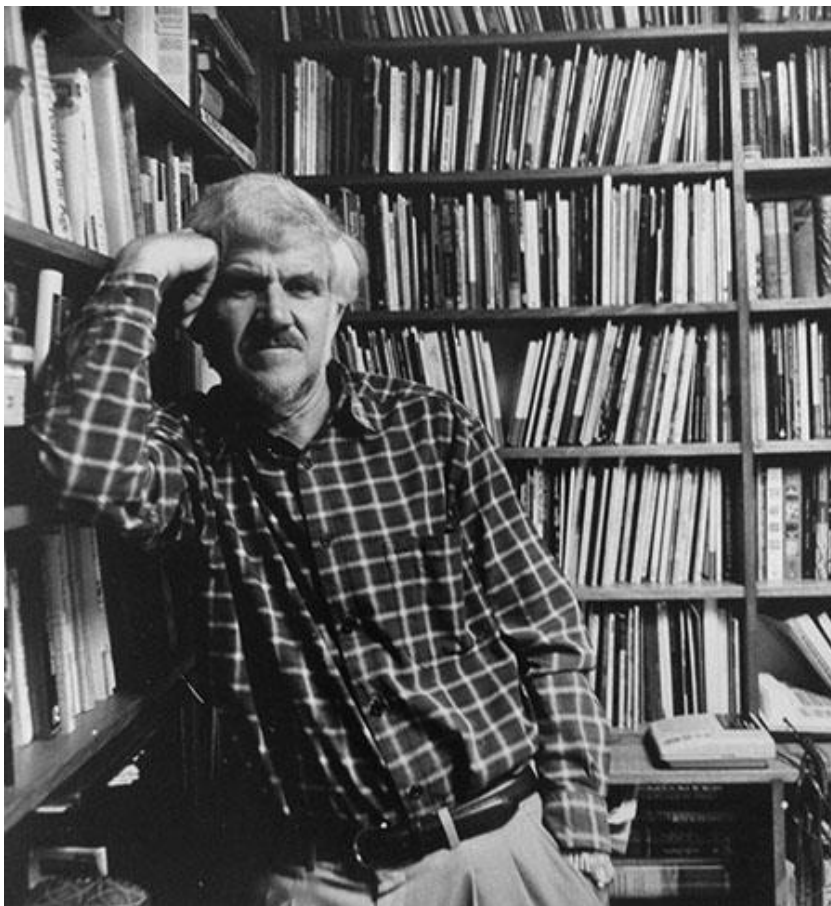


***BERNIE McGANN: A LIFE IN JAZZ*** by Geoff Page. Published by Kardoorair Press, Armidale, 1998. 137 pages. RRP \$20.00

**Reviewed by John Shand\***

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No-one would argue that Bernie McGann, one of the most strikingly original musicians this country has produced, is not worthy of a biography. Books on Australian jazz and its practitioners have been about as rare as people who have become rich playing it. Congratulations, therefore, are due to Geoff Page and his publishers for getting *Bernie McGann: A Life in Jazz* up at all. Selling recordings of Australian jazz artists is hard enough, let alone trying to sell books or magazines about the people making the recordings.



*Geoff Page (pictured) has pursued his subject with the devotion and ardour of a fan, and this enthusiasm bubbles through in his casual, magazine-style prose...*

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Page has pursued his subject with the devotion and ardour of a fan, and this enthusiasm bubbles through in his casual, magazine-style prose. It is infectious enough to carry the reader along, and if that reader shares anything of Page's love for McGann's music, it is absorbing material.

McGann's life is spread out across the decades in loosely chronological form, from his childhood in Sydney's Granville, through depping for his father as a drummer, to taking up the alto saxophone and going on to carve out an iconoclastic niche for himself in jazz. The text is coloured with anecdotes well worth the telling. Page is at his best recounting in lively fashion stories of the Last Straw's tour of Russia or the McGann Trio's tour of Europe, which bristle with references to lambs slaughtered while-you-wait or vodka flowing like water.

However some debatable decisions were made in the creation of the work. A percentage of these are just a matter of style and taste, while others are more pivotal, undermining the presentation of the subject-matter to a greater or lesser degree. Most significant is the lack of exploration of the dynamics of McGann's musical rapport with the people most closely associated with him. Given the book's subtitle and Page's obvious intention of somehow getting inside McGann's music and rendering something of its quintessence in words, it is a glaring omission. In the case of McGann's collaboration with John Pochée, the absence of such discussion is akin to trying to examine John Coltrane's contribution to jazz without investigating his interaction with Elvin Jones.

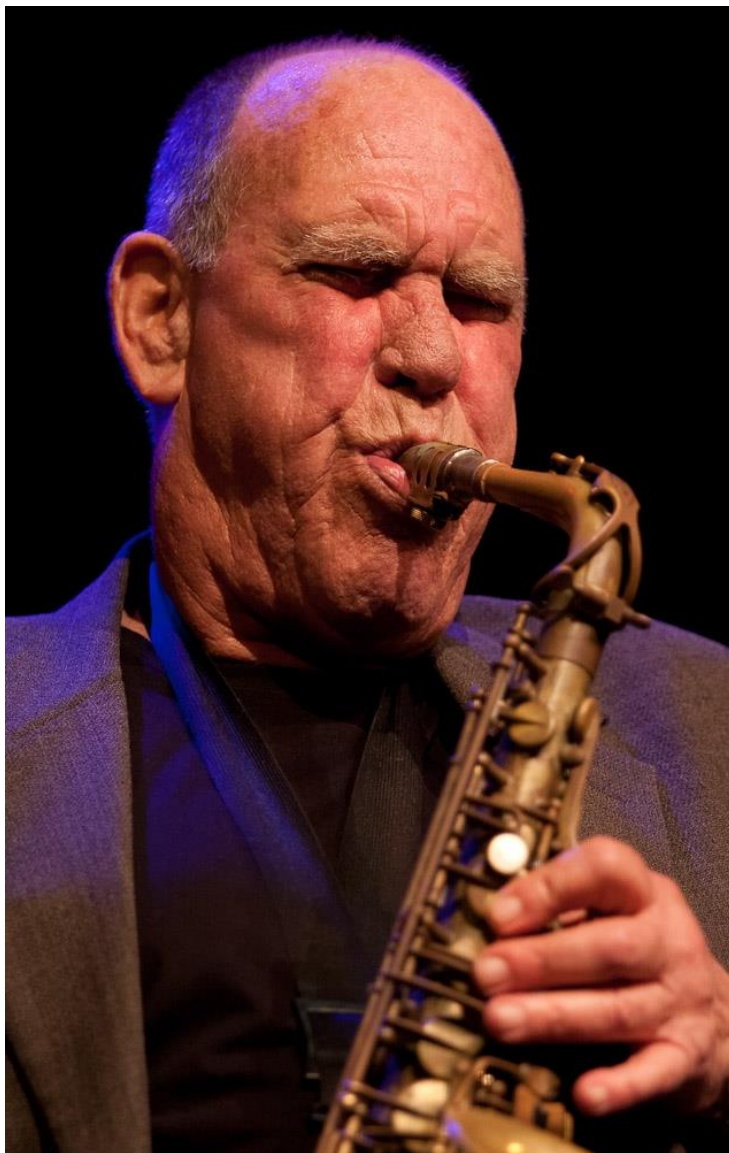


*John Pochée (left) and Bernie McGann snapped in London: their collaboration is not discussed in this book...*

Page skims over the issue in the body of the book, and attempts to close in on it at the end, when providing edited transcriptions of interviews with 13 musicians talking about the saxophonist. Pochée speaks in general terms of the rapport between McGann and himself, but that is as far as we get. Perhaps the issue proved impenetrable, or perhaps Page hears the rhythm-section as being rather subservient to the soloist, and therefore of negligible consequence in determining what and how the soloist plays.

The book's other fundamental problem occurs in the way Page deals with McGann the man. Great biographers from Suetonius to Richard Ellman have been rightly at pains to convey as much of the essential character of their subject as possible. Page seems almost embarrassed to delve. During the transcribed interview which ends the book, McGann confesses to being "a bit of a loner", yet there is no exploration in the body of the book of whether this is so, why it may be so, and its ramifications personally and musically.

Indeed Page even apologises at one point during that same interview for potentially embarrassing McGann, when pursuing a line of questioning about originality of style. While one may deduce Page is a decent enough bloke to have such sensitivities, these sensitivities cannot be part of the biographer's make-up if a comprehensive picture of the subject is to emerge. Otherwise the end result is in danger of being reduced to a eulogy with dates attached. Thankfully, this book is much more than that, but the observation remains relevant.



*There is no exploration in the body of the book as to why McGann says he is "a bit of a loner"...PHOTO COURTESY ABC JAZZ*

Other criticisms are more minor. For instance, while opening the book with a discourse on McGann's highly individual sound is commendable, it seems rather bald to hit the reader with almost two pages of press quotes on the matter. Some of these reappear subsequently in the body of the text, and perhaps there could have been a more elegant, integrated way of incorporating the quotes if Page feels they are so vital.

The book is studded with photographs from McGann's childhood through to the current era.

The shots themselves are good, and some much better than that, so it is a shame the reproduction quality is no better than newsprint and that they have nearly all been reproduced in such small dimensions.

Finally, a text of this nature without an index radically undermines its own usefulness as a research-tool. If it goes into a second print-run, an index should be added, complementing the admirable discography.



*A classic shot taken in 1966 at the Katoomba Jazz Festival, L-R, Dave MacRae (piano), McGann (alto sax) Bob Bertles (tenor sax, obscured behind McGann), John Pochée (drums), Andy Brown (bass)...*

Despite these reservations, Page is to be applauded. He may not have produced a definitive biography of McGann, but he has, nonetheless, come up with an eminently readable, informative and enjoyable work. Any subsequent biographer will be hugely indebted to him.