

TONY GORMAN: CALMING EVERY MOLECULE WITH ONE LONG NOTE

by John Shand*

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For veteran jazz musician Tony Gorman making music is these days equal parts art and therapy. The brilliant saxophonist and clarinetist was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 20 years ago, leaving him with numbness in his legs, hands and half his face, making playing a monumental challenge.



Tony Gorman in 1990: for many years he had to inject himself with Betaferon which initially had horrendous side-effects...PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

*In 2019 John Shand is 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 got out of bed one morning and I fell flat on my face," he recalls. "I couldn't feel anything from the waist down."

For many years he had to inject himself with Betaferon which initially had horrendous side-effects. "I met people who did it once and just said, 'No, I'd rather die'," says Gorman, who persisted. "I'm glad I went through it, because I'm sure it's one of the main reasons I'm actually on my feet today."

Among the many accomplishments of his 45-year professional career, Gorman founded the Monday Club, a group of improvisers with a penchant for using long, slow notes as musical building blocks. And it's at the ensemble's regular rehearsals and gigs that those long tones work their magic.



Long notes: Tony Gorman, left, and fellow Monday Club member Paul Cutlan...
PHOTO CREDIT NICK MOIR

"As soon as I close my eyes and play a long note, everything in my body calms down," says Gorman. "Every molecule. My nervous system, even without the MS, just twitters like a sparrow. I've got a very high energy level, and the long notes are the ultimate antidote, because you cannot play them unless you don't move a muscle."

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Gorman was given his first saxophone when he was 14.

"I was at that age," he says, "with no interests, in an industrial town with nothing but alcohol, fights in the street and snooker halls. This was my way out."

He attended the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and by 19 had two diplomas and was playing in rock and jazz bands, as well as with the Scottish

Chamber Orchestra under Richard Hickox. Shortly after, he decided to pursue jazz over classical music.

In 1986 he met and subsequently married the eminent Australian saxophonist Sandy Evans, moved to Sydney and co-led or played in such acclaimed projects as Clarion Fracture Zone, GEST8 and Mara!. His career was peaking just before the MS struck.



Tony Gorman (left) pictured here with eminent Australian saxophonist Sandy Evans, whom he met in 1986 and subsequently married... PHOTO CREDIT MATTHEW SUTTON

The Monday Club will perform on Saturday as part of the Sacred Music Festival, which opens this weekend and continues around various Sydney venues for a fortnight.

Gorman's story will also be the subject of a new film by Shanni Dalton, *No Boundaries*, which will premiere before the group's festival performance.

Dalton describes a sequence in which Gorman plays a passage of long, deep notes.

"When he finishes the piece he looks up, and I think that you sense how the music affects him. It just restores balance, peace, harmony and quietness," she says. "And I think that's what he thinks is sacred."