

MARK SIMMONDS: NO SLAVES

by John Shand*

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It barely seems credible that the first ever album from Mark Simmonds' Freeboppers is only now being released - after the band has spent 13 years in the vanguard of Australian jazz. Better late than never... Birdland should get some sort of medal for recognising that Simmonds is one of our most significant players and composers, whose art has cried out for recording. The other labels should be putting on dark glasses and blushing. Then again, they're probably saying Mark who?



The Freeboppers, L-R, Scott Tinker (trumpet), Steve Elphick (bass), Simmonds (tenor sax), Simon Barker (drums)...

**John Shand is a playwright, librettist, author, journalist, drummer and critic. He has written about music (and occasionally theatre) for The Sydney Morning Herald for over 24 years. 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). His website is www.johnshand.com.au.*

Simmonds, born in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1955, has been living in Australia for 18 years. Initially a trumpeter, he swapped to saxophone in 1972, finding he had a natural aptitude for that instrument. He commenced Jazz Studies at the NSW Conservatorium the following year, which coincided with his beginning to move freely in the Sydney jazz scene. He has been moving freely ever since, his vast, impassioned tenor sound like beacon to his listeners.

Just as, during a performance, the music often gushes from him as though something has burst, so Mark needed no prodding to unleash an erudite torrent of opinion, fact and fascinating insight. In a free-wheeling chat at his Redfern flat, Simmonds began by pouncing straight on a subject that clearly needed to be aired.



Simmonds: the music often gushes from him as though something has burst...PHOTO CREDIT DAVID PERRY

"There's a whole bloc in the Australian jazz scene that's been holding things back for years and years. There's this force that says that if you don't play bebop the same way that Charlie Parker played it, then you're not playing it correctly. And it's an incredibly shallow attitude towards music. My music is bebop, but it wouldn't be recognised as such by some people, because I'm more interested in ideas than style.

You don't create something new by knocking down what exists, and trying to create something out of nothing, which some kinds of free-improvisers are into. As far as I am concerned, you take the ideas from the tradition, but not the style."



There's this force that says that if you don't play bebop the same way that Charlie Parker (pictured above) played it, then you're not playing it correctly... PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER

Simmonds went on to explain how this relates to his composing: "A composition arises out of a question; it's an exercise in developing a problem. So you take the ideas that you need to answer these musical problems. You look for things in existing languages that have worked successfully. By lateral thinking, you rearrange ideas from different styles in juxtaposition. And then the problem becomes how to resolve those ideas. I'm not just talking about jazz. I'm talking about composition, or art in general.

"For me, it's very important to be really clear about the difference between bebop as a style - as it was played in the 1940s by Charlie Parker - and the ideas it contained, such as moving away from role-orientated functions in the rhythm section: that is,

the bass and drums being there just to accompany some sax player doing a 20-minute solo. That's the best way to lose an audience. The irony is that people like myself who try to do something original are often called self-indulgent. Whereas the real self-indulgence is people that will get up and play a twenty-minute solo without any concern as to whether they're telling a story that says something to the audience.

"My music is very much about moving away from the kind of restrictions within the group that force certain musicians to be stuck in the role of a *slave*, almost. If someone does a solo as such, it's because they have the strongest thing to say at that point in time; not because it's institutionalised that way. So, at any point in time, even in what might appear to be a saxophone solo, if the drummer picks up on an idea of mine, and an interplay starts happening and ends up as a duet, then there can be periods where the drummer actually takes the lead role."



Mark Simmonds, here on alto sax: to him a swing feel is a body rhythm that runs much deeper than such superficialities... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SMETANA

Simmonds has always liked his drummers to play more drums than cymbals, in order to increase the melodic content, and to get away from the *ting-tinga-ting* cymbal pattern, which he finds a cliché. To him a swing feel is a body rhythm that runs much deeper than such superficialities. When I suggested that the freeing up of the conversational roles has encouraged too many drummers to shout, he pointed out that often this was not so much a matter of the dynamics as the density, and that by moving the music off the cymbals, he avoided the wash that occurs when the

cymbal overtones pile up. He also punctuates his pieces with periods when the rhythm section pulls out completely.

"We have the attitude that you don't make the rhythm happen by what you play. You feel the rhythm, and then anything you play is rhythmic. It's got to be felt first, before you actually play. I think that's a trap a lot of musicians fall into: they think they're going to make something happen by playing a certain way. It can *appear* to be happening, but it's on a very superficial level. The pulse has to be played as little as possible; it is something we all feel rather than play, and it should be communicated to the audience through the ideas, and not because the bass drum's going 'boom, boom, boom'. So everything is on a feeling level rather than a sound level: the musicians are dancing in their bodies, and so their ideas communicate that rhythm to the listener, and the listener dances in his or her body. That's what we're aiming for, anyway."

The rhythmic possibilities of jazz have always been a major attraction for Simmonds, and he has little interest in music that is devoid of this component. "I've never been of the opinion that there is any such thing as free rhythm. A lot of musicians think, quite naively, that when they hear Coltrane in the last couple of years of his life, or Albert Ayler or Cecil Taylor, that they're playing some kind of rubato. I actually thought that, myself, when I was younger. I thought the music didn't swing. But one day I was listening to *Sun Ship* by Coltrane, and the penny dropped that this was the same as *Giant Steps* or something. It swings like mad, but they weren't stating the



John Coltrane: Simmonds was listening to Sun Ship by Coltrane, and the penny dropped... PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY RONALD ATKINS JAZZ FROM NEW ORLEANS TO THE NEW JAZZ AGE

pulse. And I think any good contemporary jazz of that style does swing really strongly. I personally hate it in situations where it's just wallowing around in rubato. I'm very strict about symmetry of phrasing, as well. A lot of people have misconceptions that my music has similarities to Ornette Coleman's. My music comes from bebop, as with Miles and Coltrane. It's very symmetrical in terms of division of time."

You won't find the heads of the tunes getting much of a work-out at a Freeboppers rehearsal. Besides ensuring the pulse of each piece has been internalised by each player in the same way, they mainly concentrate on what Simmonds calls the "the improvising language of each piece", going on to explain that there are certain rhythmic and harmonic juxtapositions to be resolved and dealt with. When I asked if there was not a danger of an established vocabulary restricting the spontaneity of the improvisations, he replied that such a vocabulary is designed to open the music up and to undermine role-orientated functions.



Simmonds: harmonically, his music is not built on complex alterations, so much as polytonality...PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE

"We have a few bits where we allude to stylistic tradition, but it is almost a tribute to certain styles. If the bass and drums go into a traditional swing thing, it's certainly not the norm, though most of what we do are swing feels as such. There are riffs, but the whole idea is that the riff is a motif, just like the horn melody is a motif, which implies certain tonalities and rhythms on which to improvise."

Players working with Simmonds must have a reasonable grasp of the bebop tradition, and a good facility in standard chord changes and substitutions, though he explains that, harmonically, his music is not built on complex alterations, so much as polytonality.

"All my music is about simplicity of content; the complexity happens in context, through the juxtaposition of simple ideas. To my mind, all great music is like that. Most great composers and great musicians have narrowed down their language more and more as they've matured, but the way they deal with that language has become deeper and deeper."

Mention of the possible reintroduction of a piano or guitar to the Freeboppers led to a conversation about the merits of many rock guitarists, sound-wise, over their excessively samey and "clean" jazz counterparts.

"I personally really love John McLaughlin's playing with Miles Davis," said Mark. "I think that John McLaughlin in that period was one of the master musicians of jazz. And it's also a beautiful example of jazz not necessarily being black or Afro-American, as well. Dedication, hard work, talent, courage and persistence go a lot further than what colour skin you've got. I don't think that there is such a thing as Black music, or Afro-American classical music. I don't think music has a colour or a race. I think that's very destructive kind of thinking."



Miles Davis (left) and John McLaughlin: Simmonds loves them playing together...

One of the ways that it becomes destructive is by leading to a tendency to place overseas artists on false pedestals. When Simmonds arrived New York in 1980, for instance, he soon discovered that it took more than one gig to hear the top players performing at the level of their best records. This disappointment was more than offset by the relationship he struck up with saxophonist George Coleman, who was to prove a major influence.

"I was fortunate enough to have a Steinway grand where I was living, and George just loved to play the piano, so he'd come over for an hour lesson, and he'd be there for five or six hours, playing the piano, and writing things out for me. He's a master player of the traditional chord progressions. He filled in some of the gaps in my bebop playing, and he also enabled me to make the connection between my own music and bebop, in terms of the language. That was probably the most important thing. So the way I play my own music is still very much coming out of the things I learned from George Coleman."



American saxophonist George Coleman: he enabled Simmonds to make the connection between his own music and bebop, in terms of the language...

To my ears, Mark Simmonds and the late Mery Acheson have produced two of Australia's most instantly recognisable tenor sounds. Simmonds explained that there was no secret beyond what he described as "elitist listening": concentrating on Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane. Other players were listened to for musical reasons, but not so much for the sound and technique of the saxophone. This partly explains the lushness of his sound; something that sadly fell from favour sometime in the '50s.

"It's still unfashionable now," Simmonds suggested. "I'm an expressionist, most definitely, if you're going to give it one of those aesthetic descriptions. That thing you

were saying about guitar players applies to saxophone players as well, particularly tenor players. Wayne Shorter, for instance, has been a big hero for a lot of Australian players, and maybe Michael Brecker. Whereas I've never been a fan of Wayne Shorter. I've always been a big fan of Coltrane, but not so much the '50s Coltrane. As far as the '50s went, for me there was only ever Sonny Rollins. Coltrane developed a bigger sound in the '60s."



Simmonds has never been a fan of Wayne Shorter (pictured above)... As far as the '50s went, for Simmonds there was only ever Sonny Rollins (pictured below)...
ROLLINS PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY BRUCE CALE



Other heroes were Archie Shepp; the aforementioned Merv Acheson, with his sound like aural honey; Charlie Holmes; Johnny Hodges; Benny Carter. On the current Australian scene, Simmonds particularly enjoys Paul Furniss' playing in the swing style.



Heroes of Mark Simmonds: Merv Acheson (above) with his sound like aural honey; and Paul Furniss (below) playing in the swing style... ACHESON PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN COURTESY OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ FURNISS PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



"I went and sat in with his band on Saturday night, and what a great band. You wouldn't get a band playing that music any better than that anywhere in the world. He's a great all-round musician. For my money, he and Bob Barnard are two of the best players Australia's ever produced. They've got that magic fluidity that just flows out. Everything they play is rhythmically sparkling, and they've got the sound."



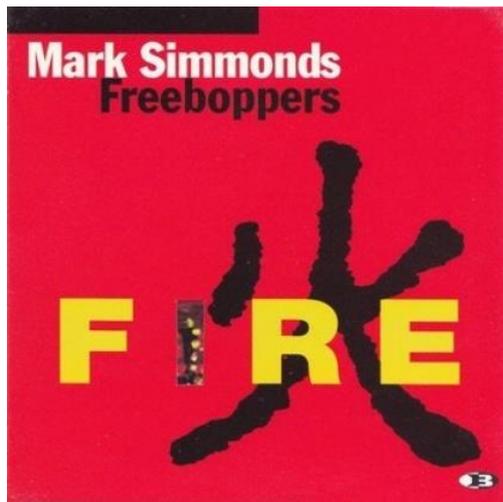
Simmonds says that Paul Furniss and Bob Barnard (above) are two of the best players Australia's ever produced. They've got that magic fluidity that just flows out... PHOTO CREDIT TERRY MILLIGAN

Mark seldom plays gigs outside the Freeboppers any more. He attributes this to having spent too long working in bands to make the money that would supposedly allow him to concentrate on his own music. As countless others have learned, the system did not work.

"It ended up being really soul-destroying, and I nearly killed myself, really. So I can't afford to do that anymore. I'd rather just hang in. I think there's a light at the end of the tunnel. Look at the amount of local jazz records coming out. It's fantastic."

Finally added to that list comes *Fire*, the long-awaited debut album from the Freeboppers (reviewed elsewhere in these pages). It was recorded earlier this year using a valve tape-recorder, going direct-to-stereo, so there was no re-mixing. For what was to be a single CD, it proved impossible to pick which tracks to leave out. Producer Kieran Stafford's solution was to release a double. The material is all written by Simmonds, except for a rather oblique version of *Body and Soul*, on which he alludes to the melody about as much as Coleman Hawkins does on his classic takes.

"After a couple of hours we'd done two tunes, and weren't very happy with them. Then we got into a groove and did something like nineteen tunes in one or two takes.



We came back the next afternoon for a couple of hours and did a couple of tunes, and redid the two tracks that we'd done at the beginning of the first day. A lot of it was getting the right sound and balance in the studio; just getting used to it and getting warmed up. We didn't even go into the sound-room to listen to what we'd just done. We went in there after the first hour, altered the balance a bit, and then we just played."

Given the intensity with which Simmonds yearns for his music to be "right", I had thought he might be a difficult person to record, in that he would never be satisfied with a given take. In fact, this was why he avoided the booth, not wanting either the false elation or the negative cringe feeling that can predominate at the time. Ultimately pleased with the result, Mark's main concern is that a listening audience used to a diet of digital compression will find the sound rather confronting.



Simmonds says that drummer Simon Barker (above) has done a wonderful job in a short time... PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS

"It's a matter of it being as close as we can get at this point in time. I think there's a hell of a lot of room for improvement there. But the drumming, for instance, is sensational. I think Simon [Barker] has done a wonderful job in a short time, given that I put a lot of pressure on him."

Like any composer, and particularly a jazz composer, Simmonds is reliant on the interpretive powers the players bring to his material. From so many years of the Freeboppers existing, there is now a pool of musicians who are familiar with the music and the philosophy. A large part of his own understanding of his compositions has come from hearing how other band members have attacked them. He will then throw back at the musicians ideas that they may have originated.



Simmonds: dedication, hard work, talent, courage, and persistence go a lot further than what colour skin you've got... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

"Maybe I've been more aware of the idea when it's happened than they've been when they've played it. But what I do is try to create the vehicle for people to find their own originality. Each musician approaches the music in a very different way. Simon plays very differently to previous drummers Greg Sheehan or Andrew Gander. So there is actually an incredible amount of freedom." Now the ice has been broken, one can only hope that Mark Simmonds will be free to record his vibrant music again and again, without us all having to wait another thirteen years.