

ANDREW FIRTH: OUTWARD BOUND

by David Sly*

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

Andrew Firth plays the life out of his reed instruments each time he takes to the stage. The force of his effusive personality and virtuosic flair, particularly on the clarinet, has seen the 27-year-old Adelaide musician compared favourably with such players as James Morrison, and made him popular with audiences. Curiously, it has also cast him adrift from the contemporary clique of young jazz players. Rather than be perturbed by this exclusion, Firth remains adamant that he is heading in the right direction, giving life to the music in his heart rather than being influenced by trends or fashions.



Andrew Firth on clarinet: heading in the right direction, giving life to the music in his heart... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

** In 1994, David Sly was an Adelaide-based music journalist. He remains a professional journalist – his writing extending to also cover food, wine and travel – and in 2019 teaches journalism at Flinders University. He also remains a busy drummer in several blues and rock bands.*

"I don't want to be talked about as being hip, I want to be entertaining," Firth says. "I'm not cool, I'm not hip. I want to move away from the strict jazz stereotype of the '90s. I can play any style but what I want is to play music that people enjoy."

Firth talks tough about his art and ideas of jazz as entertainment, but admits that he is wrestling with how to best forge his own identity in jazz. Having established a playing reputation from winning the Ricky May Encouragement Award in 1988 performing at Japan's Monterey Jazz Festival and releasing two self-financed CDs - *Let There Be Firth* and *Fresh Starts* - Firth says he is now in a period of flux. His decision to leave Australia in November to establish a new working base in England underscores his season of change.



Firth (second from left) pictured here with his two major mentors Don Burrows (far left) and James Morrison (far right) towards the end of a concert at the Sydney Town Hall. Others towards the back are L-R, bassist Craig Scott and drummer John Morrison... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

"I have people that inspire me but I've learned that it's no use trying to copy their genius. Every player has got to find what their own gifts are, and travel will help me do that," Firth says.

Firth's move represents a significant gamble. He intends to study arranging and orchestrations with John Dankworth, play with Kenny Ball, stage his own profile gigs and forge a path of work for himself through Europe. However, he has no record company support, and figures he has funds to sustain him for three months if no

significant work or contract offers come his way. And if that happens, Firth says he'll return to Australia, to earn enough money to go back and try again.



In the UK Firth would like to study with John Dankworth (pictured above) and play with Kenny Ball (below)...DANKWORTH PHOTO COURTESY JACK MITCHELL



"Hopefully I'll be doing enough to get me on the path," Firth says. "I'm going over there to struggle, but it's an investment in my future."

Firth's decision to travel was forged with advice from his mentors - most notably Don Burrows and James Morrison - and the encouragement of star players he has toured with, including Wynton Marsalis and B B King. Firth says he needed such guidance because he has been plagued by doubt. He had even cast aside the clarinet two years ago, steering his energy instead to the soprano saxophone after being seduced by the fresh sound and overwhelming success enjoyed by Kenny G. Don Burrows guided Firth back, writing him a letter of encouragement which said: "When playing the saxophone comes to a dead end for you, come back to the clarinet". Within a year, Firth did just that, appreciating the instrument with greater maturity - and understanding where its unique sound belongs.

"The clarinet is too much of a lady to be in the streets," Firth says. "It doesn't fit the sleazy US street sound that is fashionable. Swing is the essential element in what I'm trying to find. It has the beat and the joy of life to its sound which makes it stand out from everything else."

Firth has styled a sound which isn't built around trying to impress people with technical trickery despite his prowess. He's already tried that line but says it was too shallow and confining. "Just showing off with technique is not getting me to where I want to be," Firth says, "Technique is like alcohol. A little of it is great but once you have too much, you lose judgement and get yourself into trouble. You end up sacrificing your musicality. I've seen guys turn into technoholics, when they move right away from the music. I find that very sad."



Firth (far left) in good company as usual. Others L-R are John Morrison (drums), Ed Gaston (bass) and Glenn Henrich (vibes)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Despite his allegiances toward more traditional jazz stylists and swing, Firth still sees himself as a talent with a fresh view.

"I'm not an old-school player. I'm a young, impetuous music hothead. It's just that I'm not so much trying to break new ground - more trying to make an impact. I'm quite prepared to polarise an audience, to do something that I want and believe in. I could do that cutting edge, intrinsic stuff and be seen as hip. I know that but I'd rather be sure of who I am and be true to that notion."

He stopped, reflected on what he just said and shook his head with a weary smile.

"Putting it that way, perhaps you're right. Perhaps I do have an old man's head on a young man's shoulders."