

THE AUSTRALIAN STAGE AT UMBRIA JAZZ 2001

Reviewed by Mike Zwerin*

[Editor's Note: At Umbria Jazz 2001, an Australian Stage featured three Australian groups which had travelled to Italy, after performances at Pori Jazz, Finland. They were the Bernie McGann Trio, the Tim Stevens Trio, and the quintet Ishish. This was a result of the visit to Australia by Umbria Jazz's artistic director Carlo Pagnotta in 2000. While in attendance at the 2000 Wangaratta Jazz Festival, Pagnotta came up with the idea of an Australian stage at his next festival, scheduled for July, 2001. On hearing the Stevens trio and Ishish at Wangaratta, he invited them to come to Italy. Previously he had heard the McGann trio in Sydney, and invited them also to participate in his festival. This review was published in JazzChord, Aug/Sep, 2001.]

For an art form that is supposed to be either stuck, going out of style or becoming fused beyond recognition - and which we are told represents only 2% of the market - there seems to be a lot of life in the old girl. At least judging from the more than 200,000 people who heard more good music than they had any right to hope for during the ten-day Umbria Jazz Festival in July, 2001.

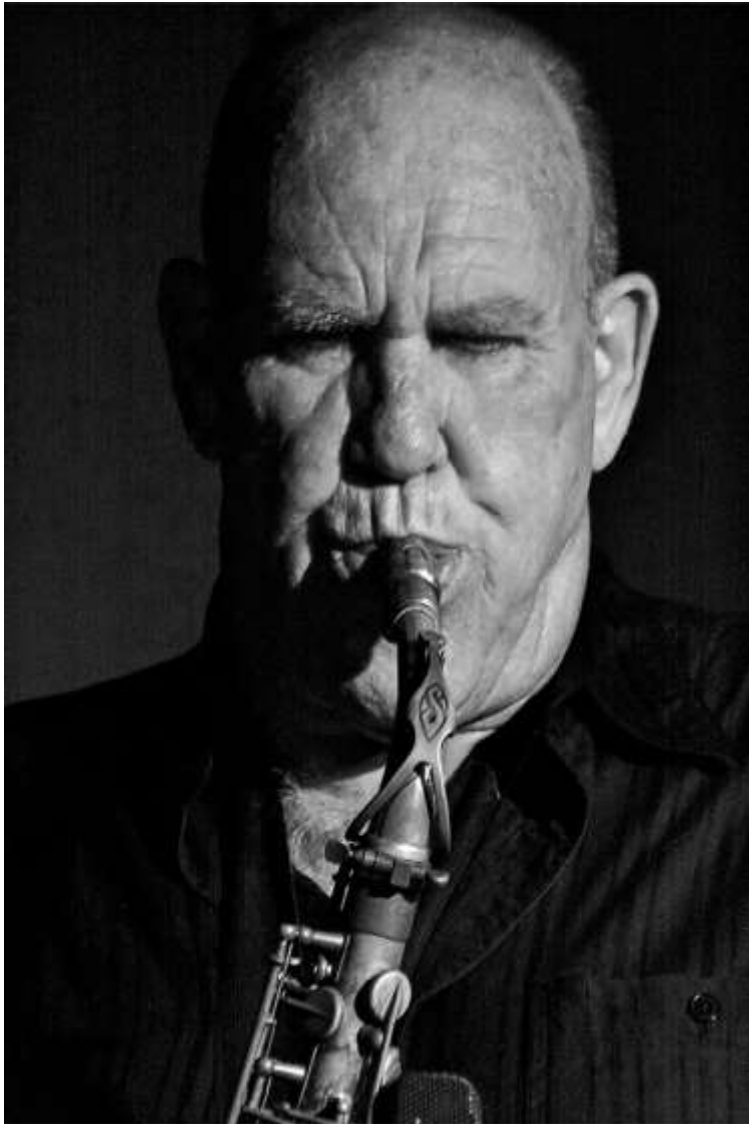


The quintet Ishish: (L-R) Mark Shepherd, Ronny Ferella, Julien Wilson, Eugene Ball, Jordan Murray. Ball was unavailable for this tour, and was replaced by the Sydney trumpeter Phil Slater...

**In 2001 Mike Zwerin had been the jazz/popular music writer for the International Herald Tribune since 1977. Over the years he wrote prolifically for The Village Voice, Rolling Stone and Down Beat. His most celebrated book is La Tristesse de Saint Louis: Swing under the Nazis. He also was a jazz trombonist who, as a 19-year-old, played with Miles Davis's 9-piece Birth of the Cool in New York in 1958. Depping for Kai Winding, he subsequently played on some tracks on the famous Birth of the Cool albums. Mike Zwerin died in 2010.*

In addition to the heavy artillery like Keith Jarrett, Dianne Reeves and Ahmad Jamal and the others, there was an “Australian Stage” in the recently restored Oratorio di Santa Cecilia in the afternoons. Coming from a faraway country with a small, mostly white, population, Aussie authenticity was impressive. The players were mostly young and some of them were understandably nervous, but there was nothing “provincial” about any of it.

The deepest impression was made by the veteran alto saxophonist Bernie McGann. Although on the surface it might seem that McGann is derivative of Ornette Coleman, he is pure and deep and convincing enough to have played something like that anyway. Little is more moving than a talented improviser to whom it is essential to express himself honestly - and to play every time like it's the last time. Even at noon.



Alto saxophonist Bernie McGann: pure and deep and convincing... PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

The concerts were all in the afternoon. (Five pm was the latest.) I also heard the quintet Ishish at noon. Ishish, which has echoes of Gil Evans but a sound and a personality all of its own is, I think, capable of great things. So early in the day, it was not surprising that a certain amount of caffeine was lacking. This played to their advantage, I thought, since they did not - could not - try too hard. They did not play as though they had anything to prove and trying to

impress was not on their minds and so the early hour, in fact, made the music better. Cooler. More professional. They need exposure but who doesn't?

The fine pianist Tim Stevens illustrated one problem with contemporary jazz. People insist these days on playing their own material. (Except, most obviously, for Jarrett and that is one reason he is such a complete and popular performer.) This is one negative legacy from the Beatles. When you are a pianist and you write a tune for yourself, it is going to lay comfortably on the keyboard; unless you are a masochist of course. Stevens sounded as though he needs to stretch himself more. Perhaps playing other people's material. But he has a wonderful touch, a great technique, a sensitive musical soul and a great future. He deserves to be heard anywhere in the world as often as possible.



Trio members (L-R) Mark Lau, Tim Stevens, Simon Barker. According to Mike Zwerin, Stevens has "a wonderful touch, a great technique, a sensitive musical soul and a great future..." PHOTO CREDIT GARY JOHNSTON

To finish, a pet peeve. Electronic amplification has become like the story of the Emperor's new clothes. Everybody is afraid to say the old man is naked. The Australian Stage was in an exquisitely restored small round domed room. Its natural acoustics were fine on their own. Yet every instrumentalist was individually miked, giving birth to imbalance and distortion. There was no need of any electricity whatsoever - except, perhaps, to goose the bass. So we were left with counterfeit overtones instead of ecological reverberation.

However this is a quibble having nothing to do with Australian jazz. If these musicians are representative of the scene Down Under, there should be more Australian Stages around the world.