

DON BANKS

Interviewed by Mike Williams*

*[This interview was published in Mike Williams' 1981 book *The Australian Jazz Explosion*.]*



Don Banks: his Dad brought home a record of Teddy Wilson playing A-Tisket, A-Tasket. Don had never heard piano playing like that... he was hooked from then on... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

Mike Williams writes: Don Banks, who died in August, 1980, was an internationally respected composer of 'serious' music, with a considerable number of coveted awards to his credit. He had received commissions to compose for some of Europe's most prestigious musical occasions. In the late 1940s he was also in the forefront of the modern jazz revolution in Australia, Melbourne's most influential pianist and arranger in the new idiom. From 1950 until the early 1970s he was overseas, at first studying, then following his career as a composer. But he never lost his links with jazz. With Margaret Sutherland he formed the Australian Musical Association in London, he was chairman of the Society for the Promotion of New Music and an executive member of the British Society for Electronic Music. But he was also one of the two patrons for the London Jazz Centre Society, now a powerful promotional organisation in Britain (the other patron was John Dankworth). In

1973, after he had returned permanently to Australia to head the Composition Department at the Canberra School of Music, he was appointed the first Chairman of the Music Board of the fledgling Australia Council. It was largely due to him that the Council first channelled funds into the development of jazz in Australia and he was inspirational in founding the Jazz Action Society movement. At his death, he was head of composition at the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music.

Don Banks: I started learning piano when I was five and was on the competition circuit when I was six. I got to know Ballarat and Bendigo and places like that rather well. I was going through the agony of a young performer, and I remember that on cold days we used to have little boxes to rub our hands on so that they would get warm with the friction. My father had his own dance band in Melbourne. He was one of the first people to import a saxophone into Australia and had the whole family, including baritone. He also played trombone and drums. So apart from my formal piano lessons I used to muck around on trombone and saxes and got to know the drum kit. Dad used to teach as well as lead the band; for instance, he taught trombone to Dutchy Turner, who became a very well-known player. My formal music education was just that: learning the piano, with some theory and harmony later on. But then there was a teenage crisis and I became tired of the mechanical business of playing piano. What I really wanted to do was compose. With Dad's encouragement, I had been writing short songs for gatherings and for children to sing, but there was no example of a composer around town. And I do think that is important; you have to have a model.

Eventually I gave up playing. The mechanical keyboard skills and the dexterity didn't seem to mean anything to me any longer. But I found my way back into music through jazz, through improvisation. One of the turning points was that Dad brought me home a record of Teddy Wilson playing *A-Tisket, A-Tasket*, and I had never heard piano playing like that. Of course, I was hooked from then on, and started to buy more and more records and find out more and more about jazz.



The American Teddy Wilson: Banks had never heard piano playing like that...

By the time I had finished at Melbourne Boys' High School, I and a drummer named Paul Longhurst used to go down to Tony Newstead's place for sessions. I used to get great kicks from playing with Tony, who is a fine natural musician. Then there was George Tack on clarinet and Splinter Reeves on tenor sax. With the outbreak of war I was in the Medical Corps. I had been classified as something like B2 — unfit for tropical service; I was of such slight build that they wouldn't take a chance on my being bitten by a mosquito. I was out in field hospitals for a while, but my war years were spent mainly around Melbourne and I started to do much more regular playing. Some of the people I worked with were Russ Jones on vibes, Bobby Limb on saxophone, and Bob 'Beetles' Young, who played piano. They had just come over from Adelaide to play with Bob Gibson's band down at St Kilda.



Tony Newstead: Banks used to go down to his place for sessions...

I followed Artie Shaw and the US Navy Band around when they were here and was absolutely amazed at the precision of their playing, watching the brass warm up their chops about eight bars before coming in to play just one note. When it did come, it was absolutely tremendous. We had never known that kind of precision. I recorded with Max Kaminsky, who was on trumpet with the band. I was playing piano nearly all the time but did actually make one public appearance on trombone with, I think, Roger Bell at Unity Hall on a Sunday. There was a big band at the American Services Club in Melbourne which used to blow several nights a week. It was not top class, but there were enough good service musicians to make it work, including one fabulous tenor player whose name I can't recall.

We used to have lots of jam sessions with the guys in the band and I started to do scores for it. I also did a lot of scores for Glen Gilmour's band in 1945. I remember that one of the chores Glen asked me to do was to take down Ellington's *Blue Goose* off the record for the band. Boy, did I sweat over that! That was the first transcription from disc I had done, and I learned a hell of a lot from it. There is nothing like that for training the ear.

We were doing palais jobs, nightclub work, bar mitzvahs and were very good at Greek weddings. And I think it is fair to say that I had the first bop group as such in Australia. There was Bruce Clarke on guitar and the front line was usually Ken Brentnall on trumpet and Eddie Oxley on alto sax. We made some records on the Jazzart label under the name of the Don Banks Bopet and I remember writing a piece for *Tempo* magazine, explaining bop.



Don Banks Bopet, 1949-50, L-R, Charlie Blott (drums), Ken Brentnall (trumpet), Pixie McFarlane (bass), Betty Parker (vocals), Banks (piano), Eddie Oxley (sax), Bruce Clarke (guitar): the first bop group as such in Australia... PHOTO COURTESY CHARLIE BLOTT OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ

In 1947 we started Sunday afternoon jam sessions at the New Theatre with Bob Limb and Splinter Reeves on saxes, Ivan Haisall, a very fine clarinet player, Jack Brokensha, vibes, Ken Brentnall, trumpet, Doug Beck or Joe Washington, guitar, Pixie Amies or Charlie Blott, drums, John Foster or Ken Lester, bass and Les Cooper or myself on piano.

We were playing a lot of coffee lounges about this time and used to get together for jam sessions until the early hours, I also played with Fred Thomas' big band and did a lot of work with Charlie Blott and Joe Washington. It must have been the Count Basie influence, before the bop influence, that I would always train a rhythm section to be tight but free and use dynamics, contrast and change.

We came to Sydney a couple of times for concerts but I was mainly working around Melbourne. There were some fabulous times, especially with Benny Featherstone, who was quite a character, and Splinter Reeves. I remember Benny, Charlie, I and some others were booked for a new Sunday night gig. All the rest of us were there at the coffee lounge but there was no sign of Benny. Charlie said, 'Obviously he's up at the club. I better go up and get him.'

Charlie went, we waited another quarter of an hour and there was still no Charlie. So someone else went to find him and Benny. And one by one we went looking for the others. I was last to go. The promoter wasn't very pleased at that stage, but we all came back and, I think, played well, and longer than we were booked for.



Splinter Reeves (right) with Ted Preston on piano: Reeves could put four bottles of beer in the inside pockets of his overcoat... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CLARKE OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ

Then Splinter turned up in full penguin suit, having had one or two on the way. By this time the promoter was very happy, because we had a good crowd. Splinter had an overcoat on. He used to wear it because he could put four bottles of beer in inside pockets and when he was thrown out of the pub at six o'clock he always had a couple stashed away. Well, the promoter shook Splinter's hand — and glasses and cutlery started falling out of the overcoat. It was just like a Marx Brothers scene.

I had got out of the Army in 1946. By this time I had started to hear Debussy and Ravel and began to think, 'Gee, there are other things apart from jazz.' Doug Gamley, who now does all the scoring for Henry Mancini's films in the UK and is a composer in his own right, a brilliant orchestrator, was playing in a coffee lounge on accordion. And I started to listen to recordings he had and said, 'Why didn't you tell me about all this before?' I suddenly became desperate to know.

I decided I wanted to study music after the Army and thought that to get into a place like the Melbourne Conservatorium I would have to know more than I did. So I started studying privately and seriously, piano and harmony. I was auditioned before Sir Bernard Heinze and accepted. I think the next person in was Rex Hobcroft, who is now Director of the New South Wales Conservatorium. Sir Bernard looked at Rex

and said, 'Your face is familiar, young man.' And Rex said, 'Yes. I flew you down from Sydney this morning.' Because Rex was an airline pilot.

I think the next person in was Keith Humble, then Jim Penberthy. Peter Sculthorpe was already there. So that started what Sir Bernard referred to as the golden age there. Two of my friends there were Ian Pearce and Ivan Sutherland, who went back to his home country, New Zealand, in the 1950s and is now in television there.



With Jim Penberthy (above), Keith Humble and Peter Sculthorpe, this was the start of a golden age...

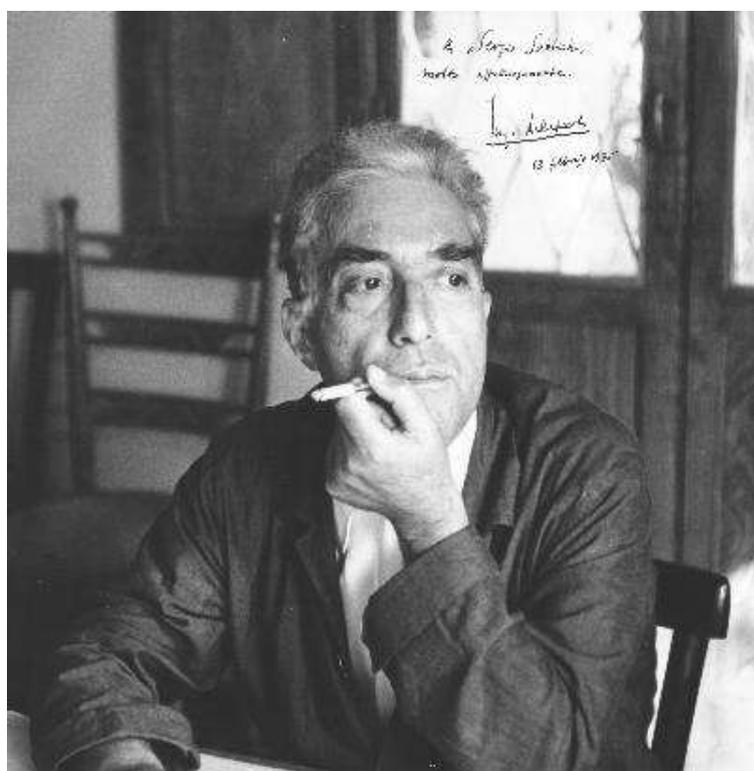
I was doing a double major in piano and composition and in the last year I was practising six hours a day, writing six hours a day and also reading history and trying to catch up on a whole range of stuff. And I was working to save money to go to London. I was kicked overseas by Professor A E H Nickson, who told me, 'There is nothing for you in this country. You've got to go abroad.' So when I got my diploma I, Ian Pearce and Ivan Sutherland went over to London together, where we lived in a house at Cheam.



Mátyás Seiber: he was the first professor of jazz appointed at Frankfurt in the 1930s, and he wrote the first twelve-tone piece in jazz...

To start with, I kept going with the money I had saved, then by what I was used to doing; going out and playing. Even though it wasn't particularly interesting work, it was money. I was playing at Tooting Broadway three nights of the week, and two of them were for old-time dancing. But I had started studying with Mátyás Seiber. That was tremendously interesting because he was the first professor of jazz appointed at Frankfurt in the 1930s, and he wrote the first twelve-tone piece in jazz.

Once I was studying with him, I had to throw everything else out of the window. He asked me not to compose for three months or so as I had to do a hectic course of analysis. Then I started to learn what music was about. He used to put everything under a microscope. He said, 'You have to look and see how these little cells move together, how they expand. There is a whole chain of chemistry goes on.' I was with Seiber for 1951 and some of 1952, then went to a summer school in Austria, studied with Milton Babbitt there for three months. After that I went on to have a year with Luigi Dallapiccola.



A year with Luigi Dallapiccola (above)...

I got back to England in late 1953 and married shortly after that. I was copying music for a crust when we were first married, then started getting a couple of interesting things to do. I did some arrangements for a record by the Australian jazz violinist Don Harper, with whom I had played in Melbourne, and the British trombonist, George Chisholm.

The person who gave me the chance to break into the commercial scene was Wally Stott, who was also a student of Seiber. Wally was doing something for BBC radio. It required some serious music at the start and Wally said, 'I think you should do this.' It was an H G Wells thing and had Tony Hancock in it. Then I started to do some

scores for the BBC Light Orchestra. I became more or less staff arranger for Jack Parnell, who was music director for one of the TV networks. His band was full of good jazz musicians and I was doing backings for vocalists, comedy routines, that sort of thing. Later on Jack became a student of mine.



Wally Stott (pictured above): he gave Banks the chance to break into the commercial scene...Later Banks became more or less staff arranger for Jack Parnell (pictured below), who was music director for one of the TV networks...



About the end of the 1950s I got my first crack at films with a documentary, followed by some cartoons. Then I got a B film which I think was called *Murder at Site 3*. After that came a big feature with Marius Goring, Dawn Adams and Eddie Constantine. A lot of tracks for that were played by a big jazz band with some beautiful solos by people such as Ronnie Scott on tenor saxophone and Bob Burns on alto. I was now an established composer and the fact that I was an all-rounder meant that when

there was a film where jazz was required, I would be in the running for it. In one I did for MGM, called *Hysteria*, I built the whole score round Tubby Hayes, a brilliant tenor saxophone player, who provided the identifying theme, more or less the voice, for the hero. There were about 45 minutes in that score and Tubs was probably playing about two-thirds of the time. In another film, called *Jackpot*, I had Phil Seamen on drums and again Ronnie Scott, Bob Burns and Laddy Busby on trombone.



The whole score for the film Hysteria was built around the brilliant tenor saxophonist Tubby Hayes... PHOTO COURTESY ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ

Altogether I did some 20 features during the 1960s and early 1970s. Right throughout the 1960s, I was living by my pen as a professional composer. I would do about two feature films a year and with a couple of TV commercials, that bought me the time to compose. I had dropped my keyboards playing when I started studying composition in the early 1950s. I decided I was never going to be a concert pianist; I realised there was so much work to do in composition. I'd always listened to a lot of jazz on radio and disc and knew of Gunther Schuller's theories about third stream

music and had heard some of his early pieces. Then Keith Humble, the Australian composer who is now at La Trobe University in Melbourne, had a project going in Paris and he was tuned into what was happening through visiting Americans. He said, 'Why don't you write a piece involving jazz?' So I wrote my *Equation 1*, which was duly played over there. I found it rather a fascinating medium, to get some kind of synthesis of serious music and jazz. *Equation 2* was written in England for a festival. *Equation 3* was written for Don Burrows and George Golla out here, and *Equation 4* was also written for Don.



Don Banks (left) pictured with Don Burrows: Equation 3 and Equation 4 were written for Burrows...

Then there were pieces such as *Nexus*, which was a commission from the festival people in Kassel, West Germany. Originally they had approached me to say there was a very fine German group led by the American vibes player Dave Pike. They asked me to think about writing for that group and symphony orchestra. They sent over some LPs of Pike, and I started to listen to them and think about the piece. One day there was a phone call from Germany to say that Pike was on tour in South America and wouldn't be back in time. Could I think of an English group? By this time I had got to know the Dankworths and had written my *Settings from Roget* for Cleo Laine, so there was a good bond established there. I phoned John and we spoke quickly about it. I said what about Kenny Wheeler, the trumpet player, and Daryl Runswick, the bass player, Chris Karan, the Australian-born drummer and Laurie Holloway, the pianist, and, of course, John? So *Nexus* was written for that quintet with symphony orchestra.

It was double-billed with Freddie Gulda, who came on and played Beethoven's *Second Piano Concerto*. That was followed by *Nexus*, which went down extremely well. I think the first movement of that really works as a synthesis; I think I really



Freddie Gulda: he played Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto, and that was followed by Banks's Nexus...

pulled that off. The second half of the concert was a jam with Freddie Gulda. There was a further association with Cleo and John when I wrote three short songs for her. There was also a piece I was commissioned to do for the London Sinfonietta, which I called *Meeting Place* and which is for chamber ensemble. For that there was John, Kenny Wheeler, Bob Lamb on trombone, Ronnie Ross on baritone, and Kenny Clare, drums — what a beautiful drummer! I enjoyed writing that piece. When *Nexus* was done here — there is a recording released by the ABC — I added a guitar part for George Golla.

The third stream concept was very useful in the 1960s, but I don't think it applies any longer. It was a useful tag to identify what was going on. Nowadays it is damned difficult when you are listening to a free improvisation group to hear whether it is jazz or whether it is serious music or whether it is a mix, because so many people move freely between them. Look at Daryl Runswick, who plays bass with Dankworth and is a very fine composer and does most of the arrangements for the Kings Singers. Then there is another English bass player, Barry Guy. He and Bobby Lamb had this big band going at St Pancras Town Hall in London, and it was really wild. Then he got a commission from the BBC and wrote a suite, which runs for about two hours, and the BBC played it in two parts.

I got to know Mike Westbrook because by 1969 I had gone to the University of London, to Goldsmiths' College and there were courses in jazz and electronics — two of my interests — there, and Mike used to do the jazz lectures. A L Lloyd did the folk songs. We had a very good scene going down there. I was director of music in the Department of Adult Studies and also used to lecture for the degree course.

Another fine jazz musician I knew pretty well in London was Kenny Graham who had a band called the Afro Cubists. He was just so goddamned inventive. In his bedroom he used to have speakers on either side of the bed and would make these tapes of two guys talking, bitching to each other. That could have been where I got the idea for my



piece, *Commentary*, in which there are two different guys' voices in speakers, one under the piano, the other offstage, bitching about the pianist: is he any good, that kind of thing. Humphrey Lyttelton was very good the way he stuck by Kenny, who was in hospital for a long, long time. So I always had this association with jazz musicians. But I must admit that when I went to England after having been with the monsters in Melbourne, found everybody so quiet over there, until I dug a little deeper.



Banks: he and Stan Ostoja-Kotkowski, Creative Arts Fellows at the Australian National University, put on the big show, Synchronphon '72...

I came back to Australia on a six-week tour in 1970 and liked what I saw. I got an offer to come to Canberra for a year in 1972. It was there that artist Stan Ostoja-Kotkowski and myself, as Creative Arts Fellows at the Australian National University, put on that big show, *Synchronphon '72*, which I think I still have to see topped as a multi-media event. We had the Burrows Quintet, a complete electronic music studio, five synthesisers way out in front, chamber ensemble and singer. And Stan, on his side, had lasers, including a giant cobalt one. We offered the show to the ABC and I said to some nameless person, 'Here's your Radio Italia Prize entry.' And the answer was, 'No, the lasers might hurt the lenses.' It was a tremendous community effort, that show. Everybody in Canberra was behind us.

My first interest in electronics came when I was over in Paris and I heard Keith Humble direct a piece. I'm a great man for timbre and colour and I thought, 'I'll have to do something about this, have to find out about electronics.' Several of the composers in England made an attempt to get the BBC to set up an electronic music studio. There were precedents in Rome and Paris and the studios were proliferating through the universities in America. We felt very deprived because we had nothing. The outcome of our approach was the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, to which the composers did not have access, because it was so busy churning out *Dr Whos*.



Engineer and inventor Peter Zinovieff: he created the Don Banks Music Box...

So I went to Peter Zinovieff, who had a very fine private studio, and said, 'It's all right for you. What about the rest of us?' So he said, 'What do you want?' I said, 'A small machine that will teach me the fundamentals.' A couple of weeks later he phoned and said, 'My designer has done it.' The outcome was what became known as the Don Banks Music Box, which I brought with me to Australia. I had a gap of 22 years between going overseas and returning to Australia. Since I got back I have found that the young people coming along now are serious and they play well; they listen to one another, which is one of the important things. And I think the Young Northside Big Band, for example, is quite astonishing.

When I took up my post with the Canberra School of Music there were three things I wanted to do. One was to get a jazz element in the course, another was a media element and the third was electronics. And I did succeed with the latter because Canberra has just about the best-equipped studio in the country. It hurt me to leave that one. But never mind, we are catching up fast at the NSW Conservatorium. Another thing that has resulted from my coming to Sydney is that we now have a close working arrangement with the Film and Television School. And I do think it important that young composers should get some kind of training to meet that big wide professional world. I am also thinking about drama and dance, and there is the jazz elective in the composers' course. So I can see there is every chance of bringing those three things I wanted into the main courses — in fact, that is now well under way at the Conservatorium. And it is quite amazing the number of students with experience of jazz who have come there.