

THE PROFESSOR: ANDREW SPEIGHT

by Gordon R Webb

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Andrew Speight on soprano saxophone: jazz musician, educator, composer, producer, and musical and artistic director...

Last month I had the pleasure of interviewing jazz musician, educator, composer, producer, and musical and artistic director, Andrew Speight. The following article is the result of those interviews, combined with my own knowledge and a bit of research.

In 1979, the legendary jazz pianist and bandleader Count Basie toured Australia. As many of you will recall these were dark days for purveyors of what was then referred to as traditional or acoustic jazz, but the Count Basie Orchestra was still popular.

When Count Basie performed in Sydney, “the musician’s union made the concert promoter hire an act of similar stature to perform as a support act,” Andrew said. “At the time there was only one ‘professional’ big band in town, and the Young Northside Big Band,” which was Australia’s first high quality student band – founded and directed by Andrew’s father, John Speight. The promoter chose the latter.

“They were the cheaper option,” Andrew joked, but in reality the YNBB had just released a record using several Basie arrangements. ‘The Count’ was so impressed by

their performance at the Sydney Opera House that he invited them to play at the prestigious Monterey Jazz Festival. John accepted the invitation and the fundraising began – car washes, concerts, sponsorships, etc.

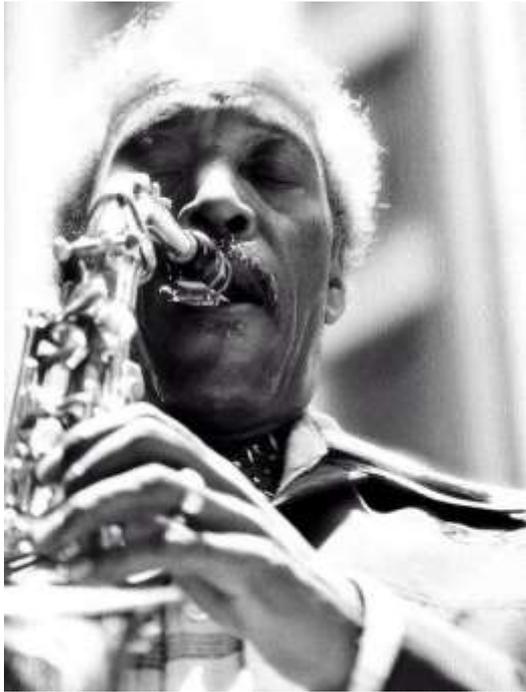
John was so taken with the Monterey jazz experience, and the lovely surroundings, that he decided to start a jazz festival of his own at the beautiful seaside resort of Manly, Australia. For nearly 30 years John served as the artistic director of the Manly Jazz Festival, which grew substantially under his guidance – nowadays the festival draws up to 100,000 people. When John passed away in 2007, Andrew took over the reins as artistic director.



Andrew's father John Speight (with cap), at the Manly Jazz Festival in the early 80s. Standing next to Speight in the dark glasses is the American trumpeter John Hoffman, and the orchestra is probably the John Hoffman Big Band...

If your quest in life was to be a jazz musician, Andrew grew up under ideal circumstances. His father happened to be a first rate jazz piano player who also led the top trio in Sydney. Horn players often toured without a backup group and would play with a jazz club's 'house band.' Andrew's father not only supported touring jazz saxophone titans such as Sonny Stitt and Johnny Griffin, but they occasionally came back to his home for basement jam sessions. When he was only 14, Andrew received a late night informal sax lesson from Stitt.

"I'd give anything to have that lesson back," Andrew said. Since the age of 10, Andrew snuck into jazz clubs (with his father's assistance) and with help of live jazz education he progressed quickly on the alto saxophone. By the time he was 18, he was invited to tour with Nat Adderley's group, playing with jazz masters like Nat, Jimmy Cobb and Jimmy Heath.



At 14 years of age, Andrew received a late night informal sax lesson in Sydney from Sonny Stitt (pictured above)... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

In 1990, Andrew relocated to Woodshed in New York and in 1991 was named one of the six finalists in the prestigious Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition – easily the most talked-about finals in the history of the annual contest. That was the year that Joshua Redman, Eric Alexander and Chris Potter – now regarded as three of the most talented and recognized sax players in the world – finished first, second and third. What most folks don't know is one of the other finalists was Andrew Speight. What if Eric had been sick?



In 1991, when Andrew was one of the six finalists in the Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition, it was won by Joshua Redman (pictured above)...

While in New York, Andrew roomed, jammed and performed live with several of the future stars of jazz, as well as many of the veterans. But he ran into visa difficulties and ended up accepting a teaching position at Michigan State University. While at MSU, he established the Bachelor of Arts degree in Jazz Studies. Nearly a decade later, in 2002, he accomplished the same thing at San Francisco State University, where he currently teaches saxophone and is the Director of the Jazz Studies program he founded.

While focusing much of his attention on academia, Andrew has still found time to play and record with some of the finest musicians in the history of jazz, including: Ellis, Branford & Wynton Marsalis, Jimmy Heath, Phil Woods, Benny Carter, Jimmy Cobb, Eric Alexander, Ray Drummond, Ronnie Mathews, Junior Cook, Frank Wess, etc. He also performed with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra in 1993. His releases and other appearances on CD include: *Speight* (1997), the ARIA [Australian Grammy]-award winning *Quartet* (1998), *Marsalis Music Honors Jimmy Cobb* (2006) and *Tough Guys* (2008) by Generations. Andrew formed the Generations Band with several of the musicians named above. He is the group's artistic director, plays alto sax, and co-produces their CDs and DVDs.



The Generations Band, L-R, Speight (alto saxophone), Ray Drummond (bass), Jimmy Cobb (drums), Eric Alexander (tenor saxophone), Marcus Belgrave (trumpet), Ronnie Mathews (piano)...

Andrew has developed into a modern day jazz master and one of the best alto saxophone players in the world. That's a pretty bold statement, but the more I listen, the more I'm convinced. Andrew possesses a unique, gorgeous tone (not too pretty) that is often described as clear or clean. He's a melodic player, especially on standards, but won't hesitate to heat things up when necessary. His playing is passionate, bop oriented and hard driving. Possessed with an effortless swing, it seems as though he could solo forever with new ideas constantly flowing. Andrew's also not afraid to mix things up by adding Benny Carter type vibrato to his version of the ballad *Easy Living*, or getting down with the blues on *Back to the Old School*

where he holds one note in particular that will have you hootin' and hollering. And nobody alive today plays Charlie Parker like Speight – nobody.

Personally, I don't think Andrew needs that Sonny Stitt lesson back. The student has become the teacher and he is obviously doing all he can to share his knowledge and talent. In addition to being a sax professor and head of the jazz studies program at SFSU, Andrew volunteers time to the Stanford Jazz Festival (and several others), leads the Generations Band and for seven years ran the Monday night student session at the Shanghai 1930 jazz club in San Francisco.



Speight: the student has become the teacher and he is doing all he can to share his knowledge and talent...

“It’s too bad it shut down. Shanghai was a great place to play – wonderful acoustics, and a good way to teach the kids,” Andrew described.

Shanghai 1930 and Jazz at Pearl’s may be gone, but you can still catch one of the world’s finest musicians blowing his alto sax once a week at the Dogpatch Saloon [22nd and Third St] in San Francisco. Nearly every Sunday between 4.30 and 8.30 pm, you can enjoy the Andrew Speight Quartet with various guests.

As an elderly gentleman – who could barely stand, walk or sit – said recently after one of Speight’s blistering bop solos, “That’s what I come here for!”

Andrew’s father John Speight died in February, 2007. His obituary written by John Shand, appears on this website at the link

<https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-22>.