

CATHY HARLEY: THE WORLD AT HER FEET

by John Shand*

[This article appeared in Australian Jazz & Blues, Volume 1, No 6, 1994]

How did the world begin?" Down the phone-line, the question comes out of nowhere about as completely as the world itself must have once done. I pause. Is this a joke? "We were just talking about it," explains Cathy. I tell her I'll illuminate her when we meet for the interview.

I wonder whether the bebop pianist I had heard with Craig Scott's dream band, Improviso, is more likely to be a Christian Fundamentalist, a Big Bang Theorist, or an Existentialist. Does her involvement with such diverse projects as Senegalese party-animals Bu-Baca or Jackie Orszaczky's omnipotent Grandmasters hold any clues?



Cathy Harley (far left) with Craig Scott's dream band Improviso. Others L-R, are Warwick Alder (trumpet), Scott (bass), Graeme Lyall (saxophones) & Alan Turnbull (drums)...

*In 2019 John Shand was a playwright, librettist, author, journalist, drummer and critic. He has written about music and theatre for *The Sydney Morning Herald* since 1993. His books include *Don't Shoot The Best Boy! – The Film Crew At Work* (Currency), *Jazz: The Australian Accent* (UNSW Press) and *The Phantom Of The Soap Opera* (Wizard). In 2017 he won the inaugural Arts Journalism Award at the Walkleys, the nation's pre-eminent awards for journalism. He lives in Katoomba (NSW) with she who is called The Mouse. He enjoys wine, and wishes he could say in moderation.

I enter a garage converted into a bed-sit. An old drum-kit, an older upright piano and a newer double bass are the main furnishings. Cathy Harley is finishing off with a student when I arrive. I deduce this from the direction the money changes hands - otherwise she could just as easily have been having a friend over for a blow.



Cathy Harley: she simply oozes optimism and enthusiasm...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

I decline freshly squeezed orange juice, but willingly accept the ensuing verbal outpouring. I immediately understand why, other than her sensational piano playing, Harley has so quickly become so much in demand. (After all, there has never been a shortage of good pianists in Australia.) The secret is that Cathy simply oozes optimism and enthusiasm. If her ardour were ultra-violet, you could get dangerously sunburnt from it. The older, slightly - dare I say it - jaded players must simply bask in the warmth of her positivism. If there is an elfin quality about her, there is also a burning intensity when she fixes you with her gaze.

"When I was three, I used to spend hours at the piano creating different colours and sounds. I used to love where it took me. I didn't know what I was playing, but I knew it took me somewhere."

To retreat from the figurative, it took her through a childhood of classical study, shared with the more strenuous pastimes of surfing and netball (up to State level). "In many ways the surfing trained me for the jazz scene: spending hours and hours around guys. I love surfing; it's the ultimate motion sport. That's where surfing and playing music are very similar, cos of that forward motion. It's a great feeling.

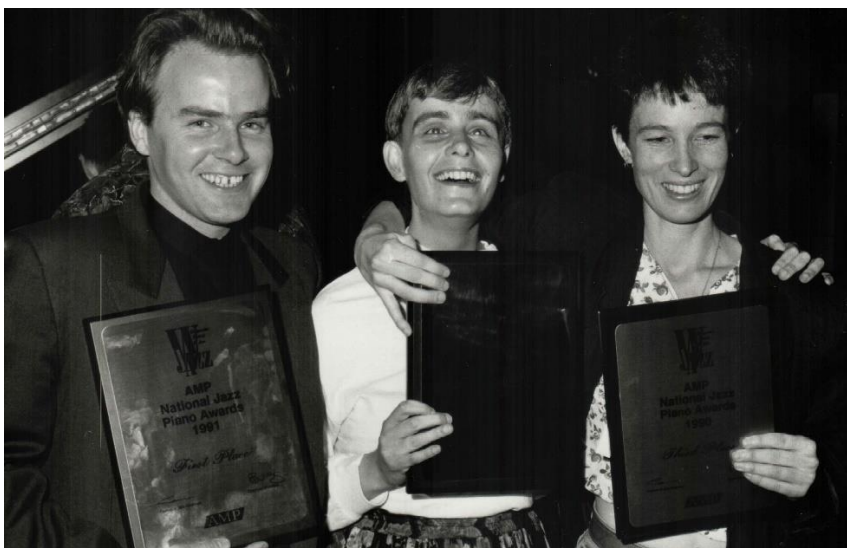
"Not that I'm into any of this stuff, but my Mum said that when I was a little kid she went to a fortune-teller who said that I would be successful in a man's world. Between the jazz scene and surfing, I've always dealt in a man's world."

Self-consciously aware that I am a male speaking, I express surprise that, given the ever-growing ranks of women in the professional music scene, Cathy's perspective should be one of the old divisions and inequalities still being the order of the day.

"It is a man's world," she states vehemently. "I mean, all the bands I'm in are all guys. There's *something* happening. Not that the girls I know want to be in all-girl bands. Basically, when you're really strong in yourself and you really work at your art, it doesn't matter in the end. Lisa Parrott's a strong woman; Nicki Parrott's a strong woman; Jann Rutherford's a strong woman. You've got to be. There's nothing wrong with that." Amen.



The Parrotts, Nicki (above left) and Lisa (above right) are strong women... Jann Rutherford (below, centre, pictured with Mark Fitzgibbon on left, with Harley on the right after the Wangaratta piano competition in 1991) is a strong woman...



It's hard to believe that Cathy only started playing jazz four years ago. "So much has happened in four years, suddenly I've got this itching desire to learn all the instruments, and study composing and maths."

Coping with the cold sweat that for 30 years I have broken out in when people mention maths, I drag Ms Harley back to the original point.

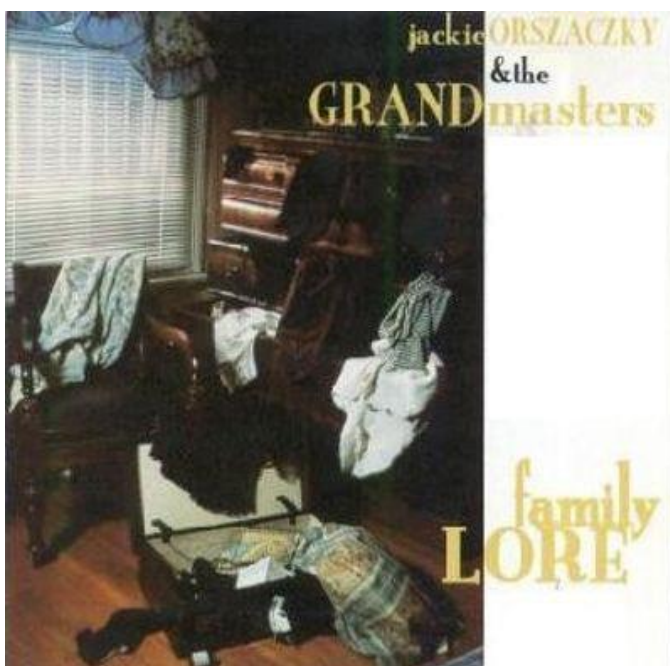
"The first person I heard was Jimmy Smith. I just loved his sound. Then I heard Oscar Peterson. The next thing I heard was Monk, and that made me go, 'Alright! There's something happening here I don't know about.' And then it just steam-rolled from there."

Steam-rolled is right. Harley scooted through the Jazz Studies course at the Sydney Conservatorium, came second (to Jann Rutherford) in the piano competition at the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz, and immediately fell in with many of this country's best players. Of course, from her perspective, the process did not seem quite so straightforward.

"In a way, my downfall was that my musical emphasis had been so much on technique that there wasn't any ears or heart there. I'd been taught to be a piano player, not a musician."

As was Lloyd Swanton's experience (see separate story) she was accepted into the Conservatorium with little knowledge of jazz. "I think they see something in you of the ability to organize musical thoughts quickly. They give you an opportunity. Maybe they take a punt on the fact that they see you really want to do it. My heart certainly loves music. It all boils down to you doing the work, anyway."

The opportunities have kept on coming, with a series of established bands and players calling on her to contribute her svelte touch on the keyboard. Jackie Orszaczky's fabulous *Family Lore* album contains two pithy, sinuous piano features from Harley.



"When I first met Jackie, Chris [Abrahams, keyboards] was away, and he gave me an opportunity which planted big seeds. I've got lots to thank Jackie for, because he helped me loosen up. He pulled me up in many ways, and opened doors for me. I did this gig the other night with Lily Dior [vocals] Hamish [Stuart, drums], Arne [Hanna, guitar] and Orszaczky. The groove those guys were playing was so wicked, and I realised the reason was because they were so still. They weren't frantic or uptight or frazzled. It's like they were really trusting themselves, and they could lay down this awesome groove. I'm not saying Jackie doesn't get angry, but you hardly see him freak out about things, and I figure that has a lot to do with his grooving ability."



Harley says she's got lots to thank Jackie Orszaczky (pictured above) for, because he helped her loosen up....PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

Orszaczky's *Tractor Mind*, which Harley had played with him live, struck a chord with the pianist. When she was asked to record it, she already knew exactly what she wanted to do with the solo space, as was the case with *Lights Off*; they were songs she loved.

Craig Scott snapped her up to play piano in Improviso, a band whose other members have been playing for at least 20 years longer than Harley: Alan Turnbull, Warwick Alder and Graeme Lyall.

"Craig gave me an opportunity because he saw something in me, and knew that if I was given enough time, it would start to flower. That allowed me to gather more confidence, and to realise that if I can do certain things, the band could fly higher. I know that some nights the band might not go up to the next level because of me, and if I tried something new, then it could go up. What I'm trying to say is that I'm taking responsibility for my part of it. There's a lot of potential in that band."

The band that presents Harley's talents to the largest audience is certainly Bu-Baca, whose high-octane brew of traditional Senegalese music and western funk has the

toes twitching of the dance brigade. Harley's commitment is such that she is even learning Olif, the language of the other members.

"I want to learn it," she explains, "because I'll really be in the band, then. Also it will give me their rhythms - their language is so linked to the rhythms. They've got a totally different culture and concept of music, and I'm just so glad to be in it. It's a really good experience to be playing all this stuff to a huge jumping, dancing crowd. It's got this fantastic groove behind it, and is just what the doctor ordered."

Composing is now a major focus in Harley's life. Saxophonist Dale Barlow suggested she compose a tune a day, and she has taken him at his word, writing for most of the projects she has an involvement in, including singer Kate Swadling's forthcoming CD, *Improviso* and her own outfits. This lies behind her desire to be fluent on as many instruments as possible. She already takes gigs on double bass as well as composing on it. Drums, African hand-drums, saxophones and vocals are just around the corner.



Cathy is composing for a new album by singer Kate Swadling, pictured above in 1996 with saxophonist Bernie McGann in the background...PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

The whole process of making music is something Cathy clearly thinks about a great deal. "To me, music is to do with reminding humans not to get too stuck in the physical world. You know when you hear some music, it can make you speechless, or it can affect you in ways that remind you that there are things other than just physical existence.

"What I call genius is the ability to focus on one thing; to let go of everything else you would really like to think about. I see music as really linked to thoughts. The sort of thoughts you're thinking [when playing] resonate in other people. So it is my responsibility as a musician to get my life in as much order as possible."

Cathy, along with Sean Wayland, is also behind a newly set up piano collective, which intends to run a venue in Sydney with a quality grand piano courtesy of Kawai: an instrument all the members could relish playing in the context of all-too-often having to deal with sub-standard or poorly maintained pianos. Seemingly all the country's leading pianists have endorsed the project, and if anyone has the drive to get it all off the ground, I suspect it is Cathy Harley. Watch this space for further developments.



Cathy Harley: it is my responsibility as a musician to get my life in as much order as possible... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

Interview over, it is not until I am back out in my car that I realise we never got around to sorting out how the world began. Lucky really, because I would hate to have disappointed her with my Little Bang Theory. But that's another story...

Cathy Harley will record her debut CD for ABC Records in February, and can be seen at the Woollahra Hotel on Sunday nights in December, with Bernie McGann, Craig Scott and Alan Turnbull.