

SANDY EVANS: IN CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL WEBB*

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Sandy Evans, performer, composer and activist, is a major voice in contemporary Australian musical life. Sandy's composition *Testimony* about the life and music of Charlie Parker with poetry by the Pulitzer prize winning American poet Yusef Komunyakaa - commissioned originally by ABC Radio – was premiered by The Australian Art Orchestra in the Concert Hall at The Sydney Opera House for The Sydney Festival in January 2002. Her innovative work with the ensembles Clarion Fracture Zone, AustrALYSIS, Ten Part Invention, The catholics, Waratah, Mara! and the Australian Art Orchestra among others, was recognized in 2003 when she was awarded the inaugural Bell Award for Australian jazz musician of the year. In 2004, Sandy and composer Tony Gorman launched GEST8, an eight-piece ensemble of outstanding Australian musicians, which unites jazz, non-western, electronic and experimental musical elements. Sandy is involved as an educator at various levels and is constantly exploring across musical boundaries.

**In 2008 when this interview took place Michael Webb was a lecturer in the Music Education Unit at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, the University of Sydney. Michael finds the diversity and originality of contemporary Australian jazz inspirational and he is committed to encouraging its study and practices in Australian music education.*

Michael Webb writes: This is an edited transcript of an interview I undertook recently with Sandy. We spoke twice, both times in my office at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music on the Thursday afternoons of 15 May 2008 and 12 June 2008. The first session turned out to be more formal and interview-like while the second, with more time available, became more like a conversation. Immediately prior to the first session Sandy had conducted a gruelling two-hour workshop on improvisation with a large group of students enrolled in the music education degree; hence our conversation began with the art of teaching. Much of the second session touched on being a learner, and concluded with Sandy's thoughts on learning to become an Australian musician at this moment in history.

MICHAEL: Starting with today—literally and metaphorically—can I ask you about how you became involved in passing on the music tradition and about some of your experiences as a teacher?

SANDY: In many ways I see my involvement in education as the most important aspect of my work. As you were asking the question I had a flashback to one of the people who had the biggest influence on the ways I have developed my ideas about teaching improvisation and that is Paul McNamara, one of my teachers at the Con [Sydney Conservatorium of Music]. Many jazz musicians found Paul an exceptional teacher of improvisation. I got from him the importance of mentorship



Paul McNamara at the piano: a big influence on the ways Sandy Evans has developed her ideas about teaching improvisation...

which underlies the teaching of, particularly, an oral tradition. Jazz has traditionally been learnt through listening to other jazz musicians and playing with them. All the players we look up to historically have learned in a social context by listening to other players, whether on CD or actually going out live and playing with them. The human element of playing with other people is the fundamental aspect of music education that really allows people to develop and to grow. This has been reinforced to me

recently through the study I've undertaken in Indian classical music. That system is based entirely on working with a teacher or a guru and learning by ear characteristic phrases that your teacher deems to be at the right level for you on that particular day. To me that makes a good deal of sense in terms of the way improvising should be passed on. In the '70s, systems of analysing and passing on information about how to approach constructing a melody over chord changes became quite extensive, through the Jamey Aebersold system, for example, and my first experiences of learning as a jazz musician were through that system. In the 1980s there used to be jazz clinics in Sydney and Melbourne run by Jamey Aebersold, where a whole group of incredible American musicians would come here for a week, people like Freddie Hubbard, Woody Shaw, John Scofield, Steve Swallow.



The US educator Jamey Aebersold: analysing and passing on information about how to approach constructing a melody over chord changes became quite extensive, through his system...

MICHAEL: Dave Liebman.

SANDY: Dave Liebman... the list was huge... there was this phenomenal influx of people... David Baker as well... So musicians of my generation got all this information and exposure in intense one-week periods and that was extremely influential. The Aebersold system seemed to be a very analytical approach— 'Okay, you play this scale over that chord.' But obviously that's very limited in its application. It needs to be combined with exposure to these great musicians, and that's what we did receive during that period. I believe a successful way to teach is to learn from an experienced practitioner, essentially by playing with them and through their guidance. It's very hard to rely completely on what you might read in a book, and you can't say that this



The US educator (and cellist) David Baker: musicians of Sandy's generation got all this information and exposure in intense one-week periods and that was extremely influential... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

or that system will work for everyone. There are basic features that you can apply, but it is the individual relationship [between teacher and student] that really counts. The other part of your question, as to how I got into teaching and what it means to me... I guess I've always taught and I've always enjoyed it, but for a large part of my career it wasn't the main thing that I was doing; and my career is made up of a lot of different things now, too. But teaching probably started to become more significant when I started the SIMA [Sydney Improvised Music Association] course for women.

MICHAEL: Which year was that?

SANDY: This is our seventh year... I think it started in 2002. That was in response to my observation that the number of women in the jazz scene wasn't actually increasing. I had thought—when I was at the Con myself in the early 1980s—that by this point in time there would be equal numbers of women, or maybe more [women] as there are in some areas of classical music.

MICHAEL: Do you have any observations as to why that's happened here? You were saying over lunch that some of the gung ho... some of the 'muscular' aspects of large ensemble jazz might be something that's not that appealing to up-and-coming women musicians...

SANDY: When I was a teenager I was in an early version of the Northside Big Band. I certainly found I was ultimately more interested in going to acting classes than being in that band. Because of the social aspect primarily; among adolescents when you get lots of guys together, the testosterone-driven aspect tends to overtake.

MICHAEL: In the playing, do you mean, or in general social relations? .

SANDY: Actually, I think more in general social relations than in the music. I think a lot of it has to do with social factors.

MICHAEL: Like a 'football team' situation?

SANDY: Very much, yeah, very much like that. I think it's a very, very complex issue. I think the fact that there aren't a lot of role models so women don't necessarily, on a subconscious level...

MICHAEL: So it's the mentor notion you were talking about earlier... is that a situation that is built into the tradition, that there have not been a lot of women musicians in the history of jazz?

SANDY: There have been some very, very good [women] players like, for example, Louis Armstrong's wife [Lil Hardin], to go back to the original days. Certainly, in the vocal field women have been the leaders, and women's contribution to jazz has been very significant. But as instrumentalists, I don't think you... I'm reluctant to say it, really... but when you think of Coltrane you don't immediately think of a female equivalent who has had the impact in terms of innovation and excellence that you would say he has had. There are players who have made a contribution, and there have been great composers, like Carla Bley, who have made extraordinary music,



Great female musicians, such as the composer Carla Bley (above) have made extraordinary music but they have been in the minority...

but... so I guess the thing to say is not that they haven't been there but that they have been in the minority. I think that has an impact, on some unconscious level, on whether women commit to this form of music.

MICHAEL: So have you found the culture surrounding Australian jazz to be a very male culture?

SANDY: There are many more men involved in it so, in that sense, yes, it is. But I have to look at different periods of my development. It's hard to speak of my whole career in one go, because my own self-confidence has changed as time has gone on. I think that has a big impact on how the world around you appears. I think for a lot of younger women who may lack confidence it is easy to get knocked. My experience, almost without exception, has been that it's not that men would deliberately knock women's confidence. No way! Pretty much all the men in the jazz scene that I know are unbelievably supportive, open and generous. They want to see anyone who is interested in the music grow and develop and have a good experience. It's not that there's anything in the culture that is saying, 'Don't come here!' It's not like that. It's much more subtle than that.

MICHAEL: Before we leave the topic of gender and jazz, would you share your thoughts on whether you think we have a scene in Australia that is rich in women players?

SANDY: Oh, absolutely we do! I am a huge fan of Judy Bailey. One of the first jazz concerts I saw was in Kuala Lumpur when Judy was leading her band, in 1978, I think. I had just finished school. I'd been living in Singapore and I was travelling, going out to see the world. I happened to be in Kuala Lumpur and saw that the Judy Bailey quartet was on. I thought it was incredible! Judy was playing all her own



*The Judy Bailey Quartet, L-R, Col Loughnan, Bailey, John Pochée, Ron Philpott...
PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY CREDIT LEON SAUNDERS*

music, had a fabulous band. I think it was Col Loughnan, John Pochée was definitely there, and probably—I'd have to check if the bass player was Ron Philpot—I think it was. I think Judy is amazing, an incredible 'survivor'. She was unique in her generation, and is still coming up with fresh ideas now. So Judy would be at the top of my list. And then in the younger generation there is a huge amount of talent. I'm a big Andrea Keller fan. She is incredibly expressive with her composition and in her playing, and in the way she leads ensembles and puts them together. [Melbourne trombonist] Shannon Barnett is a very, very interesting musician and [Canberra's] Jess Green is fantastic—an interesting composer—and a lovely guitar player. In the Sydney scene Zoe Hauptman is strong in her contributions as a bass player, which I think is significant. What's happened with a lot of Sydney players is that they wind up in America, like Lisa Parrott, Nicki Parrott and Cathy Harley. I was also a fan of Jann Rutherford, an outstanding musician, who has sadly passed away. And there are other people, but these ones spring to mind.



Sandy Evans is a big fan of Melbourne's Andrea Keller (pictured above) while Sydney's Zoe Hauptman (below) is strong in her contributions as a bass player...



MICHAEL: I was asking those questions in the context of your commitment to teaching and education. Other than your general thoughts on teaching improvisation and your involvement with the SIMA program, you've been involved with Musica Viva In Schools and...

SANDY: I teach privately and I also teach one day a week at Sydney Grammar School and that's been very interesting. I run a lunchtime group focusing on composition through improvisation. It's been absolutely brilliant seeing how far you are able to go with helping students develop their ideas. I've been lucky to have such talented students, and it's challenging because they are always ten steps ahead of me.

MICHAEL: Whose idea was this group?

SANDY: Mine. But the school was open to it. This experience has validated for me the importance of improvisation for secondary school students. I've become passionate about the pursuit of that, both in a jazz context and beyond. I've always had eclectic musical interests and am interested in cross-genre connections.

MICHAEL: This leads to another area I'd like to ask you about. I sense that you have almost a philosophical commitment to the exploration of the possibilities of diversity, not as a dogma but more a life view. Before coming to this more specifically, can I ask you, is jazz your musical home and, if so, what do you understand jazz as a 'musical home' to mean? And did you set out to explore other neighbourhoods, or did it just happen?

SANDY: It's really hard to say why or how I came to be like this but I've always been this way. My parents are very open people. My mother is a keen musician and very open about what she listens to. Actually, my very first jazz concert my mum took me to... It was by Don Burrows, when I was about 12. But my parents, for example, had probably never heard of the koto until I started collaborating with Satsuki [Odamura]. Maybe it was just my natural curiosity about sound, and probably, as you



Sandy's parents had probably never heard of the koto until she started collaborating with Satsuki Odamura (above)... PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL

suggest, some aspect of my personality which is interested in inclusiveness. Another key factor is that I spent my last two years of high school in Singapore [1976 to 1978] and that was influential in two ways. One, I was exposed to a variety of music. I was doing cocktail gigs with a guitarist, sneaking out of school late at night to gig in hotel lobbies playing *The Girl from Ipanema* and I was playing in the Singapore Philharmonic as a flautist—it wasn't a professional orchestra at that time. And I was learning the *erhu* [Chinese single string fiddle] in a Chinese folk orchestra, as well as doing a project on *gamelan* [classical Indonesian gong and chime ensemble]. Second, I had an amazing music teacher called Joe Young, an American guy. I was the only one in my music class so I had a very intense music education with him. He had been training for the priesthood but had pulled out before ordination; he'd been through a Catholic music education. He was extraordinary and encouraged me in all areas, in this breadth of view we're talking about, and mentorship and the importance of these key figures and the influence they can have. He was one of those people for me. While not a jazz musician he encouraged me in my love for jazz. So, being in Singapore, you had all this sound around you, being in such a multicultural city. But the next ten years of my life were very, very confusing, because, okay, you've got this whole world of music—how do you actually make sense of that? How do you find your own position in it? And that practically killed me at a certain point [laughs], trying to work that out! A key moment for me came when I went to study in New York. I had some saxophone lessons with Dave Liebman and then he was going away so he put me on to Joe Lovano. I was very lucky to study with him for a while there. I also always had an interest in the broadly spiritual aspects of music, in questions such as why we play music, what it is that we are expressing, and why it is important to us as human beings, as well as an interest in music as healing—of mind, body and soul.



US saxophonist Joe Lovano: Evans says she was very lucky to study with him in New York... PHOTO COURTESY TWITTER

MICHAEL: In the context of your ‘confusing next decade’...?

SANDY: Yes, I was looking for meaning in music as well as looking for a stylistic focus. I’d also been into punk in a new wave jazz group called Great White Noise. I was into the avant garde and I was into folk music. Because of my interest in the mystical aspects of music I attended some workshops in New York with David Hykes on harmonic [overtone] singing. He said something which suddenly clicked with me.



The pioneer of overtone singing David Hykes: he said that music is a very specific language...

He said that music is a very specific language. It’s an obvious thing, but somehow when you’re young you tend to miss the obvious! I realised at that moment that I needed to find a home base for myself, and as a saxophone player I realised for me that was going to be jazz. So for quite a while I cleared away a lot of the other interests and said, ‘Okay, I’ve got to focus on becoming strong in this language.’ I didn’t know how long it might take for me to feel like I’d gotten anywhere with it, but it was a big thing to decide I needed a home position from which I could relate to all these other areas. That helped me cut out a lot of other stuff that was confusing and provided me with focus for a while, for me to get to know my instrument and to get to know the lineage of my instrument.

[The first interview session ended after about half-an-hour and we agreed to meet again in a month’s time to take up where we left off. Less than 48 hours before the second interview session Sandy had flown in from Chennai in India, where she had been performing and recording in collaboration with leading Karnatik (the South Indian classical tradition) musicians as a member of the Australian Art Orchestra (AAO).]

MICHAEL: We were last talking about how you came to have such diverse musical interests. A student in one of my classes yesterday was playing a recording of Australian composer Ross Edwards’ *Dawn Mantras*, the tenor saxophone part of which I believe was written with you in mind as its player?



The Australian composer Ross Edwards: he wrote Dawn Mantras, including a tenor saxophone part written with Sandy in mind as its player...

SANDY: That's right. That was composed to play at the dawn of the new millennium. It came from a concept of [director] Nigel Jamieson's to have me and [didjeridu player] Matthew Doyle and [shakuhachi player] Riley Lee representing three different wind traditions, with the Sydney Children's Choir, as Australia's contribution to the worldwide broadcast at the new millennium, to be performed from the top of the Sydney Opera House as the sun rose on the first of January, 2000.



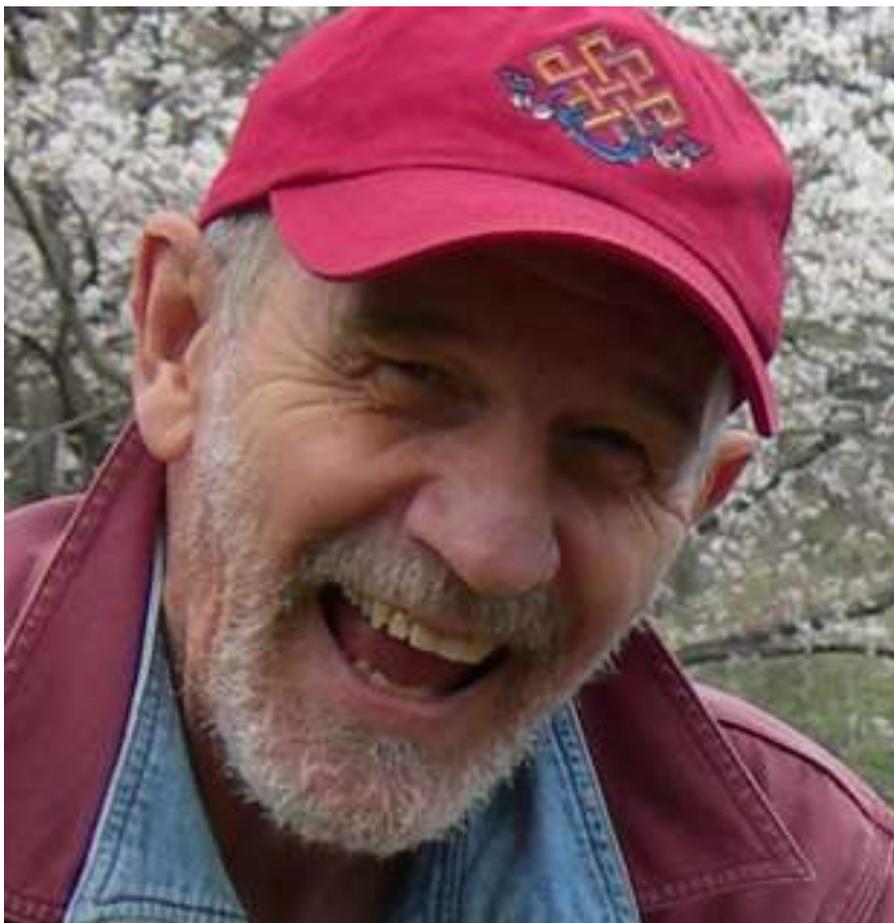
Shakuhachi player Riley Lee: representing different wind traditions...

MICHAEL: What was it like for you, collaborating with Ross in that sort of music?

SANDY: [thinks] It was a different experience for me because it didn't involve improvisation. It was actually quite fascinating, and probably the first time I had worked with a 'serious' classical composer as they were writing a piece for me to play. What was very different about it was the degree to which he specified phrasing. I found that an interesting learning experience. Because Ross had a good knowledge of shakuhachi, he was thinking in terms of how the saxophone and shakuhachi phrasing would match each other, so Riley and I were in dialogue with each other.

MICHAEL: Let's move the conversation to India where you've just been, and to the pathways you've taken musically after making the conscious choice to ground yourself in jazz. At what point did you start to branch out again into all of these areas, like in the Ross Edwards piece, or with the AAO—do these things come up very often?

SANDY: My career seems to have been full of them and I'm delighted about that! But I still maintain that having a fundamental language and training is very important. Having a strong point from which to collaborate with other people is significant, and my view about that hasn't changed. I think Phil Treloar coined, or at least used, the term 'collective autonomy'. Phil is a fascinating guy, another person



Phil Treloar, a fascinating guy: he coined, or at least used, the term 'collective autonomy'...

who was influential among my generation of musicians. He now lives in Japan but was just back in Sydney recording a percussion duet with Hamish Stuart. Particularly in an improvising ensemble, each member has to be very strong on their own and that allows them to engage in the collective process. This was brought into very sharp focus on this recent trip to India with, for example, [trumpeter] Scott Tinkler who was in the band. Scott is so evolved in his ability as a trumpet player and in his rhythmic language, which actually has a lot in common with Karnatik music but is not Karnatik music and isn't attempting to be. His strength as an individual allows him to interact in any situation with complete confidence, and that's what I'm striving for. Not in the same way as Scott—I'm a different person and have a different expression. But he's an absolutely outstanding case of somebody who personifies being strong yourself, of exploring your own language absolutely as far as you can.



Australian trumpeter Scott Tinkler: his strength as an individual allows him to interact in any situation with complete confidence... PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS

MICHAEL: I was talking to another student only this morning about Scott Tinkler and he was remarking about how, musically, Scott seemed to be on a quest to continually expand, as a player, his facility and full range of expression.

SANDY: That is absolutely true of him! And on the other side of the cultural universe, in India we had Mani Sir [Guru Kaaraikkudi R. Mani], the virtuoso *mrdangam* [double-headed barrel drum related to the *tabla*] player whose group we were working with. He's 63. On this recent tour, for the first time we performed in Chennai, which is the equivalent of New York for Karnatik music; it's where all the 'heavy' players are. Mani Sir was very nervous about us performing there. He's like a god in Karnatik music and here he was presenting this, really, incredibly innovative concert, a fusion of Karnatik music and jazz.

MICHAEL: And he expected people would be there?

SANDY: Yes!

MICHAEL: To check him out?

SANDY: Yes!

MICHAEL: With his Australian friends?

SANDY: Yes! [laughs] Yes! And it was really and truly remarkable that we've had this opportunity to interact with a virtuoso Indian musician who—and all of the musicians who work with him are the same—wants to keep on developing. I think it is even more significant in their case, because they're coming from such a deep tradition where there are strict rules and strict boundaries. We don't have that so much. I mean, if we want to stick our head in a bucket of water and play, well, that's okay, but...

MICHAEL: Which Scott Tinkler has done on his solo album, *Backwards*.

SANDY: [laughs] Exactly!

MICHAEL: Well, he sort of does! But, and this is a different area, among the players within the Australian jazz tradition—and I'm not even talking about jazz more broadly, worldwide—there seems to be desire to aspire towards technical and expressive completion, if you know what I mean. There doesn't seem to be a notion of 'Well, I've got enough skill for what I need to do so I'll be content to just use that'. In Australia now many, many jazz players are pushing far beyond that point.

SANDY: Absolutely! There is a very strong culture here, very, very strong. And certainly, the players that were on this tour are all outstanding examples of that.

MICHAEL: Adrian was on the tour..., and who else went?



Drummer Niko Schäuble: from a European jazz tradition where there are all sorts of other values of self-expression in terms of colour and nuance ... PHOTO COURTESY ROGER MITCHELL

SANDY: Adrian Sherriff; Lachlan Davidson came in — he’s a multi-instrumentalist sax, clarinet and flute player from Melbourne, a wonderful player; Alister Spence — one of my closest musical colleagues and a very imaginative composer and player; Phillip Rex was playing the bass—an astonishing bass player. And Niko Schäuble on the drums; Niko is a great example of a musician with an individual expression. As a drummer [in that context in India] you might be tempted to think you have to try to match the *mrdangam* and the *ghatam* [clay pot percussion instrument] with their very particular kind of language. Niko can understand and engage with their language when he needs to. But he’s from a European jazz tradition where there are all sorts of other values of self-expression in terms of colour and nuance, subtle types of interaction with other players which Niko really excels at. And on this trip it was extraordinary, because each of the players seemed to be able to find their own space and respect the space of the others. Sometimes, in past collaborations it has felt like we were playing very far over on to the Indian side and they weren’t coming much over to the side of the Cowboys—as we called ourselves! [laughs]... But on this trip the Indians came way, way, way over to our side and were allowing themselves to be quite vulnerable at times, coming into areas that they had no previous experience of. So it was a really, really remarkable experience in terms of collaboration. I think that’s a fraught area; it can lead to disaster, especially cross-cultural collaboration. A lot of the fusion music I’ve heard, of western and Indian music, is horrible [laughs] in my opinion. And it’s easy to end up creating something horrible, for all sorts of reasons. Other people might find this horrible [laughs]. But there was certainly a lot of engagement and great music coming out of that engagement.

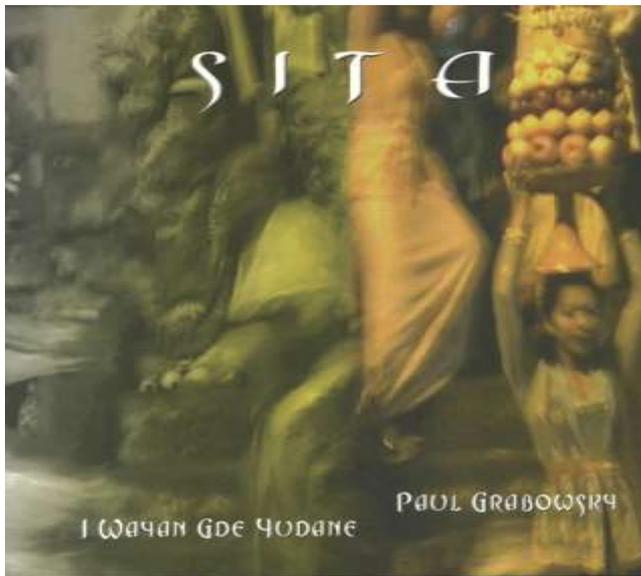
MICHAEL: I’m keen to know whether Sri Mani thought he succeeded.

SANDY: He did. As far as we were told, his old musical friends were really amazed by it. There’s a review coming out in *The Hindu* tomorrow, so we’ll look that up online and see what the critics thought! But there was a huge interest... a huge interest. And we played to big audiences. We played in an ashram [a Hindu spiritual hermitage] in Mysore [in the state of Karnataka] which was quite a bizarre experience. We played to 6,000 devotees of—and you’ll have to get the spelling for this one—the Swamiji’s name is Sri Sri Sri Ganapathy Sachidananda Swamiji! He’s a keyboard player. He also has an ashram in Melbourne and he comes out and performs there from time to time. He put the band on in his ashram for his devotees, which was an extraordinary experience. Not something you’d get to do very often in your life, that’s for sure—an incredible opportunity. To go back to your original question...

MICHAEL: [laughs] Thanks! I’d lost it...

SANDY: [laughs] You had asked me about jazz as my home base and where I’d gone from that base. I’d done a lot of collaborations, for example with Satsuki Odamura on the koto, where I’d never attempted to learn to play like a shakuhachi or to do anything other than what I would do. That always felt completely right in the context of playing with Satsuki. She’s a very creative musician who responds intuitively to the moment. It always felt like I should do whatever came to me, and that I wouldn’t be assisted by knowing more than I already did about Japanese music. I might even be hindered by it.

MICHAEL: But what of the AAO project, *Theft of Sita*, of a couple of years ago? Was there any attempt to approximate a *suling* [Indonesian bamboo fipple flute] there or was it just a pairing between *suling* and soprano sax?



SANDY: Again, in that particular project I didn't undertake any deep study of Balinese music other than what I learned by osmosis through the process [of involvement]. But the area where *Sita* was different was intonation. That occasionally pops up when creating repertoire with Satsuki—we might decide 'Let's explore this or that tuning'—but as you know, the whole concept of Balinese tuning is radically different from any western concept at all.

MICHAEL: Although there might be some connection with Ornette?



Ornette Coleman: Sandy heard the beauty in his tuning....PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

SANDY: Well, yes! Absolutely! It's funny you say that, because prior to *Sita* I'd always been somewhat sceptical about Ornette's tuning. People would say he meant to sound that sharp in the top register, and I would think, well, the alto just has a tendency to play sharp up there—he's just playing sharp. But after working so closely with a Balinese gamelan, I heard it quite differently. I heard the beauty in his tuning.

MICHAEL: That's interesting, because I was first introduced to Ornette Coleman's music while I was studying in Wesleyan University's world music program, where, among other things, I was playing in a javanese gamelan, and hearing Ornette in the context of world music studies didn't strike me as unnatural in any way.

SANDY: *The Theft of Sita* was a real eye-opener for me—it completely changed my view about what tuning means. I had thought about it before, especially playing with Roger Dean [with the avant garde electro acoustic ensemble, AustraLYS IS]. Roger has a keen interest in microtones and has written many pieces using quarter tones. I had also played a piece by [composer] Colin Bright, *The Wild Boys*, that he wrote after a conversation with Tony [Evans' husband, clarinettist and saxophonist Tony Gorman]. Tony told Colin he had a fingering chart for quarter tones. Colin said, 'What quarter tones can you play on the saxophone?' and Tony said, 'Pretty much any.' So Colin wrote a very effective piece for [percussion ensemble] Synergy and a saxophone quartet. But that experience was different from the *Theft of Sita* because the pitches were fixed. There is much more flexibility with the Balinese tuning. In the show, I would never know which flute Lanus was going to use on any given night. His flutes were totally different from each other in terms of pitch, so you'd try to prepare for a certain intonation and it would be something else.



Sandy's husband saxophonist Tony Gorman (left) pictured here with Paul Cutlan: playing quarter tones on the saxophone....

MICHAEL: So you were even improvising intonation?

SANDY: Yeah, definitely, yeah. And the fact that your goal was not to play ‘in tune’ with each other; your goal, was to create a beautiful dissonance with each other through your intonation.

MICHAEL: To get that shimmering gamelan sound...

SANDY: But I also realised that that’s very, very refined in terms of each individual’s hearing, so that can sound beautiful or it can sound ugly according to your skill in being able to make it gel. In *Sita* we were dealing with western temperament as well, because we had a singer and a viola player, so we roamed all over the pitch spectrum. Originally it was violin; it was John Rodgers, but then Jason Bunn took over for most of the touring. And on the subject of music in general but also intonation, John Rodgers is really mind blowing! He’s got very refined hearing and is able to bring out the beauty of any increment of tuning. It’s phenomenal. And of course that’s something that comes into play in Indian music. One of the things that knocks me out the most about Indian classical music is the certainty of the intonation with really accomplished players.



Violinist John Rodgers: he’s got very refined hearing and is able to bring out the beauty of any increment of tuning...

MICHAEL: Well, once again I distracted you by bringing up the *Theft of Sita*. Can we go back to how you went about diversifying again after you ‘went into the tradition’ of jazz?

SANDY: Well, that had never stopped. It's interesting trying to answer these sorts of questions. Often people puzzle over the fact that Coltrane was recording the ballads album during the day and playing really 'out' music at night. I think for most musicians many emotions and forms of expression co-exist. It's not like our life is one nice, clearly defined path. There is a whole bunch of stuff going on all the time.



Often people puzzle over the fact that John Coltrane (above) was recording the ballads album during the day and playing really 'out' music at night... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

That's certainly how it is for me; there's not a nice neat and tidy answer. I feel more than ever that I want to delve deeper and deeper into jazz. I don't feel like that's ever going to end, that I'll even begin to know what there is to know there and that I can express it the way I want to. It wasn't like, 'Well I've got jazz now, so now I'll go and play with the koto!' It was like, I met all these other musicians and I had an attraction



Sarangan Sriranganathan: a unique Sri Lankan musician...

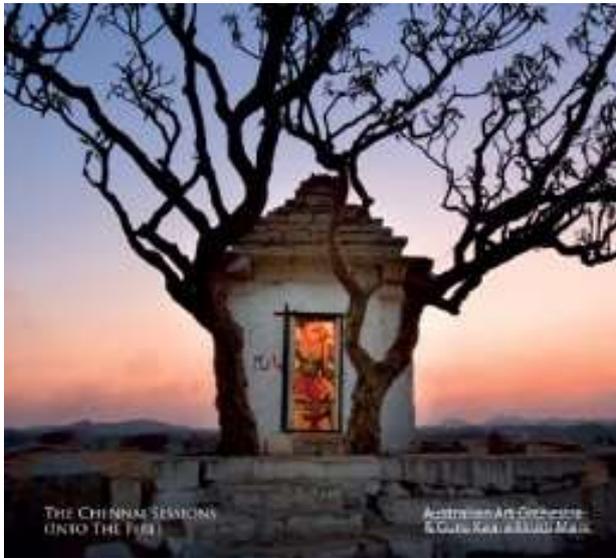
to the sonic possibilities of engaging with them and therefore I followed that. But still, my own learning is very much related to jazz. A big change came for me in the lead-up to the last small group AAO tour to India in January of 2007. At the end of 2006 I decided I wanted to prepare, so through [tabla player] Bobby Singh I got in touch with a teacher in Sydney, Sarangan Sriranganathan. He's a unique Sri Lankan musician, a Hindustani sitar player and a Karnatik singer. I thought of having a few Indian music lessons—a bit like if you were going to go to Spain you might learn a few words of Spanish. In the preceding years, along with other AAO members I had had some intensive training with Mani Sir and also with [B V] Balasai, the [master] flute player, on *gamaka* [Karnatik music ornamentation]. This was a basic but valuable introduction to Karnatik music, not enough to say I knew anything about it



Mani Sir on an Australian beach: along with other AAO members Sandy had some intensive training with him...

really. On the tour in India in 2007 I was really inspired by Balasai, the flute player in Sruthi Laya [Guru K R Mani's ensemble]. Having him in the ensemble opened a door for me in terms of seeing how I could pursue some ideas from Karnatik music on my terms. So I got 'the bug' for the music. It helped that I found a teacher I clicked with and I continued with lessons after I came back last year. With this recent trip, because I now knew a little bit more, I knew how much I didn't know..., so... [thinks] that's all really [laughs]. I'm hoping to study in Chennai in January next year. But I found this trip confusing, to be honest, in regard to my further development with Karnatik music. It became clear to me that I'm not going to be a Karnatik classical musician. I bought some saxophone recordings of Karnatik music and I didn't really like them. I respect the players enormously, because what they are doing is really difficult. But I'm at a questioning stage again, which I think is a good stage. When I was young it used to make me very uncomfortable to feel like I was searching, but now I think, 'Well it's great, I'm searching. I'm searching for what this actually means to me.' That's good because it will make me look harder to find out.

MICHAEL: Speaking, then, of developing, to what extent has the collaboration with the Indian musicians developed over the years? *Into the Fire* dates back at least a decade, I think, and the CD has been out for almost a decade.



The Australian Art Orchestra album Into The Fire: it dates back at least a decade...

SANDY: It's been extraordinary to watch the collaboration grow. Earlier I was referring to Mani Sir, who is a very senior Karnatik musician, being able to be flexible, to grow in the collaboration. That's been amazing, really amazing. There were four members of Sruti Laya performing with us, on flute, ghatam, mrdangam, and mandolin. It was incredible that they were so engaged with the collaboration—with this idea that we could meet somewhere and create some new music that would have meaning, bringing together the best of what we have to offer. And at its best it really did succeed in doing that.

MICHAEL: I wonder whether we could come to what musicianship is for you, now. You spoke of the need for a unified language as a musician but one that still has room for expansion. Being a musician in the 21st-century Australia, and having the opportunity to travel, we've heard from you about working with Indigenous musicians of various places, with art music composers, working in contemporary jazz contexts, and with electro-acoustics. Do you see the broad definition of jazz, for you, expanding? Is becoming a better jazz musician the same as becoming a better musician?

SANDY: [thinks] There is a point where the word 'jazz' becomes more confusing than helpful. [thinks]

MICHAEL: Do you compartmentalise music—jazz is one thing, this other music is another thing?

SANDY: That's actually the question I'm asking myself at the moment. There's a whole accent that goes with jazz which is quite different from the accent that goes with Karnatik music. We share fundamental principles of music so we can say 'okay we're playing this raga and yeah, that means these notes for us, we're playing *Adi*

tala [a specific rhythmic cycle] and it's got that many beats for them and this many beats for us, and we can divide it into five this way or seven that way or nine this way and that means the same thing to them [being the Indian musicians] as it means to us.' All of those things are in common. But then there's an *accent* of the language that is not common. And that even comes down to the fundamentals of rhythm. Some interesting examples of that came up where we would be counting our bars and they might go twice as long as the Indians' *tala* would go. And because they would be learning bits of our music and we were learning bits of theirs, we would be saying, 'Okay that's two of your bars which is four of ours,' and then somebody would get a bit confused about what that means and we'd have to all sing through it. I found this fascinating in terms of communication, co-operation and understanding. The way we all feel rhythm is a bit different, too. We had one interesting example, while recording in Chennai, with my piece called *The Sacred Cow's Tail*. Niko put down a click track because there are quite big gaps in the melody. That made it a lot easier for us to play and made it very, very difficult for the Indians to play. They were thinking in terms of phrases rather than in terms of a metronomic pulse. Then, we talk about melody as if it is something that is universal; I'm even doubting that. I think the Karnatik idea of melody is really quite different from the western idea, or certainly the idea that appears in jazz. So it's almost impossible for me to answer your question at the moment. I remember talking to [drummer] Simon Barker about the questions that his involvement with Korean music has thrown up for him over time. And he said that he asks a question of the music and eventually, if you keep looking, the music will give you the answer. But I'm definitely at a point right now in my engagement with Indian classical music where I'm asking the question more than I'm able to answer it.



Drummer Simon Barker: he said that he asks a question of the music and eventually, if you keep looking, the music will give you the answer... PHOTO CREDIT SIMON WEB

MICHAEL: What is it about jazz in Australia right now? Is jazz changing worldwide, or are we particularly experimental or unusual here?

SANDY: It's changing worldwide, for sure. In a master class in Melbourne a couple of years ago, Dave Liebman's observation about the development of jazz was that the innovation at the moment is all taking place in rhythm. I think that's true, and that's a worldwide thing. For instance, you get musicians like Vijay Iyer and Chris Potter who are really expanding the boundaries of what jazz musicians explore in terms of rhythm. That's a worldwide trend, which Scott [Tinkler] is part of. And I think one of the reasons why Karnatik music is so attractive is because it has explored counting in a really complex and sophisticated way.



Dave Liebman (above) observed that innovation in jazz is all taking place in rhythm... Chris Potter (below) is really expanding the boundaries of what jazz musicians explore in terms of rhythm....



MICHAEL: Is counting different from rhythm, do you think?

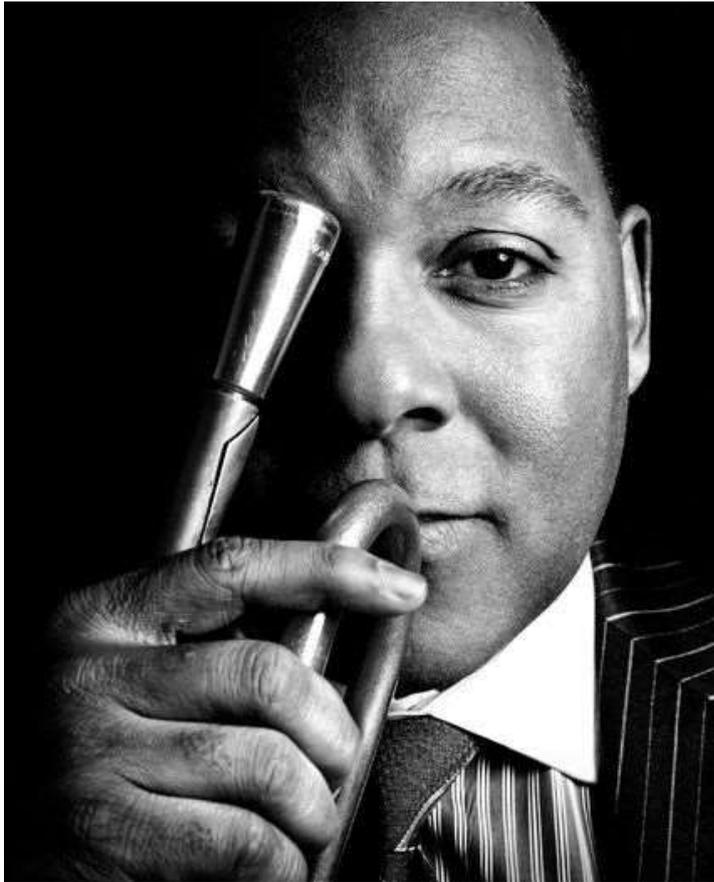
SANDY: Ha ha. I chose my words carefully—and you picked up on it—because I was talking to James Greening about this today. There is some music which is much more groove-based than Karnatik music. Karnatik music is very sophisticated, precise and complex rhythmically, with detailed calculations determining many features of musical form. But it's not about groove in the way funk and soul and a lot of music that has come out of Africa is. I spoke with Adrian about this on the tour as well—I should acknowledge here the *extraordinary* amount that Adrian Sherriff has had to do with this collaboration; it wouldn't be happening without him and he's had a huge influence on me, teaching me things about both Balinese and Indian music, and also inspiring me as to what some of the possibilities might be. It seems that keeping tala is not like a body thing in the way that a funk groove, for example, is, or even a swing groove. It's a bit more 'head-y' somehow, a bit more intellectual. This is not to say that the music is any less moving or soulful. So, to get back to whether the changes are a uniquely Australian thing, I think it is happening worldwide. It's not as if Australia has any kind of monopoly on an interest in Indian music.



Trombonist Adrian Sherriff: Sandy acknowledges the extraordinary amount that Adrian has had to do with this collaboration... PHOTO CREDIT SAM GLAYSHER

MICHAEL: I wasn't meaning only the fascination with Indian music. More that we seem to have a particularly rich experimental culture in jazz at the moment, although 'experimental' may not be the right word for it.

SANDY: No, I think it is the right word and there is something in that. I think it's down to two factors. One is that we aren't dominated by any main tradition in terms of western music. Obviously, if you look at Indigenous culture it is a whole different ball game. But as western musicians, even as jazz musicians, we don't have Wynton Marsalis breathing down our neck going, 'This is how it has got to be done, guys, or piss off.'



We don't have Wynton Marsalis (pictured above) breathing down our neck going, 'This is how it has got to be done, guys'...

MICHAEL: Well you don't even have the 'weight of the tradition', its history, either.

SANDY: It's a double-edged sword, because to get really good at a style, in one sense you need that. But we are liberated by not having such a weight on our shoulders. I think that does contribute to a general trend here to be able to look wherever we're interested at any given moment. Secondly, the scene in Australia is big enough that there is excellence in most areas, but small enough that you actually meet people in a different area from you. I think somewhere like New York is much more ghetto-ised. The beboppers will hang with the beboppers and the people into koto music talk to other people into koto music. Of course, that's not true of all people in all situations, but my experience has been that in the course of my natural musical life I've engaged with this huge variety of people interested in different things. And whatever it is that takes your fancy, you can experiment here.

MICHAEL: Do you look or do you get asked?

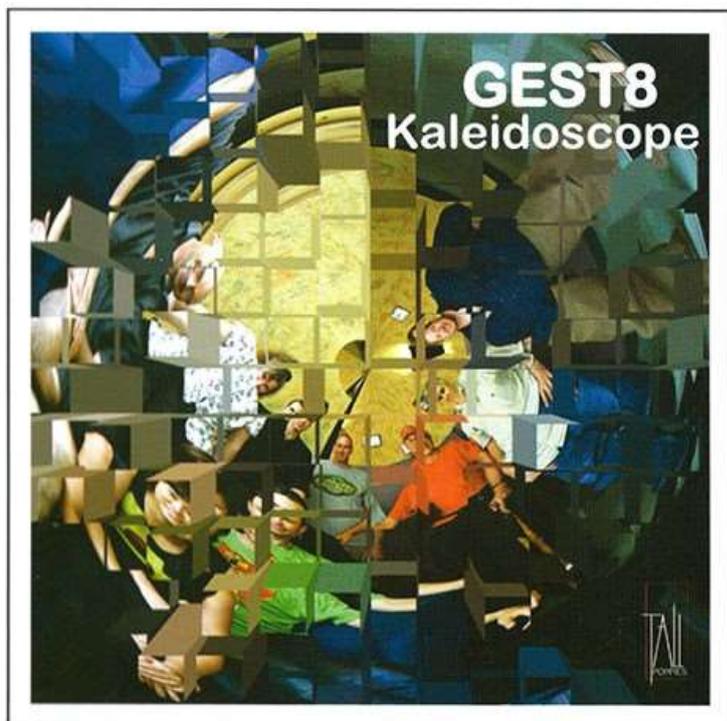
SANDY: Both. Both. A mixture. [pauses] I probably began by looking.

MICHAEL: I just ask about the wealth of experimentalism here in the context of the 'permanent underground' idea discussed in Peter Rezniewski's recently published essay. Not that I've asked you about this, but you seem to exude optimism about the creative possibilities here in Australia.

SANDY: In response to that, I think it is really tough here, on a professional level. There needs to be way more support, way more opportunities, especially in Sydney. I do think the performance opportunities are very, very limited here and less so in Melbourne; this has more to do with licensing laws, I think— they're not necessarily well-paid gigs, but there are more gigs. Take a group like the trio Waratah I play in [with a percussionist and koto player]. We would play in a pub or a café, and we get maybe one gig a year, and unless we put it on ourselves there are very few opportunities. So most young people who aren't recognised pretty much do have to create their own opportunities—and so did my generation—but the standard of music and of creativity that is coming out is very, very high. And the performance opportunities are extremely limited.

MICHAEL: Perhaps we don't have an audience being prepared for all of the rich, diverse strands?

SANDY: No, we don't! There's very little education, there's very little mainstream media about the music and it's very hard to get space in the papers. Jazz critics find it very limited. It's almost invisible. One of the nice things about being in India is the sense you get that pretty much everybody is engaged with music, creating music somehow or other. I'm optimistic, though, because of the people involved in the scene; but there needs to be way more infrastructure. But the amount of energy it takes can be draining. For example, at the moment I'm really keen to make another record with my trio and I want to organise a tour for GEST8 and I can't afford to do either of those things. I don't have the time or the money. But to be alive and to be able to make music is an extraordinary privilege. And I think the Australian improvised music culture has progressed quite a bit in the last 20 or 30 years, in my lifetime. I've seen a real development in self-belief and self-confidence.



The album Kaleidoscope from the octet GEST8: Sandy would like to organise a tour for this group but can't afford to do it...

MICHAEL: In the sense that we're not just becoming good at overseas traditions but rather we're doing something that we want to do?

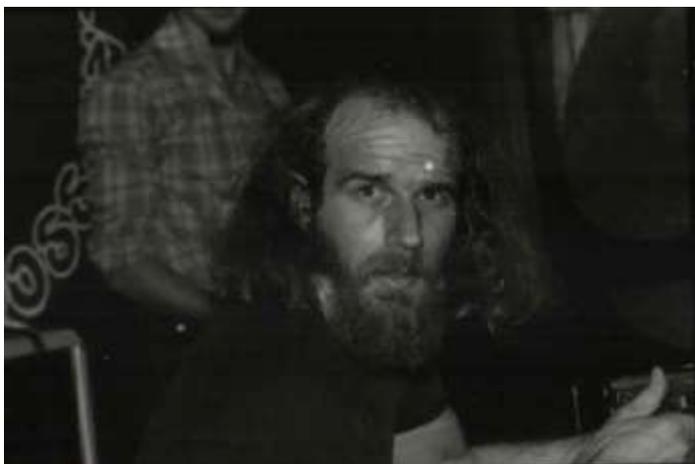
SANDY: Yes.

MICHAEL: With which musicians did the change start to happen, do you think?

SANDY: Probably the ones, in my experience, who started it were Roger Frampton and Phil Treloar, with the Jazz Co-op, in terms of modern jazz. They were connected with Howie Smith when he first came out [from the US]. Roger became co-musical director of Ten Part Invention, John Pochée's ten piece band that I play in. That band has commissioned a lot of new works from Australian composers. All the people in



The change started to happen with Roger Frampton (above) and Phil Treloar (below) with the Jazz Co-Op...



that band have contributed to pride in our culture and defining a local sound, players like the very distinctive alto saxophonist Bernie McGann. Another person who had a big influence on my generation was Mark Simmonds. Mark was just such an outstanding tenor saxophone player, and... unashamedly *himself*. He demanded that of anybody who worked in his bands. So he was a key figure. Then it's been a gradual evolution. I think Australian musicians going and playing in an international environment has been an important part of it. It allows you to get a sense of what your strengths and weaknesses are. You're not just blindly thinking that someone on the other side of the world is better. Also, Paul Grabowsky has been visionary in his



The tenor saxophonist Mark Simmonds: he was just such an outstanding tenor saxophone player, and unashamedly himself...

ideas about the possibilities for Australian improvised music. A lot of the opportunities I've been talking about today have happened because of his vision for the AAO. Ensembles like that are very important as places for fostering a culture of ideas about new directions in Australian music. Personally, the experience of running Clarion Fracture Zone with my friends Tony Gorman and Alister Spence contributed greatly to my own confidence in a music of our time and place. In fact, my whole career has been full of such friendships and opportunities, like playing in [bass player] Lloyd Swanton's group, The catholics.



The experience of running Clarion Fracture Zone (above) contributed greatly to Sandy's confidence in "a music of our time and place". L-R, Lloyd Swanton, Alister Spence, Tony Gorman, Toby Hall, Sandy Evans... PHOTO CREDIT MICHELLE AGIUS

MICHAEL: Do you think about being an Australian musician much, or do you just think about what you are doing now, about what's coming up?

SANDY: I used to think a lot about Australia and the way Australian music is influenced by the landscape. I'm lucky enough to live near an amazing beach and I do connect quite strongly with the Australian landscape. But I must say, in recent years whenever the issue of Australian identity comes up I immediately think of Indigenous people. Like Indian music, for a long time I didn't want to go near Indigenous music because I didn't want to be tokenistic. There was a lot of pressure at one point to get a didjeridu in your band and then you'd get lots of gigs in Germany [laughs]; oh no! Since then, I've been fortunate to have performed with some great Indigenous artists and to have shared their friendship. People like [Aboriginal musicians] Matthew Doyle and William Barton. Getting to know Ruby



Performing with great Indigenous artists and sharing their friendship: Matthew Doyle (above) and William Barton (below)... PHOTOS COURTESY MUSIC TRUST'S LOUDMOUTH



Hunter and Archie Roach [through the AAO *Ruby's Story* project] has been amazing... [ponders]... really, really amazing. Now I feel that you can't consider Australian identity without at least acknowledging the pain and suffering of Indigenous people and culture, and also acknowledging the unbelievable humility



Ruby Hunter (left) and Archie Roach: you can't consider Australian identity without at least acknowledging the pain and suffering of Indigenous people and culture...

and compassion, which have been the core factors of any engagement I've ever had with an Australian Aboriginal person. It's been overwhelming for me, every time I've had the chance to meet them. There is so much to learn there. It's extraordinary to me that they actually welcome us with open arms. In musical situations, that's what my experience has been and I find that deeply moving and that's fundamental to any discussion about Australian musical identity.

*We paused and all was quiet for several moments.
We looked at each other and seemed to agree that the conversation had ended*

Sandy Evans appears in many articles on this site, for example John Clare's piece "Sandy Evans & Judy Bailey: Women Outlast the Legend", at this link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/john-clare-12>.