

STEVE ELPHICK IN CONVERSATION

by Belinda Webster*

[This interview appeared in the May, 2010 edition of Extempore, edited by Miriam Zolin.]

Belinda Webster writes: I've been an admirer of Steve Elphick's bass playing for a few decades, particularly through his work with The Engine Room and his rapport with Roger Frampton who was a great friend of mine. He has played with Sandy Evans for over 30 years, Mark Simmonds, James Greening, Mara and Llew Kiek... the list goes on. That he has had such long professional relationships says a lot about the man and his abilities.



Double bassist Steve Elphick, pictured in 2010... PHOTO CREDIT BELINDA WEBSTER

**When this interview took place in 2010 Belinda Webster OAM was the founder of Tall Poppies Records. In 2021 Tall Poppies turns 30 and she has released 269 CDs. Belinda functions as recording producer, engineer and designer. She lives in Kangaroo Valley, NSW and in her spare time loves cooking, gardening and photography. In April 2007 she directed her first (and the subsequent five) biennial music festival, Arts in the Valley. She has presented her photographs in many exhibitions, including five duo shows with potter/sculptor Ole Nielsen and two solo exhibitions in Kangaroo Valley. She has also made several short art films. In semi-retirement, she is learning to draw.*

In 2008 I found myself with a spare ticket to Ornette Coleman's Sydney performance. Looking for someone who would appreciate the performance I decided to invite Steve, who had been an acquaintance for ages. Not long after that the first edition of *Extempore* appeared, and I was intrigued by the idea of a photo essay. I suggested to *Extempore* that a photo essay of Steve might be worth a look and they agreed.

Taken whilst squeezed into Steve's tiny flat, my first shots were technically flawed, but I could see that there was photographic potential. Steve, being an utter gentleman, kindly agreed to undergo another shoot, but this time I invited him to my place where I had space (and light!) to work around the bulky bass. *Extempore* also wanted text to accompany the photos, so I decided to do a long interview, with a view to taking excerpts for *Extempore* and then finding somewhere to publish the complete conversation.

With fingers crossed I sent the long interview to *Extempore* and was delighted when they agreed to publish it in full with the photographs. I have to admit I was staggered that Steve had never been interviewed before.

He has played with many of Australia's great jazz luminaries, and continues to do so, and would obviously have interesting things to say. In talking to him I found a very thoughtful and humble person, always admiring of his colleagues, and very open about his life's journey, especially after a couple of reds. After transcribing the interview I sent it to Steve for comment, and he made small but important changes to his words over the next couple of months, involving himself in the process at every point, including helping to choose the photos.



Belinda Webster: she was staggered that Steve Elphick had never been interviewed before...

BELINDA WEBSTER: You started life as a trumpeter. How did you migrate from the trumpet to the bass?

STEVE ELPHICK: It was a lot of circumstances coming together. I was fortunate to have grown up playing in brass bands, but I guess, due to family circumstances, my confidence into later teenage years was taking a dive, and you certainly need confidence on the trumpet. I loved making musical sounds. As a brass player in the orchestra you sit counting bars and, when you get to the bit you have to play, the conductor says, 'Now let's take the strings from the beginning,' so you get to play almost nothing in a lunch-hour rehearsal. At one of the rehearsals in my last year at high school the conductor said, 'We have a double bass in the storeroom. Does anyone want to volunteer to play it?' And I immediately stuck up my hand. Earlier, I had heard the bass being played by one of the older kids and I was pretty enthralled by the sound of it, as most people seem to be. I got the opportunity and I took it, locking myself in the school music storeroom every lunch hour with *A Tune A Day* and taught myself to play. Once you play one instrument, picking up another isn't all that difficult.

BELINDA: How long before you played in the orchestra?

STEVE: I started straightaway. As long as the double bass isn't amplified the effect of it is gorgeous, even if the notes aren't quite right. [laughs] I think bass players have gotten away with that for years (due to lack of audibility of precise pitch)!

BELINDA: How does a young bass player develop that pitch sense?

STEVE: I think the thing that helped me most was that at the same time as I was learning bass in the school orchestra I was also lucky enough to be at school with the jazz luminary Mark Simmonds. He and I and a couple of other kids (Raoul Hawkins and Martin Keys, after whom the Keys Music Association was named) would spend our time jamming, in and out of school. The whole notion of being a bass player playing bass notes underneath melody gives you a really good sense of the pitch relationship, which I'd already experienced singing bass in the church choir. So the singing helped.



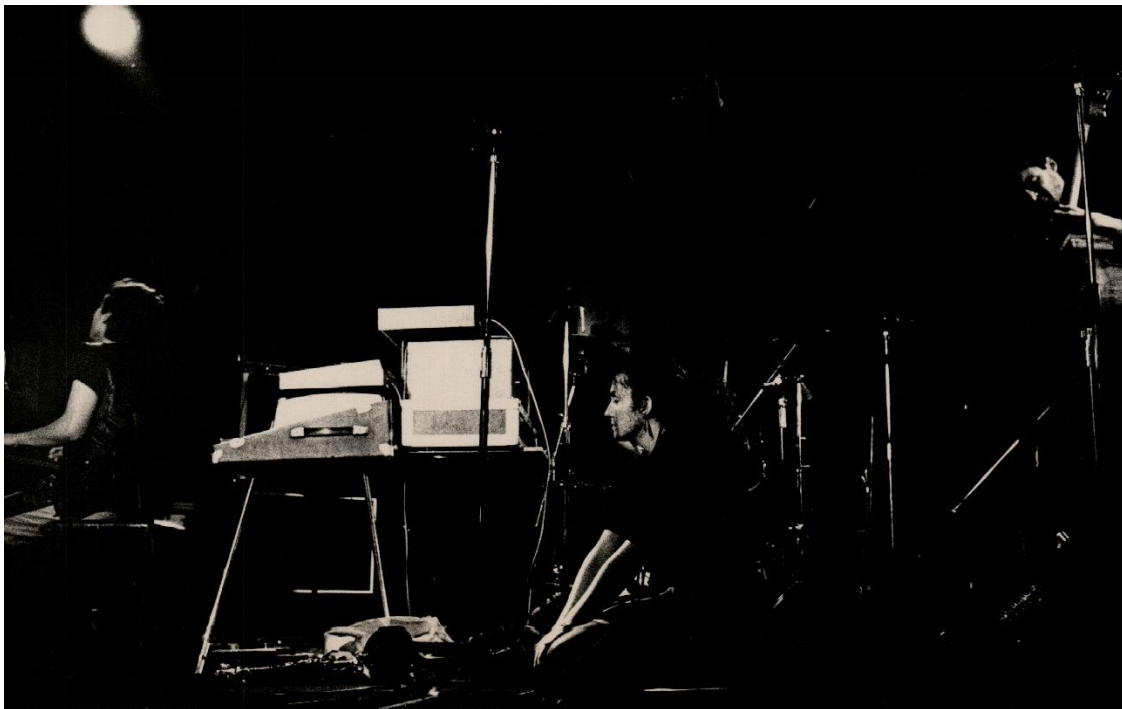
*Jazz luminary
Mark Simmonds:
he was at school
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PHOTO CREDIT
JANE MARCH*

BELINDA: So you took to it like a proverbial duck to water and never went back to the trumpet?

STEVE: No, I played the trumpet on and off for some years. Sometimes as a second instrument, playing in the KMA orchestra, which was a conglomeration of many of the young improvising musicians playing at that time. KMA had a lot of groups under its umbrella: Keys, The Benders, a saxophone quartet including Sandy Evans, Mark Simmonds, Danny Fine and Dianne Spence; an early group led by Tony Buck...

BELINDA: These are some of the luminaries of today!

STEVE: Yes. And for big festival events the KMA Orchestra would form out of all of the musicians. Lloyd Swanton was also playing bass, so that gave me the opportunity to keep playing trumpet. Robin Gador also played bass, so that kept me on trumpet too, sometimes against my will! [laughs] I did keep up the trumpet playing in one of Sandy Evans' first bands, Women and Children First, where sometimes I doubled on trumpet. In the early days we set up the performing space with candles and created an atmosphere. We might open the concert with a polyphonal arrangement with saxophone and trumpet at opposite ends of the hall. My use of the trumpet thereafter was not so much as a jazz improviser; it was more a textural point of interest and variation.



A shot of three members of the group Women & Children First, L-R, Indra Lesmana (piano), Sandy Evans (saxophones), Steve Elphick (bass)... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

BELINDA: Do you think your beginnings as a trumpet player make you more empathetic working with trumpeters now?

STEVE: It makes me envious sometimes that they got the points of playing the trumpet that I never really got. I still love the sound of it so much. And when I hear beautiful trumpet playing— which abounds in Australia at the moment, with Scott Tinkler, Phil Slater, James Morrison, Warwick Alder, James Greening, and some of the Melbourne guys like Eugene Ball and his contemporaries—I wish I could do that! It makes me want to get the cornet out from under my bed and start practising again!

BELINDA: When was the last time you dusted it off?

STEVE: It was only a couple of weeks ago, at a schools performance with James Greening's group. James likes to play the bass whenever he can in between shows. Toby Hall plays the drums, and temptation got the better of me so I picked up James' pocket trumpet and blew a few notes on a standard that they were both playing, and it felt good... but I knew it was a momentary thing! But I could envisage retiring to a town in my seventies that has a community brass band and playing third cornet...



*James Greening on his pocket trumpet: Steve blew a few notes on the instrument, and it felt good...
PHOTO
CREDIT
ROGER MITCHELL*

BELINDA: You've picked up the bass as a happenstance, and fallen in love with it. What course did you take, in terms of having lessons?

STEVE: I joined the Willoughby Symphony Orchestra. Even though I'd never had a lesson, I did the audition and it was obvious that I could read music. I think they were so desperate for bass players that someone who owned a bass, could hold it and know where they were in a piece of music—even if they couldn't play all the notes—was a good start, so I got in. One of the bass players there, Peggy Pye, offered me lessons. I had a term with her and that set me on my way. Then I went my own way, jamming a lot with friends and sitting in on pub trad jazz bands. One pub only ever paid the trumpeter and the piano player and they had a full band every week,

complemented by all the young guys who'd bring their gear and get the experience. Terry McCardell was the trumpet player and Tim Brown was the pianist. He gave me my first pointers about looking at chord symbols and playing bass lines. It was pretty basic: here's a G chord; the good notes to play are the G and the D... But at the same time I was doing a lot of jamming and listening to Mingus and John Coltrane, being influenced by Jimmy Garrison—I loved his sound and his drive and the feel. Mingus was too advanced, technically, for me to really understand what he was doing in his solos, but I loved the sound of it.



Trumpeter Terry McCardell at a Sydney Jazz Club gig: Steve sat in with his pub jazz band...

BELINDA: Are you a fan of Ron Carter as well?

STEVE: I'm more a fan of his now—that '60s period with Miles Davis—than I was back then. I remember the first time someone played me *Four and More*, I just couldn't get my ears away from Tony Williams' ride cymbal enough to listen to Ron. I was more interested in Garrison and Paul Chambers from the '50s and, from a sound point of view, Charlie Haden, definitely.

BELINDA: When you listen to the different bass players, each with their own style and voice, what are the distinguishing things that you listen out for?



Drummer Dannie Richmond (right) with bassist Charles Mingus: the rhythmic devices they used were as much the sound of the Mingus band as were the compositions and the harmonic aspects...

STEVE: For a start, their musical environments were usually very personal ones. Mingus played music that he wrote, and the musicians he played with were longstanding colleagues so they had developed a language. It was not so much elements of an individual player but more the musical relationships and how they

interacted that I listened to. The way he and Danny Richmond played, the rhythmic devices that they used, were as much the sound of the Mingus band as were the compositions and the harmonic aspects. His love for Ellington and Strayhorn were evident in the changes he wrote. Charlie Haden in Ornette Coleman's band, the way that he had found to play in that environment, has become one of the most influential ways of playing the bass. Because there was no chordal instrument most of the time, Haden would often draw on earlier periods of the jazz tradition as well as his own roots in folk music. Instead of playing a walking bass line of all different pitches, he might play two of the same note; or, as in early Big Band charts, where the bass might play the same note on all four beats of the bar he would play the one note for a longer period of time (pedalling), while rhythmically interacting with its octave—and with Ed Blackwell, of course.



Charlie Haden (right): the way that he had found to play in the band led by Ornette Coleman (left) has become one of the most influential ways of playing the bass... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZIZ MAGAZINE

BELINDA: How would you describe the way you play the bass?

STEVE: Mmm... maybe a listener would be better placed to answer that. But I do prefer playing in bands without chordal instruments because I love the relationship that is set up between a bass note and a melody. And the influence of Charlie Haden comes to the fore. I'm more likely to play a simpler line, outlining a chord more basically than in a complicated way. The older I get the more I enjoy beauty and simplicity. Most musicians will say that part of their evolution is the editing process, distilling the essence of what they are trying to communicate. And usually that goes from many notes to fewer notes.



Steve went for some private lessons with David Potts (left), who was then in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra...

BELINDA: So you had your term with Peggy Pye...

STEVE: I did a lot of jamming, but after a couple of years I went for some private lessons with David Potts, who was then in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and is still teaching. We spent two or three sessions concentrating on my position on the stool and the position of the bass in relation to me, and I figured that wasn't really what I wanted to know about. So I rang him up before the fourth lesson and told him that I thought we were wasting his and my time, and I wasn't learning what I needed to learn. He said, 'Come over and we'll have one last lesson.' He talked about approaches to different areas of playing the double bass. In one lesson he gave me what I needed to know about at the time, and certainly enough to go on with. Another lesson I remember was totally unsolicited. It was after a performance at the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz, sometime in the '90s; the Melbourne bass player Ben Robertson came up to chat. He said, 'I've just watched you play—do you mind if I give you some hints about your left hand in the upper register?' In this beautiful gesture what he gave me was very helpful, and even more valued by me because of the way it came about. So it was really a matter of discovering and learning through improvising and continuing to sit in with bands playing jazz standards, getting tips here and there, going to The Basement and watching the Jazz Co-op and The Last Straw and all those bands from the mid-'70s. I learned as much from watching as listening. I used to go to the Old Rocks Push and listen to Col Nolan and the Errol Buddle Quartet. They had a moveable feast of drummers—sometimes Laurie Bennett, sometimes Warren Daly, but always with Dieter Voigt on the bass. He was great, a lot like what I later discovered Paul Chambers to be, a beautifully correct way of getting through chord changes and that mid-Fifties jazz feel.



Melbourne bass player Ben Robertson: what he gave Steve was very helpful, and even more valued by Steve because of the way it came about... PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL

BELINDA: Did you go home after these experiences and practise all the things you'd learned?

STEVE: I was living where I couldn't play at night but the next day I was into it, yeah.

BELINDA: Did you have any other formal lessons?

STEVE: No, not apart from the one with Ben. I would say I'm basically a self-taught bass player. But I think that term is a misnomer, as it suggests that one has developed in a vacuum, whereas every recording and every performance attended is potentially a formal lesson... Of the local players, I've probably learned the most by watching and listening to Lloyd Swanton. I think he was pretty influenced by Charlie Haden. He'd been able to figure out what some of that language was and play it. (Or his version of it.) It was one thing to hear what Haden did, but to go and see Lloyd do it—I was actually seeing it in the flesh. The other thing that Lloyd opened my eyes to was the open solo, with no accompaniment, so the audience could be taken on a journey with solo bass.



Of the local players, Lloyd Swanton (left) was the first bassist Steve had witnessed in the flesh, actually taking his time and telling a story, his story... PHOTO CREDIT MARKUS LACKINGER

BELINDA: Was that the first time you'd heard someone do that?

STEVE: No, Charlie had done solo bass stuff on the Ornette Coleman recordings, and Jimmy Garrison did some solo bass escapades on some of the Coltrane recordings. But Lloyd was the first one I'd witnessed in the flesh, actually taking his time and telling a story, his story, and whatever came up was okay. Two things emerged from that for me. One is that it can be done; the other thing is having the right to do it, having the confidence to say, 'It's okay to do this.'

BELINDA: Do you remember the first time you did this?

STEVE: One of the first times, memorably, was at the end of one of the Feeling of Thought and Pipeline concerts at the North Melbourne Town Hall in the late '80s. It was a long piece of Phil Treloar's, which involved a lot of improvising from the jazz quartet and a lot of notated music—interjectional parts from Pipeline—and the whole piece finished with an unaccompanied bass solo. That was the first time that I really enjoyed the experience of that, and would look forward to doing it again. Around the same time I joined the group Mara!, and one of the pieces we did over a number of years also finished with a big build-up ending with the bass going on, indefinitely. So I really enjoyed that space, probably more than taking a solo over the form of the song, over the changes.

BELINDA: When you do that, a total solo, do you think about where you are going beforehand, or does it feel organic?

STEVE: It's always different. Sometimes you might actually start out with a phrase you've pre-heard that you can develop. Sometimes there's a totally empty palette, and you start from the first sound you make on a totally organic journey from there, following your nose. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, to my satisfaction. It could be totally different for the listener. But you can never make generalisations about either of those aspects.

BELINDA: What's the difference between when it works and when it doesn't?

STEVE: That's more subjective. When it hasn't worked for me is when it's felt like it's meandered—it hasn't been a string of ideas that I've heard, or that are following on from each other with a clear trajectory...



Steve Elphick says that “most of whatever techniques I’ve found (ones I haven’t directly stolen from my peers and idols) have been ones that have come up in improvisations”... PHOTO CREDIT BELINDA WEBSTER

BELINDA: When you've been wallowing around going, 'Fuck, how do I get out of this?'

STEVE: Yeah, and I guess that's the evidence of when a lot of performances aren't working—when you're suddenly judging it, so that means you're not inside the music of it.

BELINDA: When your consciousness takes flight and lands on the ceiling and you think, 'What are you doing?'

STEVE: Yeah! It's a challenging space; sometimes it can be quite confronting, and you want the floor to swallow you up. Sometimes that can be the launch pad for, 'Okay, fuck that, I'm going to go somewhere else, with renewed conviction,' and suddenly you're into it, and you've given yourself a second chance. And if you feel like you can trust the audience and the other band members to be allowed to take this extra space, you can go somewhere you wouldn't have gone otherwise.

BELINDA: When you get somewhere and find something that's working, is it possible to capture that and apply it to the next situation?

STEVE: Oh, absolutely! Most of whatever techniques I've found (ones I haven't directly stolen from my peers and idols) have been ones that have come up in improvisations. I've thought later, 'I really like that area, I want to work on that.'

BELINDA: And are they often the things that you find when you have to break through that brick wall of self-consciousness?

STEVE: Sometimes, yes. Sometimes it's the times before doing the solo, and I've been working on a lot of stuff. I think, 'Okay, I'm going to use that.' They're the times when I've thought it hasn't been so successful, because it's been a bit too pre-planned. A lot of musicians say that they might be practising an area of their instrument and it might be months and months before it all appears on its own merit in their playing. So you have to be patient as a musician sometimes. Everyone's different. Everyone is driven at a different speed, in a different way. I think it's taken me a long time for some of the pennies to drop, and I think there are a lot more to come! But I feel okay about that.

BELINDA: Do you ever find yourself playing but not being self-consciously driven?

STEVE: Well, it was a moment like that which made me decide that I wanted to keep playing music above everything else. It was quite early on. I hadn't been playing the bass all that long. I was repeating my last year of high school with the idea of getting my matriculation and going to teachers' college and becoming a music teacher, under pressure from parents and it being the condition under which I could remain being supported at home. I decided to follow that course; I got to the first holidays of that year and was having a jam session with Mark Simmonds and a drummer we were playing with a lot at the time, Paul Rogers. At that stage I had not nearly enough technique on the bass but I was so enthralled at making these sounds that I had this out-of-body experience where I was on the other side of the garage, watching this thing happen. That made me feel that it wasn't coming from me, it was coming from somewhere else... I've heard other musicians talking about similar sorts

of experiences. But I just knew, having had that experience, that my mind was made up in an instant. So when I went back to school I went to the headmaster and said, 'This isn't for me.'

BELINDA: So you found that a thrilling experience?

STEVE: Absolutely, I wanted it again.

BELINDA: And have you experienced it again?

STEVE: Yes. It comes and goes; sometimes when you least expect it, sometimes in the least expected kinds of gigs. Instead of being a jazz concert at a premier jazz venue it might be just a wedding, with some musicians I haven't played with for quite a while, and suddenly you're in some zone...

BELINDA: Can you describe how it feels?

STEVE: No. [laughs] It only happens when you are so inside the music you're playing—not only your own input but the whole—that there is a total loss of self-consciousness or ego. So, in a way, that's when a performance is being the most generous and when musicians are the most giving of themselves—when they're in this state. It's ironic that that's when some audiences feel like the opposite is happening, that the musicians are just playing for themselves and not performing to them. They might respond by thinking, 'Hey, these guys are up themselves...' when actually the reverse is true: there is no arrogance or ego happening. The performance is at its best when the audience is actually eavesdropping.

BELINDA: The group of whom I think that could be said would be The Necks, because they don't seem to be playing to the audience at all. You get the feeling that the three of them are playing just for each other. It's a feeling of privilege that one can be there to witness it. Amazingly, one gets this sensation listening to their CDs as well.



The Necks, L-R, Tony Buck, Lloyd Swanton, Chris Abrahams: they don't seem to be playing to the audience at all. You get the feeling that the three of them are playing just for each other. It's a feeling of privilege that one can be there to witness it...

STEVE: There's no other way they could do that. Musically, what they're doing... on the outside it looks so simple when it starts, but the long-term musical element of form is being taken care of, which in composed music is one issue. In improvised music it's a huge discipline. Probably one of the most difficult aspects of improvised music, when it's at its most successful, is when people are doing what they're doing with relevance to a long structure. So they are remembering what they were doing 64 bars ago and recreating that with one extra element. That's the sort of thing that people in pop music sequence, and these guys are doing it live—it's pretty amazing. Also, while they're playing that way they are letting the ensemble sound grow as well. I'm sure they all aware of all the individual parts as well, so I think it's improvising on a pretty high level.

BELINDA: It's where the term 'real-time composition' reaches its peak.

STEVE: In the early '80s I lived in a shared house with Tony Buck. He had a lot of pop music on, particularly Prince's long dance mixes, at pretty high volume in the house, so I had no choice but to listen! And so you would actually start to hear the musical things going on: a drum fill might happen in the second bar of the first phrase and 64 bars later it happens again so you realise that it's not an accident; and after another 64 bars it happens again with an added note, and then there's a horn riff. This slow progression...

BELINDA: So Tony's really found that!

STEVE: Yeah!



Tony Buck: in a shared house he had a lot of pop music on, particularly Prince's long dance mixes, at pretty high volume in the house... PHOTO CREDIT MARKUS LACKINGER

BELINDA: In your career of 34 years to date, you've played with a large number of ensembles. How have they come about for you? Has this been a series of friends and relationships that have formed, or have you made conscious choices to go into particular areas? You've also played free jazz, structured jazz, trad jazz, a lot of folk-inspired music, early music...

STEVE: Andrew Ford [presenter of *The Music Show* on ABC Radio National] calls me a musical slut (on air he suggests I'm promiscuous)...



*Andrew Ford,
presenter of The Music
Show on ABC Radio
National: he calls Steve
a musical slut.. PHOTO
COURTESY THE ABC*

BELINDA: Are you so gluttonous for all musical experiences?

STEVE: I think there's been a determination about the kind of people that I've been attracted to, and the kind of music: definitely groups where the leader is the composer. There are two reasons why I've wanted to tap into what that creates. First, this search for, as I mentioned before, 'Where does one get the right to do that?' And second, I see incredible value in people developing their own voice.

BELINDA: Is it also a kind of authenticity?

STEVE: In terms of the jazz tradition, absolutely!

BELINDA: I meant an authenticity in respect of leaders being composers...

STEVE: Well, that's directly related to the tradition, and there are great lessons to be learned from it. One is that by studying the greats of the past and understanding what has gone before we can re-create it, albeit with an individual stamp. Another big lesson (and this relates to your comment) is that the very masters we study—most of those since bebop at least—set the example of going on to write their own material and create their own musical environments, thereby adding to and progressing the tradition. Product and process co-existing and feeding off each other. Where musicians place themselves in this scheme of things is a matter of individual choice and taste. I have always preferred process, although I think this preference has meant that it has taken a long time to gain an awareness/ knowledge and respect for

the traditional vocabularies which bass players are supposed to know, from R&B and funk to the various South American and African styles. I am enjoying this aspect of music much more as I get older. The composer-led bands have been challenging, and I've felt that the music has been written partly with me in mind.

BELINDA: So is that where you feel an integral part of it?

STEVE: Yes, a sense of ownership. Also a sense of uniqueness playing original music. Maybe there's some ego in there, wanting to be seen in this light? I actually haven't given that too much thought. My first professional gig, after working behind a bar, was on a cruise ship. I used to work behind the bar at an RSL club and idolised the band. I would think that, one day, I'd be out there. When I went to sea, it was basically an RSL club gig seven nights a week, playing some dance music, a few jazz standards, back an act. I got off the boat and went back to work behind the bar, thinking if that's what I have to do to be a professional musician, I'm actually not that interested. That was my first career decision. After that I met up with people like Phil Treloar, who was putting one of his early groups together. He asked me! He became a mentor and quite an influence and he's still a great friend. He saw things in me that I couldn't; I think it was not to do with my musical ability and technique at the time but whatever it was inside me that could make a decision like this. I think like-minded people find each other in this world.



A young Steve Elphick is pictured here on bass in the Nancy Stuart band with L-R, Wally Temple (drums), Rex Kidney (clarinet), Robbie Burns (trombone), Stuart (vocals)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

BELINDA: What band was Phil starting?

STEVE: Expansions.

BELINDA: What was it you think he saw in you?

STEVE: I think he would describe it as some sort of spirit. I think he was willing to be associated with me based on that, and to give time for the musical side of things to grow.

BELINDA: Can you articulate what that spirit is?

STEVE: Maybe it's seeing a sense of struggle. Certainly one of my musical and personal struggles was trying to find out where this strength comes from, to get up and be counted, to be heard. And on your own terms. I knew that people who wrote music and put bands together had found this. Somehow I felt that by associating myself with people like this I could maybe learn something about this. It was a bit of a mystery to me. I was definitely drawn to it and I wanted a part of it.



Phil Treloar became a mentor to Steve, quite an influence and still a great friend. This is Treloar's group Feeling To Thought, L-R, Mark Simmonds, Dave Ades, Elphick and (behind Elphick) Treloar...

BELINDA: Is that what has guided you in all your choices of who to play with?

STEVE: Yes. I've made many conscious decisions based on that. I went to and fro for some years. I remember when Phil put Expansions together; then a theatre show came to town and it was an opportunity to make some money, so I took the theatre show. But I was still young enough to do the show and go on to late night jazz gigs on the Friday and Saturday nights at the Paradise Jazz Cellar with Mark Simmonds, Mark Isaacs' band at the time which had Phil Treloar and Dale Barlow in it. So there seemed to be a way to do both. And then I did three theatre shows back-to-back, and in the middle of the third one I broke my contract. I knew it was time to stop because I was going crazy. So I made that decision, and within a week I got a phone call from Roger Frampton asking me to join his band, Intersection.

BELINDA: Had you played with Roger before?

STEVE: With Phil's group Expansion, some years beforehand. And this offer meant a tour to India. It was great! I was in awe of Roger's musical knowledge, and in awe of the dynamic between him and Phil, and the musical areas that they had been working on for a long time. I didn't understand what they were doing. I understand a lot more now. I would be a lot better in that musical situation now, but most people would say the same thing in hindsight. Also, in those years I was playing a lot with James and John Morrison. They had some small bands and a Big Band, and they bought their first boat. We were going down to Pittwater and spending the night on the boat after our gigs, jamming the night away. That was a great time. I felt accepted.



The Morrison Bros Big Bad Band: they were going down to Pittwater and spending the night on the boat after their gigs, jamming the night away. Back row L-R, Steve Elphick, Peter Lothian, Peter Trotta, David Pudney, Warwick Alder, Peter Cross, John Morrison. Front row, L-R, Kevin Hunt, Tom Baker, Paul Andrews, Jason Morphett, James Morrison...

I was doing a lot of gigs on the Sydney jazz scene as a standards player. At the end of 1983 Sandy Evans put her first band together—Women and Children First, a quartet with Tony Buck and Indra Lesmana—and to me it was the closest thing to emulating the John Coltrane Quartet. It felt so fantastic to be in that band, and I felt really committed to it. There was also a lot of excitement about the band wherever we played. At the same time James Morrison’s group was doing a regular night at the Soup Plus, and I was committed to that as well. I got to the point where I needed to make a commitment to one or the other. I remember saying to James that I wanted to leave the band because I wanted to play original music and I felt committed to it and it was going to take up a lot of time, and he was very respectful of my decision. I’ve worked with him since then a number of times... I remember before a tour with Women and Children First, we were so short of money that I went to John and James, as they were the only people I knew who had a van, and I asked them if we could hire it for a week. They agreed, and we took the van away and when we returned it they wouldn’t take any money. They were being friends and supportive of a musical area that wasn’t where they were heading. I know James cops flak sometimes. I don’t think he cares, but I like to balance things out with my early experiences with him. I feel there’s far too much negativity in all of the scenes. Whoever has been in the forefront of any scene has copped flak...



Steve hired a van from the Morrison brothers, James (left) and John (below) for a week. When the van was returned, they wouldn’t take any money...



BELINDA: The tall poppy syndrome...

STEVE: Yeah, so you have Peter Rechniewski or Paul Grabowsky being criticised on the basis of being seen as controlling figures within the jazz scene and garnering occasionally sizeable slices of what is a very small funding pie, especially compared to the classical scene, but I think, ‘Thank goodness these guys are around, because they actually get things done!’

BELINDA: They have the force of personality to achieve things.

STEVE: Absolutely. And let's not forget those less visible, like Jane March and Ann Moir. But look, no one's going to put all their energy into doing what they have done without having an agenda or a vision. That's human nature, and I don't have a problem with that. Of course, no one person's vision is going to be right for everyone, and dissatisfaction with the status quo is healthy, especially when the result is a positive one. This was the case some years ago when a younger generation of musicians, feeling excluded by SIMA's artistic policy, created the Jazzgroove Association. Instead of putting all their energy into complaining they put it into coming up with an alternative. They took responsibility. So I reckon that, rather than pull them down (the tall poppies), give credit where it's due and rejoice in their accomplishments. We need more positives!

BELINDA: That's part of the spirit in you that I'm sure Phil Treloar responds to. A generosity of spirit...

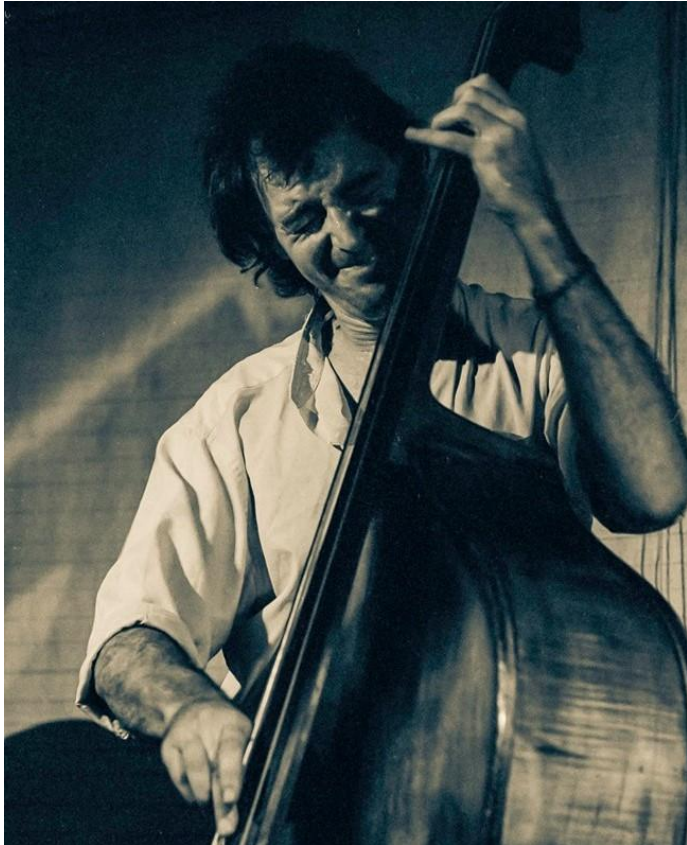
STEVE: Maybe. But I've had a lot of great teachers along the way. Musicians who have taken responsibility for their visions—Llew and Mara Kiek, Phil Treloar, John Pochée, Sandy Evans, James Greening, Andrew Robson, Michele Morgan, Mark Simmonds—sometimes at great personal cost.



Steve has had a lot of great teachers along the way, musicians who have taken responsibility for their visions, such as James Greening (left) and John Pochée...
PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

BELINDA: Why aren't you leading bands and writing more music?

STEVE: I could say I've been so busy in other people's bands and projects all these years that I haven't had a chance. But the honest answer would be that I am not driven enough in that direction. I've always considered myself as a supporting player in other people's quests to write and lead. But I've got to say, the position of the bass player in a band is sometimes a leading position; it's often directing the music. So a lot of the time I do feel like I am the leader, though not in name or compositionally.



Elphick: I've always considered myself as a supporting player in other people's quests to write and lead...PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

BELINDA: How does that happen, musically?

STEVE: Well, the bass is pretty fundamental. You play a note and it suggests a lot of things, both harmonically and rhythmically. A lot of the time I find the people I play with are very receptive to that. They are looking for that contribution...

BELINDA: ...where you do the unexpected, and take the music off on a different tangent?

STEVE: Yeah. Because great horn players will hear it. And often if horn players are playing a lot of notes in one key, they might be looking for the next step. So if you

provide the next bass note, [they think] ‘Ah, great!’ and off they go. But then they will lead as well, so it’s always a conversation.

BELINDA: So it’s either a conversation between equals or a support act with a lead?

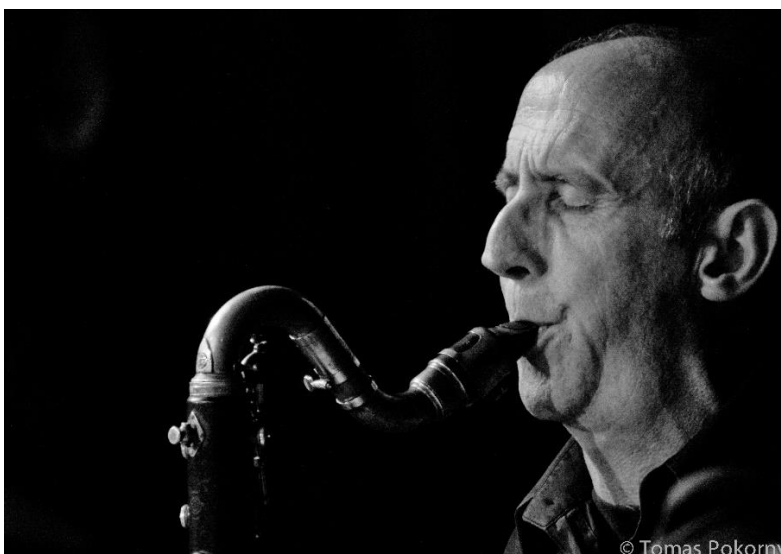
STEVE: From the point of view that someone has written a composition, different composers have different amounts of flexibility within what they want from their compositions. Some composers want their work exactly rendered, whereas others allow it to be a suggestion rather than a blueprint. I have written some music, and I have had the one experience of putting a night’s music on... It felt wonderful to be asked, to be given the opportunity. Most of the people I’ve worked with and been inspired by—because they’ve been movers and shakers, composers and leaders—have created their own opportunity. They’ve actually got the music written and the band put together and then they go looking for a gig and sell themselves. I guess that’s the aspect of my personality that is not driven enough. Maybe I’m a bit lazy.

BELINDA: If the opportunity came up again, would you grab it?

STEVE: Yes. The musicians I played with that night, Phil Slater and Paul Cutlan, both said, ‘When can we do this again?’ Because they enjoyed the experience. I play with each of them in other situations, so I’m not losing out.



Steve has had an experience of putting a night’s music on, performing with Phil Slater (left) and Paul Cutlan (below)... SLATER PHOTO CREDIT PETER TEA; CUTLAN PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY



BELINDA: But you are not the kind of person who's going to go out and get, say, a SIMA gig for this trio...

STEVE: Not at this point in my life, no. Maybe there are a lot of people that I've worked with for all these years who would encourage me to do that, who would regard that as an integral part of my development as both a musician and as a human being. So it is another step, among many!

BELINDA: Well, I thought it was an excellent evening of music, so I hope you do it again! It was good to hear all those musical influences in your life being explored. They all came together in that evening. The singing, the trumpet, the different approaches, the melody and improvisation... it was quite exciting.

STEVE: I think, for me, one of the main differences between whether I was a sideman or a leader that night was not really the fact that I'd written the music that we played, but that I got a chance to talk about how this music came about. And so it was more about letting the audience in on my personal journey to this point. And I really enjoyed that aspect of it, more than the fact of it being my music. When you have that relationship with the audience, then you can get into that zone I was talking about of totally ignoring the audience when you play. And the audience feels included.

BELINDA: Who have been your biggest influences throughout your career?

STEVE: The biggest influences on me, and also supporters, have definitely been Phil Treloar and Mark Simmonds, Sandy Evans, Roger Frampton, John Pochée, Andrew Robson. People I respect enormously and who are wonderful players. Llew and Mara Kiek as well.



The biggest influences on Elphick, and also supporters, have been musicians such as Sandy Evans (left) and Andrew Robson (centre), pictured here with trumpeter Warwick Alder (right)... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

BELINDA: These are all the people you are still working with. So you've garnered those influences and turned them into your career... And with all of those people you do quite different things. Was that a conscious decision, or just the way it's grown and evolved?

STEVE: If a couple have been married for 25 years and they come to a rocky place, they either can go separate ways or decide to re-commit. And if the marriage has been going that long, a lot of times there'll be enough going on that can't be re-made with anyone else so it's worth preserving. Long relationships— though I've not had many personally in an intimate way—but the musical ones have lasted. And I think there's a lot of value in that. Because now whenever I'm on stage with, for example, *The World According to James*, there is such an ease about being on stage with those people, like old friends, and the music sounds like that.



The World According to James, L-R, Steve Elphick, James Greening, Andrew Robson, Toby Hall: there is such an ease about being on stage with those people, like old friends, and the music sounds like that....

BELINDA: Better the devil you know...

STEVE: Well, the devil becomes an angel sometimes!

BELINDA: Why is improvisation such a fascination?

STEVE: We ask kids at school concerts about this. And they answer: 'So you can make the music more interesting,' or, 'So that you can express your feelings.' You can play notated music and do that as well, but musicians would add that there is more a part of themselves in a group which is improvising. I've always felt that a group of musicians playing, improvising, is quite a beautiful political and social example: if there are four people in the band, they are all acting as individuals but also for the

one cause. They all have faith and trust in each other, and there's mutual support for someone to step out and feature. There are all these analogies; it only works through total co-operation, and it's a culture. In a band that lasts for a long time there's a culture of all these things happening, where the music can be the same piece you've been playing for 20 years and yet it's totally free, and all of you know exactly what's going on. Yet hopefully it's a magical mystery tour for the audience. And for the players, there's still room to be surprised.

BELINDA: I often compare it to writing. The word is either written and can be re-read and it doesn't change, analogous to through-composed classical music... with words you have the book, and you have the conversation. To me, improvised music is the conversation. Every good conversation is a good improvisation...



Elphick: I've always felt that a group of musicians playing, improvising, is quite a beautiful political and social example...

PHOTO CREDIT BELINDA WEBSTER

STEVE: Absolutely. We make that point to kids in school. We say, 'You improvise all the time. Do you walk around with a piece of paper telling you what to say to your friends when you meet them? That'd be silly, wouldn't it? You know lots of words, and with them you can express whatever needs to be said. You can do that on your own, or in conjunction with other people.'

BELINDA: If you do that on your own too often you tend to get locked up...

STEVE: Or get regular work at the Domain every Sunday! It's low pay but you draw a crowd! It's an interesting analogy: when 400 people go along and hear a symphony orchestra play, it's like 400 people reading the same book at the same time, that one

person has written. That's why music is an art form out on its own, because each of the 400 people has a different impression of it. Whereas the written word... if it's poetry there might be different ways of interpreting it, but if it's a story being told, it's the story.

BELINDA: And the thing about a musical performance is that it has to happen in real time; you can't stop and start it.

STEVE: Unless you're recording with modern techniques... [laughs]

BELINDA: But with an improvisation... that's why a performance by a group like The Necks is so magical for me, because they've got that whole thing happening where they can have that musical discussion for an hour, with periods of repose and periods of intensity and periods of growth and development. It's magical, an experience unique in human creativity.

STEVE: I have to admit, I've not heard a Necks concert for a long time, as I've either been busy or couldn't afford it. But, more truthfully, I think my mind hasn't been quiet enough to take it on board. Coming back to why I've not led my own bands... the way I've felt about it in the past is that there can only be one captain of the cricket team, and for the team to operate well there have to be ten other people who are happy to not be the captain but still fulfil their role.



Elphick: I think there was a while where I had a chip on my shoulder about working class versus middle class. Different upbringings, children being supported in their opinions. Whereas I never felt I had the right to an opinion as a kid... PHOTO COURTESY JOHNSTON STREET JAZZ

BELINDA: And it works best if none of those ten are overly ambitious to be the captain...

STEVE: Well, they may be, but the team doesn't work if someone tries to take over. There is a team, and the captain needs the other people to be supportive of his or her captaincy, so there is an understood hierarchy. I've generally been comfortable in that position. I feel I've been a better supporter than a leader. And I think that's okay. I don't feel ashamed of that.

BELINDA: It's like playing double bass in an orchestra. You're not out there, you're in there!

STEVE: Can you imagine 80 conductors and one violinist! Let's turn the tables.
[manic laughter]

BELINDA: Is there any one aspect or element you regard as absolutely essential to music-making?

STEVE: Yes. To give myself permission to do it. It's taken me a long time to figure out. Some people are born with it. (This is an assumption on my part which could be totally wrong.) I think there was a while where I had a chip on my shoulder about working class versus middle class. Different upbringings, children being supported in their opinions. Whereas I never felt I had the right to an opinion as a kid. An opinion might rock the boat and it was always pretty fragile. So different people have different circumstances, but it doesn't change the fact that everyone who's playing music must, at some point, give themselves permission to do it, whether consciously or unconsciously, and that will happen at different stages in people's lives. It's just taken me longer than I might otherwise have liked, because I've actually been able to compare myself unfavourably with others who I thought have had this, and I thought, 'Where did they get this from?'



Elphick: I've had such a great time with my Dad in the last 20 years... PHOTO CREDIT BELINDA WEBSTER

BELINDA: How have you found it?

STEVE: I think just getting older. Definitely losing the chip on my shoulder about class.

BELINDA: That's a difficult one to lose. How did you do it?

STEVE: First of all, the people that I was jealous of... realising that it's not their fault. They had no choice. And that I stood to learn from and benefit from my association with them. Maybe they also shared the same struggles but found the courage to transcend their fears. Secondly, realising that I had no choice and my parents had no choice. So to stop blaming them and my upbringing. Basically, accepting and loving both my parents really helped take the monkey off my back.

BELINDA: And that's fed straight into your attitude to music?

STEVE: I think attitude to parts of life, generally, yes.



Elphick: Basically, accepting and loving both my parents really helped take the monkey off my back... PHOTO CREDIT BELINDA WEBSTER

BELINDA: How did you learn to love your parents again?

STEVE: Even though I'm not religious, I looked at the Ten Commandments, and I saw the one that said 'Honour thy father and thy mother', and I thought that, for me to change, I need to go to something outside of myself, outside of my control, and trust that. I found that very liberating.

BELINDA: Is that an acceptance that your parents haven't been the way they are just to spite you?

STEVE: Yeah! They have no control of it. I've had such a great time with my Dad in the last 20 years. He was an asshole (on his own admission) when I was a kid. He's learned to accept some parts of himself, which is part of his journey.

BELINDA: Part of that has doubtless been accepting you.

STEVE: And me accepting him.



*L-R, Elphick, pictured here in the 80s with vocalist Maree Montgomery, and pianist Roger Frampton...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

BELINDA: Children do educate their parents...

STEVE: It's a two-way street, and sometimes it takes an awfully long time! For some it's never an issue, but for a lot of people those things are an issue and they do affect the way they live their lives. And also forgiveness—not to let them off the hook but to let me off the hook. If I forgive whatever I thought was done wrongly to me, then I'm not carrying that stuff around anymore. It's liberated me. I can then look at my parents and appreciate other qualities. I try to do that generally in my life... there needs to be more credit where it's due.