

MEANING IT: TRUTH, TRUMP, UNIVERSALITY AND CULTURAL AMNESIA

by John Shand*

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Jackie Orszaczky: all music is one... PHOTO SUPPLIED

My obituary for Jackie Orszaczky in *The Sydney Morning Herald* concluded with: “Some marvel at the breadth of his endeavour, but to Orszaczky it was all music; all life rendered in sound.” I believe these two ideas are interrelated: that all music is *one* and that a *deeper* truth emerges when life is being expressed rather than notes merely being played.

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I began writing about music in 1981, and, call me a slow learner, but it's only sometime this century that I started to understand what the job is *really* about. Being a judge of quality is not the main point, and nor is being an historian, a musicologist or an analyst. A few years ago I was on a talk-fest panel where someone declared that the only *legitimate* way to write about music was technically. I bit my tongue at the time. What I should have said, ever so politely, was "bollocks". To write in exclusively technical terms about music is to alienate most of the potential readership at a stroke. But nor is just responding *emotionally* enough. It is the critic trying to evoke what he or she heard in some purple haze that led to writing about music being amusingly likened to tap-dancing about architecture. I prefer to think of this evocation aspect as akin to trying to paint ghosts. Take recording out of the equation, and music remains the most miraculously ephemeral of the arts. Especially when it includes improvisation.

So, other than taking everything on its own terms and trying to grasp the artist's intent, what is the job really about? The answer's simple and applies to all arts. The role of the critic is to discern truth, because the role of the artist is to play, paint or write truth.

Last year at this event Lucky Oceans quoted Duke Ellington's statement that there were only two types of music: good and bad. But good and bad implies taste, and taste is transient. I prefer honest and dishonest. As Duke implied, no genres. Genres are a convenience rather than a reality. The album reviews I write for *Spectrum* appear under genre headings. Sometimes I spend more time agonising over these, trying to avoid locking a record into an ill-fitting and irrelevant box, than I do writing the review. Music is music.



The late great Lester Bowie: trumpeter, composer, band-leader and co-founder of the Art Ensemble of Chicago....PHOTO CREDIT JAK KILBY

Entirely coincidentally I first fully understood this at exactly the same moment that I began writing about the subject. The catalyst for both was the late great Lester Bowie: trumpeter, composer, band-leader and co-founder of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Having come here with that band he returned in 1981 with another magical group called From the Root to the Source. This included such towering musicians as bassist Reggie Workman, the incandescent soul singer Fontella Bass and her brother, David Peaston, an even more stunning gospel singer. Being such a huge fan of Lester's work I was curious to meet him, and the only way I could see to do that was to interview him.

At the time I'd never written about music. I'd written plays and song lyrics, and was an absurdly limited guitarist and a *slightly* less limited drummer. With From the Root to the Source playing several nights at the Capitol Theatre I pitched an interview to the editor of *Jazz* magazine*, who rather took the wind out of my sails by saying he'd never *heard* of Lester Bowie. Given I have the selling skills of a slug, I suspect the fact he still said yes reflected a certain desperation for content. I somehow organised to meet Lester in his hotel room, and he was charming, funny and insightful.

I think I heard From the Root to the Source four nights in a row, and loved how it gently illustrated that *all* forms of African-American music are limbs of the same entity. It played material that *could* be described as gospel or blues, New Orleans jazz or bebop, Afro-Cuban, R&B or free improvisation, not just from one *song* to the next, but sometimes from one *bar* to the next. I heard something truly glorious that was also espousing a profound truth. Lester and his collaborators weren't doing pastiches of these styles. They were living them. As well as the truth of it all being one, there was truth in the music, itself.

This was truth like you can hear across the gamut of music, from Nina Simone to Maria Callas, Ruby Hunter, Albert Ayler and the members of the Buena Vista Social Club. You can hear it in Charlie Haden playing *Song For Che* or Ravi Shankar playing a night raga; in Patsy Cline singing *Three Cigarettes in an Ashtray*, Sam Cooke singing *A Change Is Gonna Come* or Jackie Orszaczky singing *Tractor Mind*.

Like Lester, Nina, Goran Bregovic, Bill Frisell, Joseph Tawadros, Joshua Bell, Robert Wyatt, Ry Cooder, Julien Curwin and others, Orszaczky also understood that music was all one. His espousal of this was spectacularly broad, with the inevitable Bartok and Hungarian Gypsy influences alongside all the African American ones and others. Orszaczky treasured diversity. His second Erskineville Music Festival in 2000 included Electra String Quartet, Jon Cleary, austrALYSIS, Sylvia Entcheva, Tim Freedman, Epizo Bangoura, Mike Nock Quartet, Jenny Marie Lang Band and 50 Million Beers, among many others. That very diversity played its part in community-building – the thing that live music does better than any other art form – as fans of Bulgarian folk music rubbed shoulders with fans of New Orleans funk and all the rest, whether over a beer or in a church.

*Website editor's note: The editor of *Jazz* magazine at that time in 1981 was Dick Scott. Shand's article "Lester Bowie: Tying It All Up" appeared in the May/June, 1981 edition of the magazine.

So how do we define this elusive trait in music called truth, and why is it so important? Truth is playing the music rather than the instrument. It is the player or singer extracting essences by meaning every note. This eliminates idle imitation, it eliminates playing off muscle memory and it eliminates the seductive trap of playing to impress. At the same time it intensifies the beauty and deepens the emotions, including that most courageous one of exposing vulnerability. Fundamentally it is purging the bullshit to which all artists can succumb if they are not on their guard against it.



Front, Miles Davis (left) and Bill Evans. Rear, Paul Chambers...

PHOTO CREDIT DON HUNSTEIN

Some musicians never get it. They can spend whole careers trying to impress others or regurgitating the licks of their heroes. Truth is the difference between living it and pretending. It's not Puritanical, it needn't and it can even be funny. It can be as big as Beethoven's Ninth or as theatrical as Warren Ellis; as anguished as Janis Joplin or as raw as Hound Dog Taylor; as lonely as Miles Davis or as soaring as Jonas Kaufmann. Some have an intuitive truth compass from the start, like Billie Holiday, Muddy Waters, Amalia Rodriguez and Arturo Toscanini. Others acquire it with maturity. You can be a little bit pregnant with truth. In the heyday of Oz pub rock, for example, truth was *partially* present in the work of Cold Chisel and Midnight Oil, but hard to spot in say Mi-Sex or Icehouse.

Only musicians committed to propagating truth can come close to profundity, and profundity does not just mean Bach, Mahler or Shostakovich. Profundity means the depth of a groove or the impact of a lyric. It means Elmore James singing *Dust My Broom* or Mariza singing *Primavera*.

One of Orszaczky's many wonders was the way he deepened grooves with his phrasing on bass and piccolo bass. The stop and start points of his lines *combined* with the harmonies to give the music a unique bounce. He once told me, "There are certain parts of a rhythmic structure which have to have weight, and others lightness, and that will give movement." The music rolled rather than rocked, and could be funkier than that of the African Americans who had inspired him.

There is no direct link between truth and technique, except in the negative sense of an excessive preoccupation with facility causing a divergence from the path of truth. Truly great artists who had an iron grip on truth, like Picasso, Samuel Beckett and Paul Motian, actually stripped back their art as they grew older.

Yet no one produces high art without having worked fiendishly hard to reach the point at which they make it. Of the hundreds of people I've interviewed over the last 36 years Keith Jarrett was among the most fascinating. He is not just driven, he is completely obsessed. Orszaczky, too, was obsessive, and for such people making music is not a game, however playful the end-product itself might be. It defines their existence.

While we can remember Orszaczky's concerts and listen to his records to relish his singing, playing, composing, arranging and producing, there was another dimension to his artistry that was as significant as any, and that directly spread truth to other players: his band-leading.

A band-leader dabbles in the black art of human chemistry. What might happen if *this* person were to make music with *that* person? It's a combination of talent-spotting and leaps of the imagination. If the band-leader gets it right the musicians are presented with a field upon which to play that allows them to *maximise* their potential. They are not *subservient* to a vision: rather the vision is implicitly one in which they *fulfil* themselves.

Miles Davis may well have recoiled from being called a free-improviser, yet he had a phase when composition became almost redundant because the composition of his *band* was the catalyst for music-making: personalities striking sparks against each other. I've interviewed two dozen people who played with Miles, from Sonny Rollins to John Scofield, and, however many years had passed and however important their current projects were to them, all were only too happy to talk about that life-changing experience.

Other great band-leaders include the eternally underrated and misunderstood Sun Ra, who also knew all music was one, and who kindled such extraordinary loyalty from monster musicians like John Gilmore and Marshall Allen that they barely had a profile outside his Arkestra. In the world of rock collectivism and dictatorships are more common, although Frank Zappa, someone whom Jack loved, deserves an honourable mention. In the current century the supreme example was Paul Motian. He gave players like Bill Frisell, Joe Lovano and Chris Potter the confidence and

freedom to be themselves, and created contexts in which they had no choice. Truth surrounded them, and to hide behind a mask, whether of technique, opaque emotion or anything else was not an option.



L-R, Joe Lovano, Paul Motian and Bill Frisell... PHOTO CREDIT CHEUNG, CHING MING

I've interviewed some 14 people who worked with Orszaczky, and patently he was blessed with this multiplicity of skills, empathies and insights. His talent-spotting was uncanny, and he, too wanted nothing other than for his players to be themselves. To achieve specific musical results he could sometimes deploy the great director's knack of edging actors towards the desired outcome in a way that made them feel they had discovered it for themselves. Or they came to realise there was really only one truthful option, anyway.

A defining aspect of Orszaczky as a band-leader was that, like Ray Charles, he brought an improviser's mentality to bear on music where improvisation was not necessarily the main focus. Some R&B leaders have been almost tyrannical, and in James Brown's case there was no "almost". I've been lucky enough to hear the stories directly from Maceo Parker! The musical dictator in Jack, however, wore a halo of collaboration and prized spontaneity.

The work of such an artist is not just too beautiful to be lost, it is too important to be forgotten. Yet cultural amnesia is rife in Australia. While the members of the Budget Orchestra keep Orszaczky's legacy alive, the legacies of some of our other significant truth-seekers are endangered: people like, Bernie McGann, David Ades, Mark Simmonds and Phil Treloar. Significant artists don't even have to die to fade from the collective memory. They can just semi-retire or leave our shores.



Judy Bailey: why did it take a German label to show an interest in this material?

PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

If it is vaguely profitable then revered Australian films from bygone years will be made available digitally. But what of classic LPs or classic out-of-print CDs? Are they just forgotten, regardless of quality or influence?

It took a German label to re-release several classic Australian albums from the '60s recently. By the bye, because these were out of copyright the artists, who included Mike Nock and Judy Bailey, were not consulted. The CDs just appeared. But let's dwell on the other issue: Why did it take a *German* label to show an interest in this material? Why no *local* re-releases? This label has a modest profile, and while some Germans may know Nock's work, few probably know Bailey's. Yet it's the *Germans* who think the records are worthy of re-release rather than us. It seems that Philistinism, apathy and cultural amnesia are close to completely taking over this place.

As you know the ABC uses 9994, Don Bradman's batting average, as its postcode. What equivalent celebrations of our artists do we find? Precious few. Many of our finest painters are represented in our major galleries, and the occasional one – a Brett Whiteley, a Margaret Olley or a John Olsen – will gatecrash the consciousness

of the wider public, although more for misbehaviour, eccentricity or living a long time than for their art. And of course our actors who become international film stars are exalted, but more for their celebrity than their artistry. But beyond that the celebrations are hard to spot.

Sydney has a healthier theatre scene than music scene in terms of audience numbers, but certainly not in terms of artistry. The tireless John Wardle could give a thesis on why audience numbers for live music hit a brick wall, but let's say the impact of noise laws, fire egress laws and poker machines in pubs had a head-on collision with the advent of the internet, the commodification of music and an obsession with social media and gadgetry rather than real-life experiences.

Among the myriad reasons why this was a tragedy is the fact that, as I've said, live music engenders a sense of community, as opposed to us merely being a collection of disparate and rather desperate economic units.



Rokia Traore... PHOTO SUPPLIED

Now we find ourselves in the unholy era of Trump, when a lie is heralded as truth, and truth is maligned as a lie. So how should artists respond? Should they cocoon

themselves from the putrid horror of it all, or do they in fact have a role? I believe they do, as any member of the community does. Perhaps just as beauty begets beauty, truth begets truth. If the artist is rigorous and relentless in the pursuit of truths both big and small, perhaps he or she helps the community to inure itself against falsehood. If that sounds farfetched, what is there to lose? At worst the artist is enhancing his or her own art. At best you help people feel their way towards veracity through this fog of falsehood, and you're neither thickening the fog nor polluting your art.

I don't subscribe to the myth that one needs to be impoverished to make good art, but one must inevitably overcome obstacles of one sort or another, and among them is this ultimate battle, where truth wins out and spawns beauty. It's *this* that decides if the art in question has lasting value as well as short-term appeal.



Jackie Orszaczky: blessed with a multiplicity of skills, empathies and insights...
PHOTO SUPPLIED

Truth is not just an imperative for players, it is an imperative for listeners and for critics. Far from being merely a political movement with affiliated ideologies, populism is part of a broader movement of democratisation spawned by the internet. In theory this democratisation sounds like a wonderful development. In practice the ability of search engines to give equal weight to falsehoods as to truths is disastrous. It is this excessive democratisation that allows someone to say that their opinion counts for as much as a doctor's when debating the efficacy of vaccination. It allows another person to claim their opinion is more valid than a scientist's when discussing the anthropological impact on climate change. And of course it has changed the face of everything from restaurant and wine reviews to arts criticism. Some might claim that this development has rendered the role of the professional critic redundant. I agree.

No, just joking.

But of course we critics *are* an endangered species, and our extinction here is looking quite imminent. What does that have to do with truth in music? I guess it comes down to the related issue of truth in reviewing. When you read a blogger's glowing concert review how do you know it wasn't penned by the artist's mum? If a regular theatre blogger talks a theatre company into coughing up free tickets, to what extent does the blogger compromise his or her views in order to continue to receive those tickets? *Truly* independent critics should avoid having their perspectives clouded not just by conflicts of interest, but also by other opinions.

Like most people I suffer from self-doubt – well, most people other than Donald Trump – and I *despair* over bad writing from me or anyone else. I fear that when the professional critic is extinct much of what is left will be misspelt, plodding and cliché-ridden. But apparently we can't turn back the tide.

I began writing reviews in the wake of my Lester Bowie interview being published (for the princely sum of \$40). In 1993 *The Herald* offered me work sharing the jazz reviewing with Peter Jordan, and I swiftly learned that the media are besotted with the concept of The Expert. As someone who refutes the reality of genres I battled against being just a jazz critic, and edged my way into reviewing everything from television shows to Baroque opera, theatre to Patti Smith, musicals to Buddy Guy and Weimar-style cabaret to Rokia Traore. Yet last year I found myself sitting next to the then editor-in-chief at a Sydney Theatre Company production I was reviewing, and when we introduced ourselves he said something like, "Oh, yeah, the jazz guy". Typecasting is not just the bane of actors and musicians, and it does *few* favours for truth or the idea that all music is one.

So let us return to the hypothesis that truth begets not only beauty, but more truth. In this cartoonish, post-truth, Trumpian world of alternative facts we are, as I said, ever more obliged to spread truth as the best way to slap down this insidiousness. Even a single line of honest, heartfelt melody may play a part, because it, in turn, confirms to the listener the beauty and value of emotional truth, and improves their ability detect bullshit. No performer should ever succumb to propagating those fake emotions so highly prized on Eurovision. You know the sort of thing, where the singer screws up his or her face, and hits some shrieking high note that is supposed to speak of inner anguish, but that really just speaks of vulgarity.

A discussion of the outer limits of human capabilities might turn to those who make myriad decisions per microsecond while doing something that requires supreme physical skill, and may put the body and mind under considerable stress. Jet-fighter pilots and Formula One racing drivers are examples. Hang on. Myriad decisions per micro second? Supreme physical skill? Body and mind under some stress? Sound familiar?

The thing that fighter pilots don't have to incorporate is heart. Emotion is the native enemy of analytical decision-making, but music's closest friend. So when you add heart to physical dexterity and instinct-driven speed-of-light decision-making, I would suggest that of all the skills humanity has mastered the most astonishing is making music. And perhaps improvising is greater still. As long as it's truthful.

In a country that suffers from *severe* cultural amnesia and in a world where truth is under grave threat, the Jackie Orszaczky Music Lecture and Concert keeps alive the legacy of a superlative artist who understood all music was one and who only knew *one* way to sing and play: honestly.



Jackie Orszaczky Music Lecturer John Shand: emotion is the native enemy of analytical decision-making, but music's closest friend...