

## INSIDE THE MUSICIAN: A JAZZ PARTY

by David Theak\*

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*Jazz saxophonist, bandleader, educator and protagonist, David Theak discusses what shaped his musical outlook and the direction his diverse and somewhat unorthodox career has taken. This was part of Loudmouth's "Inside The Musician" series, and appeared on August 31, 2021 in the Music Trust's Loudmouth.*



*David Theak: raised in a house of impromptu parties... PHOTO CREDIT ISABELLA RAIBOW*

I was raised in a house of parties...impromptu parties (like the time an entire Welsh rugby team arrived at the family home), parties that straddled the weekend, parties where the local loose-cannons turned up uninvited, parties for the recently departed, a party because we haven't had a party for while...you name the occasion and we'd find a reason to celebrate it, but it was always accompanied by live music. The home phone would ring... "Darling, we're having a party! [I'd feign surprise]...can you rustle up a band?"

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*\*Saxophonist, educator, bandleader, festival director, composer, and jazz protagonist, David Theak has enjoyed an exciting and dynamic career at the core of the Australian jazz scene since the 1990s. As artistic director of the Jazzgroove Mothership Orchestra, David collaborated with a who's who of international jazz musicians while touring the ensemble nationally several times. David is currently a senior lecturer in jazz at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, artistic director of the Australian National Jazz Orchestra, an advisory panel member of the Western Australian Youth Jazz Orchestra, president of the Sydney Improvised Music Association and artistic director of the Sydney Con Jazz Festival.*

As a kid, I'd longingly listen to our downstairs neighbour teaching piano every afternoon. This led to lessons, which led to my single Mum saving up and miraculously sneaking in a piano to our third floor unit while I was sleeping on Christmas Eve. I loved the lessons, the conversations with my music teacher, the pieces I should (my AMEB exam pieces) and shouldn't play (my improvisations & variations) and so the piano remained my first love until the bandmistress at Mona Vale PS, introduced me to a saxophone!

I was smitten but I wasn't allowed to play it yet; I needed to pay my dues on the baritone horn for a couple of years first. When I finally got my hands on a sax and started taking lessons with a local jazzman, I knew I'd found something unique, and slightly dangerous which sparked my curiosity for life. After a brief stint at the Conservatorium High School, I found myself back at my local high school with some enthusiastic music teachers who encouraged us to improvise and created opportunities for us to play in jazz and rock bands. It was social, it was addictive, the music was interesting, plus we had loads of fun! Bands with names like Fat Rabbits and Mixed Business would hire the local surf clubs, throw rent parties, and take home hats filled with crumpled notes after entertaining people all night. Cue more gigs, Battles of the Bands, TV appearances (once I had a sax battle with a young James Valentine), and dynamic new friendships, and this all made music seem like a fulfilling life that I had to lead.



*Theak once had a sax battle with a young James Valentine (pictured above)...*  
*PHOTO CREDIT KEITH SAUNDERS*

This trip down memory lane highlights to me the importance of community, relationships, celebration, joy and personal passion that frames the way I view my musical world, and has led to some broad experiences as a musician and facilitator that have given me some unusual perceptions of the music world and left me with some ambitions for jazz as an ongoing and vibrant art form.

So how do I make music? I view my music making through the dual lenses of practitioner and facilitator. In my university years I had unrealistic ambitions of taking on the jazz world as a virtuoso tenor man. I was deeply engaged in practising, composing, gigging, releasing my own albums and organising tours of Australia & Europe for my quartet Theak-tet until I realised there weren't many opportunities to perform the music I loved, or CD labels queuing up to release creative jazz music or platforms for myself and my fellow jazz composers to have our music expressed in a professional context. This dilemma led to a period of deep reflection about how I could affect these problems and what sort of role was there for someone like me - someone who absolutely loves performing but equally enjoys the camaraderie, the relationships, the touring and post show hangs, the electricity during interval at a happening show, but mostly the satisfaction of seeing my jazz colleagues and students performing at the highest possible level to enthusiastic audiences.

In response to a lack of venues for emerging jazz musicians in the 90s, I became involved in a fantastic musician-led organisation, the Jazzgroove Association as we moved into a more formal structure gaining NSW and Federal government funding that allowed us to present a program of dynamic new music every week, create a CD label that went on to release over 100 CDs and form an original creative jazz orchestra, the Jazzgroove Mothership Orchestra that released six CDs of original music and toured Australia several times in collaboration with some of the world's leading jazz musicians over a period of 13 years.



*The JazzGroove Mothership Orchestra, with David Theak at the prow...*

In more recent years my involvement with SIMA, WAYJO and the formation of the Australian National Jazz Orchestra (and ANJO Youth Big Band) has only strengthened the idea that for me, music is about community, a common purpose,



and of course about music creation at the highest level that hopefully brings as many people to the party as possible by encouraging audience creation and development. These days I find that I'm making more music than ever but without playing the saxophone as much. I view myself as a music creator and my role as not just performing music but also helping create opportunities for it to be performed, broadcast, recorded and commissioned. Sometimes it's connecting artists, often it's introducing people looking for a venue or a festival to collaborate with, less often than I'd like it's commissioning composers and curating new projects. These past five years it has included running a boutique international jazz festival and dreaming of new programs that I'd like to hear, then finding the money, convincing the artists to come along for the ride, concocting a way to get them all in the same room and waving my arms around until we've collectively created something that always surpasses my dreams. Sometimes music creation for me is contacting one of the many incredibly talented musicians in my world and offering them a rare opportunity to create something of their own and sometimes it's simply sparking curiosity or ambition in a student and watching where they take things.

My future ambitions for the music scene revolve around building and strengthening institutions that create jazz, present jazz and develop jazz audiences. There has been great progress with the work of the Sydney Improvised Music Association, ABC Jazz, the continued high standard of Jazz Course graduates (with many of them on full scholarships at leading US jazz programs) and a handful of brave domestic jazz festivals that are presenting amazing new music to Australian audiences.



*Theak: his primary dream is to create a jazz ensemble of national significance with the Australian National Jazz Orchestra...*  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

But my primary dream is to create a jazz ensemble of national significance with the Australian National Jazz Orchestra and give at least 20 Australian jazz musicians the opportunity to have a life similar to our salaried classical orchestral colleagues. The quality of elite jazz musicians in this country is genuinely world-class, yet the integrity of their artistry isn't always reflected by their day-to-day performance situations and remuneration and this is something we should all aspire to change as we invite jazz to the music party as a vibrant, sophisticated and dynamic guest.