the scales that best convey the sound of the chords. The next stage is the idea of the superimposition of one scale on another, which leads to pantonality, the presence of more than one key centre, but occurring within a dominant tonality. In other words the music is not atonal (in no particular key), but it can accommodate some polytonality.'



The Bryce Rohde Quintet in 1962, L-R, Bruce Cale, Rohde, Mark Bowden, Sid Powell and Charles Munro...

Rohde told me that from the moment he opened the Russell book his eyes lit up: 'From there on "to this very day" whenever I play a tune I am relating to Lydian scales.' He told McLeod that 'it gave me a clear way to think of what I was playing ... reduced it down... It takes you right to the brink of pantonality, but always knowing where "home" is.'

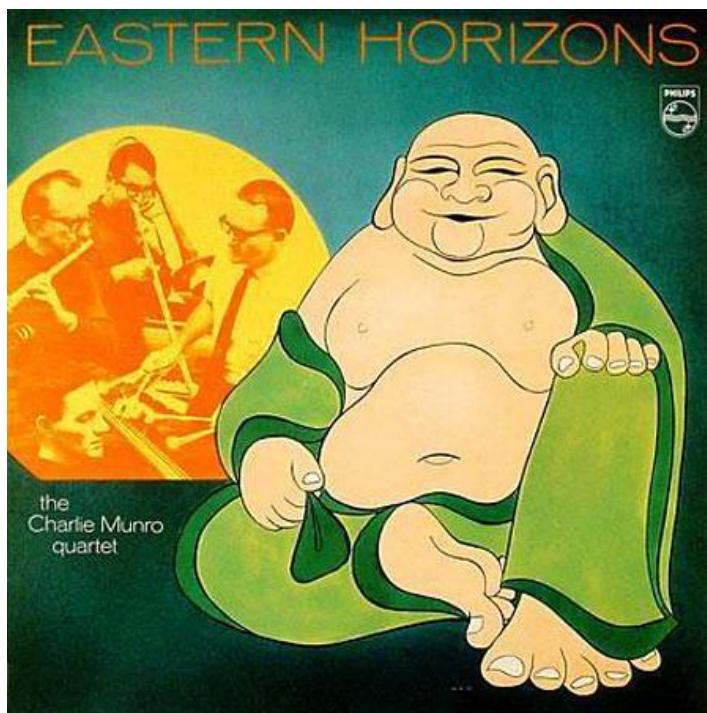


The Bryce Rohde Quartet in the studio recording the "Corners" album in 1963, L-R, Charles Munro, Mark Bowden, Rohde and Bruce Cale...

Having converted Cale, Rohde then formed his first George-Russell-influenced band with Charles Munro (reeds), Cale (bass) and Mark Bowden (drums), which performed and recorded. 'Each member owned their own GR book,' he told me. This was the other part of Rohde's great legacy to Australian jazz: having proved that local players could find success in the US, he then introduced significant musicians to Russell's approach who, in turn, spread the word to others across the generations. Russell's system is not the only way of improvising, but many players have, like Rohde, found it not only useful but liberating. It would spark Munro's extraordinary 1967 album *Eastern Horizons*, as well as much of Cale's work across the years.

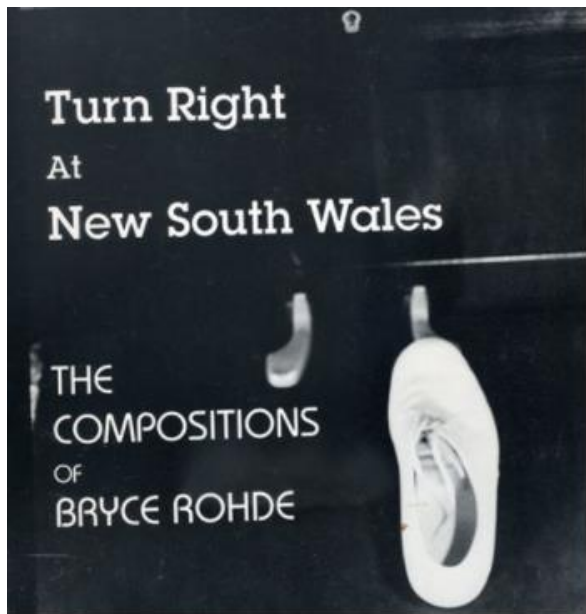


The George Russell approach would spark the extraordinary 1967 album "Eastern Horizons", by saxophonist Charles Munro (left)...



California Dreaming

In 1965 Rohde moved to California, where he led bands, worked as a sideman, taught and occasionally recorded. In 1993 he published *Turn Right At New South Wales: The Collected Compositions of Bryce Rohde*. Russell's theory was also important to him as a composer. 'It allowed me to write tunes I would never have written,' he told John Clare for *Bodgie Dada*.



The cover of the Bryce Rohde book "Turn Right at New South Wales: The Compositions of Bryce Rohde"...

The AJQ reformed in the early 1990s for an Australian tour, and Rohde appeared at the 2003 Wangaratta Festival, which is where *Windows of Arques* was recorded with Cale and drummer Lee Charlton. It, like the other relatively recent Bryce Rohde Trio albums, *Short Way Home* and *Turn Right At New South Wales*, are testaments to Rohde's elegance, melodic ingenuity and rhythmic buoyancy. He is a pivotal figure in Australian jazz.



Four survivors of the AJQ, reunited in the early 90s for a tour of Australia. L-R, Jack Brokensha, Ed Gaston, Bryce Rohde & Errol Buddle...