

Reviews

Bruce Johnson, *The Inaudible Music: Jazz, Gender and Australian Modernity*

Sydney: Currency Press, 2000.

ISBN 0 86819 601 0. xii+236pp., select bibl., index, ill.

This is an important addition to the literature on Australian music, and in particular on Australian Jazz and its place in society and culture. For too long writers, whether by choice, through ignorance, or in deference, have failed to bring jazz into the broader, cultural scheme of things.

Here is a work that begins to correct this; and it is timely, especially considering the continuing rush in music education to leap (often blindly) onto the bandwagon of creativity and improvisation. Jazz remains one of the vital stepping stones to these wonderfully mysterious aspects of music-making, and its character and history deserve stronger recognition in all cultural domains than it has had thus far.

Of course, those who attempt to discuss such complex and diverse issues as are announced in the title in just over two hundred pages (even someone as articulate and scholarly as the author) leave themselves open to all sorts of argument. Inevitably, the subject matter compels a 'touching on' only of some areas rather than an exploration in depth. The author's comment in his preface that many of the areas he covers receive only passing mention in other publications may also be applied fairly to this book.

Nonetheless, this is a fascinating examination of a minority music, which, paradoxically, has always had a significant following; a silent, inaudible majority if you like. It is clearly the lot of a genre which, since the 1950s, has been largely neglected in the print and electronic media and is still fighting to enter through the front door, so to speak, of academia. It remains sandwiched between the rock/pop world and so-called high art music. The brilliant, arguably uniquely Australian musician John Sangster, whose death the author cites as a prime example of media neglect, is one of numerous important figures in Australian music virtually ignored because their music was/is jazz. This is one of the book's central themes and it is delivered with justifiable candor.

Pertinent, too, is Johnson's reference to Roger Covell's important but embarrassingly elitist work of the 1960s, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society*. The fact is that in it, jazz (and most other non-classical music for that matter) is barely mentioned, despite, as Johnson argues, its significant place in the society to which Covell refers. Questioning of these sorts of spurious titles, the content and the false image that they (still) give has been long overdue.

From an informative but brief history of jazz in Australia prior to the 1950s (there are other more comprehensive texts on the topic), the author launches into a discussion of the inelegantly titled worlds of modernity and modernism. The essence of this second chapter is an examination of the various interpretations of high and low art, of mass/popular culture, high culture, elitism and anti-elitism. All this is powerful ammunition in support of the case for a wider recognition and appreciation of jazz. There are some all-too-obvious points made amidst excellent ones. Of the former, Johnson's reference to the views of Anne-Marie Willis, particularly her assertion that 'early Australian consumer culture was a more open channel for the infiltration of modernist images into the public consciousness than were the higher art forms' (p.38), hardly needs to be said.

Here, Johnson goes with populist rather than elitist notions of culture, which have gained much currency through the voices of social commentators such as Willis, Eagle, and the often extremist views of Susan McClary. The points are well made, although many in the author's world of jazz-academics and non-academics could reasonably be labeled as elitists, as were Norman Lindsay and J.S. Mc Donald (to whom Johnson refers) in their time and artistic world. Is there anything wrong with being elitist? (The trouble with the Covell brand of elitism is that that he gives an incomplete picture of Australia's Music.) Indeed, there are many intelligent people who think that, given the consumer, 'take-away' culture we live in, it may be imperative for one's own artistic preservation. In any case, how can we, as the author suggests, ask the 'masses,' 'the people,' what they think of culture, or how they 'read it and use it' (p.35)?

Can any serious discussion of modernity and modernism, and notions of high and low art, of society and culture be accommodated adequately in a text of this size? Consider for example the assertion (which the author cites) by noted Australian composer Carl Vine, who, when pondering where the twenty-first century may lead, dismissed popular music as 'having nothing at all to offer of any interest to his subject' (Johnson's interpretation of Vine, p.49). Such statements, mainly to do with pop versus art, need qualifying, otherwise they do little except to invite from the popular music world a few more misconceptions about musicians who choose to follow the pathway of classical (minority) musics.

Mention of Don Banks and his contribution to Australian jazz is a worthy inclusion only when one puts Banks in the context of the whole scene. Given the attempted breadth of this book, it would seem relevant to have proffered a reason as to why (save for a couple of orchestral pieces with jazz group) Banks moved resolutely away from jazz and into the so-called elitist world of classical music? Could it have been a question of musical substance, a subject that the author does not choose to address? The nearest he gets to this thorny issue is in the last chapter when he asserts: 'I conclude by reaffirming the point made in the preface: that different musics require different skills; and no one form is intrinsically superior to another' (p.183). Is there a touch of fence-sitting here, brought on by the current surge of and obsession with populism?

Chapter 3, "Jazz, Mass Culture and Gender in Australia" (the heading is a little clumsy given the title of the book), contains excellent arguments, but one suspects the author knows he has spread himself too thinly when he writes: 'It is therefore useful to move some furniture around to make space for the next stage of the discussion' (p.64). The trouble is there is often too much furniture.

There is fascinating insight into the gender balance in jazz, noting that 'jazz was less masculinised than it later became' (p.67). It begs a more comprehensive discussion as to why? Although it gives some weight to the author's views, the case study that follows, a 'cultural moment,' which describes the character of the early Australian silent film *Greenhide*, is in this context more a delightful digression.

Chapter 4, "The Microphone," deals primarily with the rise and importance of amplification and its ramifications for a shift in the relevance of so called 'art music' and popular genres. There is some thought-provoking and insightful comment here, but also some statements that need qualification. For example, Johnson argues that the expansion of vocal music's 'intentional dimensions' has been conducted 'virtually exclusively by popular musicians' and mentions Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles and Little Richard. It might have been worthwhile to mention, at least in passing, such 'non-popular' singers such as Kathy Berberian and Jane Manning, who, arguably, have gone far beyond Armstrong, Charles and Richard in matters of 'intentional dimension,' to use the author's term. In a book which discusses such broad issues as modernity and culture, a reasonable perspective seems important here.

Chapter 5, devoted to singer Barbara James and 'Microphone Singing,' puts strongly the notions of gender in jazz as well as discussing the more technical aspects of women jazz singers and the (still) dubious comparisons between the classical (acoustic) singers and those in jazz. The pitch diagram on page 134 is useful as the briefest of analyses of James's vocal register, although seems somewhat incongruous within the body of the text.

Nonetheless, this chapter at least should be read by all singers and singing teachers, regardless of what side of the musical fence they sit; although as it reads, it is an exaggeration to suggest that 'it was the microphone, in Barbara James' hands, that provided her with the means ... to develop a musical language for twentieth-century Australia' (p.133). What is this language?

Chapter 6 is another of Johnson's 'prismatic essays' (his term) titled "Australian Jazz Abroad." It waves the nationalistic flag beautifully through Graeme Bell and the like, painting a highly entertaining picture of the 'swaggering energy' of the Australian musical product of the late 1940s and early '50s. The author introduces one of the most fascinating topics on Australian music and music-making under the sub-heading "The Australian Style: A Puzzling Reputation" and while he raises some pertinent issues, this demands more space than six pages.

The conclusion is a set of brief overviews including comments on relevant literature, the neglect of jazz in the Federal Government's *Creative Nation* document, observations and statistics on funding and other rather well worn but worthwhile points about the place of jazz in Australian culture. Johnson is a little out of touch in suggesting that the Australia Council's Music Fund 'does not in general support vernacular or popular musics such as rock, pop, country music' (p.172). It does. As well, his use of the term 'avant-garde' here is somewhat dated. These minor issues aside, it is strong stuff and this section should be of interest, if not to lovers of jazz (who would likely find it less enthralling than the rest), then definitely to those who control the artistic purse strings, and by others who wish to develop the skills and acumen to argue a better case for the music which Johnson so clearly loves with a passion.

It is precisely because of this passion that he goes too far at times. For example, the last few pages in particular suggest the basis for a robust debate in which he might find himself having to back off a little. This may be deliberate in his attempt to 'correct the balance,' and thus if this highly readable and often entertaining book does put the case with a touch of bias at times this is no bad thing. The work as a whole contributes mightily to the literature on Australian music.

"Breaks" which precede each chapter are entertaining snippets of the author's life and travels in jazz; sometimes relevant, at other times mere recollections from his diary. A novel idea (no pun intended) but it hardly helps the cause to which he so wholeheartedly espouses to begin one of these with the wonderfully Australian 'On the piss far too much...' (p.77). One can just hear the elitists pouncing on that as evidence of a poverty of language in the jazz world. However, these recollections help to soften the heavier excursions into the more thought-provoking areas and thus will broaden the book's appeal. Indeed, they make a wonderful point about Bruce Johnson, a writer and scholar of intellect to be sure, but also a person who understands his subject from a deeply personal perspective.

His exploding of the myths surrounding the place of various musics in Australian culture has much relevance and, despite the book's uneven, pastiche-like structure and content (his 'collection of prismatic essays'), it helps to correct the pitiful number of literary works on music in Australia. It is unfortunate that it does not go beyond the 1950s, at least in the discussion of the actual music. Given the ground it attempts to cover, it seems eminently sensible that another 'volume' by this writer be considered soon.

The Select Bibliography reflects the diversity of the content generally. The notes on each chapter and the selection of historical illustrations are excellent.

TONY GOULD

**Richard Vella (with additional topics by Andy Arthurs),
*Musical Environments: A Manual for Listening, Improvising
and Composing***

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Throughout the twentieth century the definition of music was extended to include virtually any sound. From the deconstruction of tonal functional harmony at the end of the previous century through movements such as serialism and minimalism to the multiple sounds of technology, there was (and still is) no more accurate description of music than Murray Schafer's famous definition, so beautifully developed in his book *The Composer in the Classroom* (Toronto: BMI Canada, 1965) that of 'an organisation of sounds which is intended to be listened to.'

The broadening of the realm of music, particularly over the last fifty years, to include any sound has allowed more people than ever before to be involved in its performance. The concept of the student, dutifully practising for hours on end, as the only way in which musical performance could occur has passed, with the advent of sound production equipment and a generally freer approach to the learning of music. Today, there are many people interested in