

PETER NELSON: LIGHTNING IN A JAR

by Ashleigh Wilson*

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<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/peter-nelson-captures-lightning-in-a-jar/news-story/940182f6677519e77aeae7be0000a378>



In Australian music circles Peter Nelson (above, in Foundry 616 with the Mike Nock group in the background) has been dubbed a national treasure.

Usually he can be found close to the stage, listening intently, missing nothing. He's a quiet presence, a key part of the improvised music scene of Sydney, even if the precise nature of his role might not always be clear to an outside observer.

**When this was written in January, 2020, Ashleigh Wilson was arts editor at The Australian newspaper.*

From a distance, he comes across as a devoted fan, which is, at one level, exactly what he is. But Peter Nelson — accountant, company auditor, lawn bowls aficionado, volunteer radio presenter — is also overseeing a remarkable cultural project that is single-handedly capturing the sounds and creative evolution of a generation.

He's a "national treasure", says Julien Wilson, a Melbourne saxophonist: "I wish we could clone him and have one in every city."

For the best part of two decades, Nelson has been recording live performances by some of Australia's most innovative musical minds across Sydney. He has amassed more than 1,000 recordings, often from two shows a week, a remarkable archive of material that has been driven entirely by a love for the music and without any sense of profit or personal gain.

At 57, Nelson can't read music, but his legacy is unmistakable. "It always felt nice when Peter asked to record your work because you thought that he thought it would be worth recording," trumpeter Phil Slater says. "We all felt like a part of his massive curation and archival project."



Phil Slater at the 2009 Wangaratta Jazz Festival: when Peter asked to record your work, you thought that he thought it would be worth recording...

There's no precedent for this, at least in Australia. Nelson's efforts are reminiscent of the legendary American musicologist Alan Lomax, who collected field recordings across the US from the likes of Lead Belly, Muddy Waters, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie.

Nelson wouldn't make the Lomax comparison himself — he's far too modest. To illustrate his mission, he likes to invoke the Australian guitarist Cameron Deyell, who

could often be heard encouraging fellow band members with these words, tongue in cheek or otherwise: “Let’s go out and make some history.”

“I record that history,” Nelson says. “I capture that history.”



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The sounds he records are best described as jazz or improvised music, adjusted for an Australian context. Even at its most thrilling level, this music tends to attract a specialised following, which is to say, not always large. But the size of the audience isn’t really the point. Nelson tends to be ahead of the curve anyway – if those musicians are telling a story worth hearing, there’s a good chance he’ll be there in the room, taking it all in and saving it all for posterity. Then, once he has finished editing and mixing, he seeks approval from the musicians, then broadcasts selected parts on the radio.

“The thing that I look forward to the most is hearing music I’ve never heard before,” he says. “I just love it. And that’s the thing that gets me with improvisation.”

This is ephemeral music. That’s part of its appeal. It’s impossible to wholly capture these fleeting creative bursts as they come across in the room. To a performer, or a listener, it can feel like a kind of tragic beauty to witness these moments lost to time.

Nelson speaks with awe about the way musicians bounce ideas off each other in real time. He loves the sense of the unexpected. He calls it “magic”, and he wants the listener to feel like they’re there with him. “There’s so much in the moment in jazz,” he says. “It’s something that really sets the live scenario apart from a studio recording.”



Ten Part Invention, L-R, Roger Frampton (standing), John Pochée, Steve Elphick, Ken James, Sandy Evans, Miroslav Bukovsky, Warwick Alder, James Greening (standing), Bob Bertles, Bernie McGann: a performance by this band at the Strawberry Hills Hotel stood out for Nelson. After the gig, he found himself playing pool with the trombonist, James Greening (below)... GREENING PHOTO CREDIT LAKI SIDERIS



He recalls an early image that set him on this road: he imagined the music drifting off into the air, like smoke. That was in the early 1990s. Nelson, who had found his way from rock to jazz via Miles Davis, started attending performances around Sydney. One night stands out. The band was Ten Part Invention, and the venue was the Strawberry Hills Hotel, an inner-city pub that hosted jazz at the time. After the show, Nelson found himself playing pool with the trombonist, James Greening, and he was struck by how accessible the band members were. “There wasn’t a wall between the stage and the audience in this music.”

Nelson approached 2SER, a Sydney community radio station, and started recording gigs across town. He soon found himself presenting a weekly jazz show called *On the Corner* alongside James Fletcher, a young Sydney music enthusiast who now works for the BBC; the show was built around the music that Nelson was capturing live.

Then in 2013, after 21 years at 2SER, he moved on to a larger community station, Fine Music 102.5, where he presented another Australian jazz show, this time with Susan Gai Dowling. Again, those live recordings were the core of the program. The musicians he records vary from show to show. He tries to strike a balance between established names and artists at the start of their careers, as well as visiting musicians, particularly those from interstate.



Nelson with singer and fellow jazz broadcaster Susan Gai Dowling (right) and singer Greg Poppleton (left)...

The process is similar each time, and there’s a standard release form that covers the finer points of the law. Nelson approaches the musician a few days before the show, asking for permission to record. Later he sends the recording to the artist for approval, then selects material to play on radio. Occasionally the music ends up on an album as well.

“Mostly I would think there’s at least a moment in the gig where everything chimes,” Nelson says. “I’m not a musician though. That’s where the veto comes in. I’m not a trained musician, so I’ve got to let them have that responsibility to exercise the knowledge that they have and I don’t.”

Nelson and Dowling left Fine Music late last year after finding themselves no longer able to use the station’s microphones outside the studio. They landed at Eastside Radio, another community station, and Nelson dug deep to invest in microphones and other recording equipment. But he still needs more to do the job properly — which is why four top jazz ensembles are playing at a fundraiser in his honour next week, an indication of just how important Nelson has become to Sydney music.



Saxophonist Sandy Evans: Peter’s documentation of the local scene is absolutely exceptional...

“His documentation of the local scene is absolutely exceptional,” says saxophonist Sandy Evans, one of the musicians playing at the fundraiser. “He has recorded so many young musicians who are at important, dynamic phases of their careers. He continues to also record and support musicians of all ages, gender and ethnicity at all stages of their careers. He does this voluntarily and with a huge skill and dedication. I think he’s an absolute legend!”

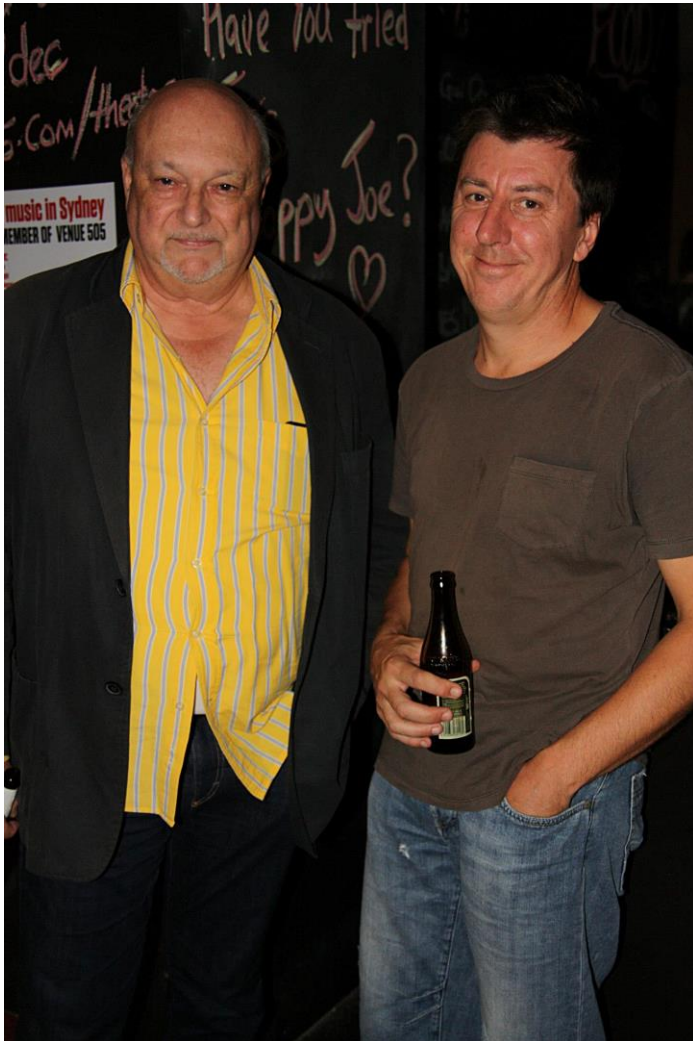
This is indeed an invaluable chronicle of Australian culture. But Nelson has received only passing interest from the National Film and Sound Archive, which has taken about 80 gigabytes of recordings, mostly broadcast content from 2SER. Otherwise the archive remains in his possession.

As well as capturing exciting live moments, the recordings document the shifting fortunes of Sydney’s jazz scene, as well as the progress of individual musicians themselves. Nelson has even recorded successive generations of single families.

After all this time, though, Nelson has no plans to abandon his day job. He's an accountant, and he prefers to engage with the music world as a volunteer, saying it gives him the flexibility to pursue other interests.

Even so, music is a time-consuming activity, occupying roughly 30 hours each week. And while the equipment has evolved over the years, the ambition has remained the same: to give audiences an idea of what it's like to be there in the room, at his side, listening to this music coming to life.

“Because I think it's magic,” he says. “That's what I want to sell to people.”



Peter Nelson pictured here with the owner of jazz club Foundry 616 Peter Rechniewski (left)... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

“Live and Local” is on Eastside Radio, Sydney, on Saturdays at 10am. The Peter Nelson fundraiser is at Johnston Street Jazz, Sydney, on January 30, featuring sets by Sandy Evans Trio with Andrew Robson; Susan Gai Dowling, Carl Dewhurst and Cameron Undy; Novak Manojlovic, Jacques Emery and Tom Avgenicos; Mike Nock, Jonathan Zwartz and Tim Firth.