

# Early Ensembles and Recordings of John Grant Sangster\*

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This article is the first public statement in a continuing research project concerning the life and music of John Grant Sangster (1928–1995), who is widely regarded as one of the most important musicians in Australian jazz.<sup>1</sup> The word ‘early’ in the title situates its concerns in the years prior to 1950 when Sangster—playing drums—joined Graeme Bell’s band at a time when it was about to undertake its second tour to Europe. The article traces Sangster’s progress from the washhouse behind his parents’ home, which he left at the end of 1946, to his appearance playing cornet at the 1948 Australian Jazz Convention, where he made something of a sensation, and thereafter to the point at which he was invited to replace Russ Murphy as the Bell band’s drummer. Early indications of adaptability and adventurousness can be seen as harbingers of the flexibility and open-mindedness that characterised the multi-faceted career that Sangster pursued in his maturity, embracing free improvisation, large-scale original composition, music for film and television, and work in music theatre.

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\* A version of this article was presented originally at the National Conference of the Musicological Society of Australia, Melbourne, 4–7 Dec. 2008. My thanks to Roger Beilby, Mel Blachford, Bruce Johnson and the late Kevin Casey, all of whom assisted me during the time this paper was being written.

<sup>1</sup> Sangster is described by Bruce Johnson as ‘one of the major figures, not just in jazz, but of Australian music’ (*The Inaudible Music* (Sydney: Currency, 2000) xiv), who left ‘a body of work unrivalled in Australian jazz’ (‘Obituary: John Sangster 1928–1995’, *Jazzchord* 27 (Oct./Nov. 1995): 3), and the distinction of his lengthy and protean career has been recognised by other such contributors to the record of Australian jazz history as Andrew Bisset (*Black Roots, White Flowers*, rev. ed. (Sydney: ABC, 1987) 165–66), and John Clare (*Bodgie Dada and the Cult of Cool* (Sydney: UNSW, 1995) 120–26).

The years between 1946 and 1950 are not the most well-known of Sangster's creative life, and nor is this the Sangster whom most would recognise. The large, bearded, twinkling hobbit of popular legend was a long way into the future in the late 1940s. A different and rather surprising picture of Sangster emerges from the recollections of friends and colleagues, who relate, variously, that he was 'a very quiet person, reserved',<sup>2</sup> or that 'as a youngster [he] had a baby-face, and he was really a pussycat',<sup>3</sup> and describe him as 'quizzical, whimsical'<sup>4</sup> and 'inventive'.<sup>5</sup>

After 1950, Sangster was still making such impressions. Deryck Bentley, who travelled with Sangster in the Bell band between 1950 and 1952, describes Sangster as 'an introvert', saying that:

John in those days was a very reclusive person; he kept to himself quite a lot. He didn't seem to mix very much; he seemed to go away on his own and stare into space. I think he was probably contemplating [or] planning what he was going to do in the future. But no, I never got close to John at all. He didn't drink, and he didn't smoke.<sup>6</sup>

Such recollections are echoed by Graeme Bell, although they do not conform to the picture painted by Sangster himself in later years. As this article also seeks to demonstrate, Sangster established himself within the local jazz scene through customary channels that relied on sociability and the will to perform; he had little use for reticence, and in the five years that this article covers, he made tremendous progress within that scene.

To try to apprehend what the young Sangster was like at that time depends on the candour of the people who knew him, for Sangster himself in his highly idiosyncratic and contestable autobiography, *Seeing the Rafters*, does not spend very long on the period, and relates it obviously from the point of view of the later man.<sup>7</sup> The photographs he provides of himself from that time are thus particularly intriguing in the context of his voluble and obscurantist narration. *Seeing the Rafters* is immensely valuable, however, for its suggestions of a process of self-construction, of edited self-awareness. Furthermore, in its early sections, Sangster conveys very clearly his youthful enthusiasm and the musical energy amongst himself and his friends.

So, if this article is about the early bands and recordings of Sangster, it also testifies to the difficulty of finding out about those bands and recordings, and about the effort to place them within a broader context that is always open to re-evaluation. Finding a path between *Seeing the Rafters* and the recollections of friends and colleagues, for example, and taking into account the evidence of recordings and contemporary testimony, is a tricky thing. One is then faced with the jazz scene's inherent mutability and disinclination towards absolute definition, its tendency at the same time to categorise, and the state of its historical constructedness at present.

The recordings themselves are in some ways the most reliable of artifacts. They are dated, there are personnel, and the musicians are audible; but then, that is only those recordings that

<sup>2</sup> Fay Shearer, telephone conversation, 7 Mar. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Walker, personal interview, 17 July 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Newstead, personal interview, 26 Oct. 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Fraser Clarke, personal interview, 4 Dec. 2007. This last has to do with Sangster's construction of some kind of flame-thrower.

<sup>6</sup> Deryck and Pat Bentley, personal interview, 8 Sep. 2004.

<sup>7</sup> John Sangster, *Seeing the Rafters: The Life and Times of an Australian Jazz Musician* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1988).

were logged or released. Actually, to record for commercial release was the exception and, whereas there are many recordings that are recalled as having been made privately, numbers are lost, in hopeless disrepair, or untraceable. Bands that are in the context of the jazz scene and Sangster's life at that time are also often difficult to trace. The fluidity of the jazz scene, in which musicians might have been active for a few years but then left to pursue more stable careers and to raise families, and in which employment was (as it remains) a variable prospect, means that ensembles might have convened for but a single gig. Similarly, venues came and went, so there is no chance that an exhaustive catalogue of Sangster's engagements will ever be collated. Such a catalogue would, however, be of only limited use. The fluidity itself is of great interest, and the manner in which Sangster in his early years found a place for himself within the jazz scene is of greater interest still.

The first recordings of John Sangster made for commercial release took place late in December 1948, at the conclusion of the third Australian Jazz Convention in Melbourne. At the first session, on December 30, it was a band led by trombonist Warwick Dyer, and at the second, the following day, the ensemble was named John Sangster's Jazz Six,<sup>8</sup> although at this time, and well into the 1950s, he was evidently known as Johnny. Sangster on cornet, Dyer on trombone, and Bruce Gray on clarinet were common to both bands. Neither band was listed as performing in the Convention program that had been published in the December 1948 issue of *Jazz Notes* magazine.

The Australian Jazz Convention, inaugurated in 1946 and conducted annually ever since, is described by Bruce Johnson as 'uniquely democratic' and, more poetically, as 'the sweaty, barracking workshop of the Australian style.' Johnson writes:

Apart from programmed bands, there is continuous informal jam session activity. [The Convention] thus expresses the spirit of a loose community of musicians and audiences who themselves are largely interchangeable, rather than a formal creative blueprint. While these arrangements obviously produce musical unevenness, at best the free dynamic also generates unexpectedly creative confluences, as well as constituting an essential conduit for the development of non-textual musical traditions.<sup>9</sup>

The circumstantial spontaneity and non-textuality of the Convention seem a natural consequence of the manner in which jazz music (limited here to a rather narrow range of traditional styles) was understood by certain Australian practitioners at this time. Schooling through imitation of recordings was virtually their only option and, as solitary endeavour was relieved by the formation of bands, the meeting of bands from different parts of Australia was, as Johnson has demonstrated, significant in the formation of a sense of community.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps as early as five years prior to the 1948 Convention, Sangster was to be found in the washhouse behind his parents' home, with his friend Sid Bridle, who recalls that they:

used to meet regularly ... in his little bungalow, and play the records, with a sock stuck

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<sup>8</sup> According to Jack Mitchell, *Australian Jazz on Record 1925-80* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service Press, 1988) 185. Kevin Casey wrote, 'I believe the commercial discs were labelled as "John", but the acetates are labelled "Johnny".' Personal email, 25 Nov. 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Johnson, 'Preserving Tradition: a New Music Archive,' *JazzChord* 39 (Summer 1997/98): 14.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Johnson, 'Naturalizing the Exotic: The Australian Jazz Convention,' *Jazz Planet*, ed. E. Taylor Atkins (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2003) 151-68.

in the speaker so it didn't make too much noise. And a paper bag over the light, for a bit of effect. You know. This was out in his washhouse.<sup>11</sup>

At this time, Sangster was known not as Johnny but as Grant, and there are still people who knew him then—or earlier—who refer to him that way. Grant was an only child, and from all accounts led a fairly lonely childhood; he was a member of the 1st Vermont scout troop,<sup>12</sup> but even at this stage had begun to recognise his passion for music and, in that same washhouse, turned a bicycle upside-down to play drums on the tyres, accompanying Benny Goodman's 78-rpm recording of 'Gotta be This or That'.<sup>13</sup>

Bridle and Sangster subsequently formed a band, in the manner that bands are formed by kids who are drawn to music. Instrumental responsibilities were delegated according to the need of the ensemble, with individuals' interests able to adapt to requirements, and evidently exercising less and less decisive influence the further one was placed from the leader. The trombone that Sangster had toyed with awhile following his period playing the tyres was passed to Bridle (who is named in the autobiography as 'Sid the trombonist'). Gordon Walker, clarinetist in the band, describes the scene:

We lived in East Melbourne, a couple of mates and myself. And John and Sid were out at Vermont, which to us was the sticks ... a couple of my friends were interested in jazz, though I was a bit reluctant at the time, and took a bit longer to latch onto it, but about that time we met John and Sid, and ... my friend Tommy O'Brien, he bought a drum kit, and Brian Sheridan, he'd been taking piano lessons from Graeme Bell, and I took up clarinet, and took a few lessons ... and we used to traipse out to Sid's place out at Vermont, once a week, carrying a drum, and all the other things, and we'd meet in the city and go out by train, and have a bit of a jam as we could on the trains in between stations, and then stick our heads out the window to look for where the noise was coming [from], as were all the other people on the train. And then we used to ... get off at Nunawading, walk down ... Springvale Road ... to Sid's place, because the parents used to go out on a Thursday night, so we had the house till about half past ten, with umpteen siblings of Sid kind of peeping round the door when they should have been sleeping ... but how could they sleep through that cacophony? But John ... at that stage was playing a rough and rorty kind of Mutt Carey kind of cornet, and he was ... the driving force.<sup>14</sup>

Bridle and Sangster, at least, attended the first Australian Jazz Convention in 1946, although they did not play. The following year they played in jam sessions, and in 1948 Sangster performed as a member of the Riverside Jazz Band.<sup>15</sup> This was a Sydney band that had, according to Jack Mitchell's *Australian Jazz on Record*, recorded two sides in Sydney less than

<sup>11</sup> Sid Bridle, personal interview, 22 June 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Bridle says that the gramophone often accompanied them on scout camping trips. Personal interview, 22 June 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Sangster, *Seeing the Rafters* 1. Here, too, Sangster reveals that the sticks he used had been stolen from the scout troop.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon Walker, personal interview, 17 July 2007.

<sup>15</sup> According to Tony Newstead, Sangster also played 'second trumpet' in his band at this convention. Personal interview, 26 Oct. 2004. This band is mentioned in the review by Jack Ricketts (*Jazz Notes* 90 (Jan./Feb. 1949): 3) but no second trumpet is mentioned. Sangster is named as a 'new face' in the following paragraph, but it is not certain that this relates to the personnel in Newstead's band.

a month earlier.<sup>16</sup> Sangster evidently replaced Keith Scanlen on cornet, and his playing was so impressive he was later described as having been ‘the find of the 1948 Convention’.<sup>17</sup> Sangster told Bruce Johnson that he appeared with this group—a Sydney group, whereas Sangster was from Melbourne—because ‘they just didn’t have a cornet player. See I wasn’t famous enough to have a band in a Jazz Convention then.’<sup>18</sup> However, *Jazz Notes* in January of 1949, that is, the issue that carried reviews of the Convention, included an advertisement that read:

**STOP PRESS ... Fantasmagorical music!**

**JOHNNY SANGSTER**

The sensational young cornetist, who rocked jazzmen at last month’s Convention, recorded a series of wonderful sides for ZENITH, together with Bruce Gray (clarinet), and other Convention stars. First of these will be available shortly!<sup>19</sup>

It is almost as though something in the Convention atmosphere had consolidated Sangster’s resolve, for it is widely held that his performance there was something of a revelation. Clarinetist, Nick Polites, who performed with Sangster from around 1947, describes the change that had occurred in these terms:

Johnny ... wasn’t an immediate type of ‘knock-you-out’, you know—some fellows get on an instrument, and immediately, you know—[but] not Johnny ... I can remember ... we were playing somewhere ... and [I thought] that this was beyond my dignity, to be playing with someone like this. And I was nothing! ... I think it was [at] the 1948 convention, suddenly he got it. He got it, and he was playing away, with some group, and I couldn’t believe it was the same guy that I’d been playing with. He’d put it all together, and this does happen in music, they’re sort of bumbling about a bit, and not seeming to get anywhere, and suddenly something happens and they get it, and he was really playing hot, and much more technically on it, and so on.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of the 1949 Convention, at which he was able to appear with a band under his own name, Sangster was described as ‘the best musician there—not necessarily the greatest jazz musician, but playing the most and the most consistently good and the most sincere, if you can make a composite out of that ... the jazzman of the Convention.’<sup>21</sup> His group there was billed as John Sangster’s Jazz Six,<sup>22</sup> but apart from Sangster and the piano player, John Shaw, it had a completely different lineup from the group that had recorded under that name in December 1948. There are recordings from September 1949 of John Sangster’s Jazz Seven, which shared a majority of members with the Jazz Six that played at the 1949 Convention, but to confuse matters further there are also recordings from January 1950 featuring John Sangster’s

<sup>16</sup> Jack Mitchell, *Australian Jazz on Record 1925–80* (Canberra : AGPS Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Frank Owen Baker, ‘Convention Impressions,’ *Jazz Notes* 99 (Jan./Feb. 1950): 4. See also Anon, ‘An Introduction to the Convention, and Some of the Bands You will Hear,’ *Jazz Notes* 98 (Dec. 1949): 4, where Sangster is described the same way.

<sup>18</sup> Videotaped interview between Bruce Johnson and John Sangster: Australia Council library, Sydney.

<sup>19</sup> Advertisement for the new Zenith record label, *Jazz Notes* 90 (Jan./Feb. 1949): 13.

<sup>20</sup> Nick Polites, personal interview, 24 July 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Norman Linehan, ‘Convention Impressions,’ *Jazz Notes* 99 (Jan./Feb. 1950): 3.

<sup>22</sup> Program for the Fourth Australian Jazz Convention, published in *Jazz Notes* 98 (Dec. 1949): 9.

Jazz Six in yet another configuration.<sup>23</sup> It would be cumbersome and of dubious utility to list all the musicians' names, but the changes appear to be evidence of a fluid, adaptive scene.

Sangster describes the formation of the 1949 Jazz Six as follows:

we just sort of found each other; at that time everyone was just grabbing anyone that we found that was interested in jazz, that knew about it. Anyone who had some 78s, you'd grab him and go to his place, out the back of a house into a bungalow, where he lived, and you'd just play ... like Jack Connelly would play along, his clarinet, I'd try and play me cornet, along with some records, or something, so the next thing was, of course, you had to get a band together, and see if you could do it.<sup>24</sup>

The recordings of late December 1948 were made with bands that seem to have evolved from the meeting of musicians within spontaneous jam sessions, and, as I have suggested already, it is easy to imagine this as the end of a consequential line running from the suburban congregation of young jazz fans eagerly apprehending and attempting to become involved in jazz music.

It is always easier to fit bands into a developing story when they have made recordings. Similarly, if they appear at the Jazz Convention and there is a discussion of style and personnel in the program or the reviews, these things can be slotted in. However, there are so many other, perhaps undocumented, incidences—such as concert performances at the Park Theatre in Albert Park during December 1949—when the regular cartoons and serials that would screen were replaced by jazz concerts for the duration of the polio epidemic, or a Sunday night dance held around the same time at the Kadimah, the Jewish cultural centre in North Carlton.<sup>25</sup> It is the nature of a scene where these engagements were generated, rather than the engagements themselves that is of interest here; but, in attempting to trace the character of the scene at the time, one relies mostly on the memories of the people who were there. The complexity of the jazz scene adds to the challenge of this kind of research: its varying from public to private; the contributions of recordings, criticism, and live performances; an awareness of international developments; meetings and exchange between different generations; the importance of locality; and so on.<sup>26</sup> All these things need to be brought, somehow, into consciousness in the investigation of the individual achievement.

The Johnny Sangster who joined the Graeme Bell band in 1950 was playing drums, and although it is a repeated story—repeated by Sangster himself, in fact—that he learned to play the drums on the ship on the way to England, and that he had been employed merely on the

<sup>23</sup> Jack Parkes' *Acetates*, Jack Mitchell FJM-020. One of these is discussed briefly below.

<sup>24</sup> Videotaped interview between Bruce Johnson and John Sangster: Australia Council library, Sydney. Connelly is listed as playing stringed bass in the Jazz Seven that recorded in September 1949, in Mitchell, *Australian Jazz on Record*: 185. Bruce Johnson has Connelly starting on clarinet at age 13 and banjo at 18, before playing bass with Frank Johnson's Fabulous Dixielanders from 1947. See *The Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz* (Melbourne: OUP, 1987) 132.

<sup>25</sup> Park Theatre: Harry Price, personal interview, 22 Sep. 2008. Kadimah: Clem Parkinson, personal interview, 6 Oct. 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Some of this is suggested by the memoirs of musicians such as Sangster (in *Seeing the Rafters*) or Graeme Bell (*Graeme Bell: Australian Jazzman* (Frenchs Forest: Child & Associates, 1998)), in magazines of the day such as *Jazz Notes* (1941–1962), *Music Maker* (title varied; originally *Australian Dance Band News*, 1932–1972) or *The Beat* (1949). Further evidence is furnished in the recorded interviews of the Australian Jazz Oral History Project, conducted by the Victorian Jazz Archive.

basis of his youthful appearance,<sup>27</sup> he had already toured and even recorded playing drums with the Bell band before leaving Australia.<sup>28</sup>

What seems reliable is the story that it was the band's bass player, Lou Silbereisen, who proposed Sangster for the position that Russ Murphy was about to vacate. Graeme Bell has Silbereisen '[coming] to us aglow with enthusiasm for Johnny's potential as a percussionist. He said, "He can't play the drums yet but shows such natural ability for the style we require that I think he's worth a try"'.<sup>29</sup> Silbereisen had heard Sangster at the home of Alan Osler Watson in Rockley Road, South Yarra, where Sangster lived for a time, and where young musicians were occupied for a couple of years in what is referred to as Alan Watson's party. Here we have the orphaned son of a champagne maker at Great Western, in possession of the family home, which included a vast cellar. Musicians gather and play—a particularly lengthy session, lasting anything from eighteen months to three years.<sup>30</sup> The same kind of stylistic chauvinism prevailed here as at the Australian Jazz Convention—strictly traditional jazz—but it was enacted with energy, spontaneity, and enormous enthusiasm. Sangster writes:

everyone at this Party [had] a go at just about every instrument; there was a house drum kit and a house bass and a house guitar and a house banjo and a piano of course, and a house tenor and a house alto and the like ... [In terms of musical style, we] were very bigoted. Yet I discover nearly forty years later that these musics we studied so earnestly then are still a powerful part of my life; they still fix me up and make me want to laugh and jump around and play music and write music. Make me feel good.<sup>31</sup>

So Sangster was having a go at the drums, and Silbereisen was moved to suggest him to Graeme Bell.

Sangster's progress was therefore largely a matter of chance encounters and opportunities. With no established path to follow, he like everyone else, moved between jam session, formal engagement for dances or concerts, hastily organised record date, and back again. The importance of this for his long-term development was, I think, significant, as it established within him an ability to adapt to situations that, combined with his own native resourcefulness, produced an enormously adventurous and open-minded musician.

On questions of musical style, it is the tendency of most jazz aficionados to categorise according to resemblances, to use the familiar as the measure of the new. Given that the autodidactic endeavours of traditional jazz musicians meant that recordings were overwhelmingly significant in the shaping of their conceptions of the music, the particular artists and recordings to which they paid their attentions could not help but be replicated to some degree in the manner in which they subsequently played. So it is we find both Gordon Walker, already quoted, and the trumpeter Tony Newstead describing Sangster's early cornet style as resembling that of New Orleans trumpeter, Mutt Carey.<sup>32</sup> Sangster, writing

<sup>27</sup> Interview between Norman Linehan and John Sangster, 12 Mar. 1979; Bisset, *Black Roots, White Flowers* 164; Sangster, *Seeing the Rafters* 48–49.

<sup>28</sup> See Mitchell, *Australian Jazz on Record* 38.

<sup>29</sup> Bell, *Graeme Bell, Australian Jazzman* 139.

<sup>30</sup> Eighteen months: Sangster, *Seeing the Rafters* 16. Three years: interview between Roger Beilby and John Sangster, 29 Jan. 1994.

<sup>31</sup> Sangster, *Seeing the Rafters* 19, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon Walker, personal interview, 17 July 2007; Tony Newstead, personal interview, 26 Oct. 2004.

in the mid-1980s, names Carey as his 'then-favourite', speaking of the mid-1940s, when his trumpet heroes also included Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Joe Smith, Tommy Ladnier and Arthur Whetsol.<sup>33</sup>

A brief comparison of two recordings featuring Sangster, made thirteen months apart, demonstrates that his cornet style was changing quickly. Differences are clear between the first, an extract from 'Weary Blues,' performed by Warwick Dyer's Stompers on 30 December 1948, and in particular the stop-time chorus featuring Sangster's cornet, and the second, the cornet feature from the 'Epiphonious Blues,' recorded by John Sangster's Jazz Six in January 1950. (This was not the same Jazz Six as had been recorded in 1948.)<sup>34</sup> In these two performances, the tunes are in the same key and at roughly the same tempo. While obviously there are similarities between the cornet styles, because it is the same player at an interval of only just over a year, there are significant differences, discernible and not merely to do with any improvement in technique. This second performance features longer phrases, and slightly less vibrato, as well as a greater care with the phrase endings. The tone here sounds milder, and neither the attack nor the sense of the time is so urgent.

I am not going to ascribe this change in cornet style to the influence of any particular two predecessors on that instrument, although that may be argued. However, the naming of models appears to be an insufficient means by which to determine musical character, although, as I have mentioned, it is a pervasive tendency among jazz musicians and fans. What is needed is a better way of assessing the playing, and this is another significant challenge of the research. Just as surely as it is a danger to take a single recorded performance as representative of instrumental style or musical concept, to miss what might be suggested by the contemporary audible documents would be a shame. I would, however, suggest that the availability of different stylistic options, and the willingness to adapt and to synthesise are hallmarks of these early years in Sangster's musical life. It is reasonable to trace a line from the enthusiastic efforts with the gramophone in the washhouse, through the first bands with friends rehearsing for its own sake, to the spontaneity and spirited exchange of the first few Australian Jazz Conventions, to these recordings, and ultimately beyond, to the changes of instrument and the enormous catholicity of style and taste that Sangster demonstrated throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

He was Grant, he was Johnny, he was John; later, to those who knew him, he was Sango. It is Sango who is narrating *Seeing the Rafters*, with the benefit of hindsight and all the revisionist ardour on offer. The means to this revisionism was, however, always on offer; as Sangster created his own history and the scene its own identity as it went, each was characteristically subject to change. In the improvised history of Australian jazz, the effort to capture and assess the work of a single figure carries with it the need to recast constantly one's understanding of the scene, as each informs the other. So Sangster, in the years between leaving home and leaving for Europe, took a visible place within a developing jazz community through an ability to negotiate its morphing possibilities, and to capitalise on opportunity.

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<sup>33</sup> Sangster, *Seeing the Rafters* 13.

<sup>34</sup> 'Weary Blues,' recorded for Elmar with the master no. OM-25, was unissued. Kevin Casey provided me with a CD transfer of the acetate, held in the collection of the NSW Jazz Archive. 'Epiphonious Blues,' recorded in Sydney and previously unreleased, is among the acetate recordings belonging to Jack Parkes that were passed to Jack Mitchell and reissued by him in his series *Jazz from the Mitchell Library* (FJM-020).