

## Jazz in Australia – The State of Play

JAMIE OEHLERS

WITH ANDREA KELLER, GIAN SLATER, PHIL SLATER, KRISTIN BERARDI, SIMON BARKER AND STEPHEN MAGNUSSON

The term 'jazz' in the twenty-first century has become something of a catch-all genre descriptor. At times it seems that if a song contains an element of jazz harmony, has a horn section or has even a short improvised solo, the 'jazz' term gets applied. As someone who has spent my life studying, performing and teaching within the 'jazz' realm, even I find it difficult to determine where the outer edges of 'jazz' are now – where does 'jazz' stop and something else begin, or alternatively, when does something enter the space of the 'jazz' genre? This is the first question that I put to a panel of six prominent Australian artists who are commonly identified as jazz musicians. All members represent a similar generation of artists and have spent most of their careers in Australia. The group was well known to each other. In fact, though we hail from different parts of the country, we have all performed with each other in one format or another over the past thirty years, which enabled a free-flowing conversation. During the discussion we explored some interesting tangents that emerged from this initial question. Is there an Australian jazz dialect? Are there issues with how jazz is perceived in Australia?

As a precursor to the conversation, I asked panellists to list their main musical influences during their formative years. Though many Australian artists were named, it was also very clear that Black American improvising music artists have had a major impact on the music produced here. This influence is one that was clearly recognised by the group and has undeniably formed the foundations for a lot of 'jazz' music that is created in Australia.

The participants in this panel were Jamie Oehlers (moderator and participant), Andrea Keller, Gian Slater, Phil Slater, Kristin Berardi, Simon Barker and Stephen Magnusson.

*I would like to thank the panellists for their candour and willingness to contribute to this discussion, which I feel positions jazz in Australia accurately in 2022. Many of the responses published here are verbatim, as they really capture the feeling of the group, and hold expression that aids the*

*dissemination of ideas. Not all responses are printed for some questions, generally because the ideas among panellists were held in common.*

## What Is Jazz?

JAMIE OEHLERS: So the first question is, do you call the music you create ‘jazz’?

If so, why, if not, why not?

ANDREA KELLER: I think quite a few years ago, I would’ve been more hesitant to call my music jazz, possibly because I was heavily influenced by lots of different musics, including classical music, and larger ensembles that aren’t necessarily jazz ensembles, and I was drawing from a lot of compositional techniques that didn’t necessarily come from a jazz genre.

Then I remembered reading an interview with [prominent Australian jazz pianist and composer] Paul Grabowsky in *Extempore*,<sup>1</sup> and he was asked what the definition of jazz was, and he said something along the lines of, ‘Well, some people will interpret it as a noun that describes a very particular period of music, but if you think of it as a way of doing things as a process, then that gives you a different definition.’ And I feel like that invited me to say, ‘Okay, well I fit a process definition, and the things that I really value in music and the music that I create are improvisation and collaboration, and dialogue between other musicians that happens spontaneously.’ That sort of musical environment doesn’t necessarily happen in other types of music, but it happens in jazz. It really defines jazz.

STEVE MAGNUSSON: I think Pat Metheny also said that in jazz we are involved in a process of looking at ourselves in real time. So, when it comes to naming this thing, what do we call it? Well, jazz. I mean, I have to call it something, and I’m always asked, ‘What do you do?’ And if I say, ‘I’m an improvising musician’, they sort of say, ‘What do you mean?’ I have to kind of categorise it, so I say, ‘I’m a jazz musician within this framework that I live in, with the musicians that I play with.’ We are always negotiating some sort of framework – it could be a song, it could be someone else’s song, it could be our own composition. Last night, I played with Archie Roach.<sup>2</sup> We’re playing within his framework, and we never play it the same every night, and so we are improvising, and he’s fine with that. I’ve never been a musician that can actually play the same thing, the same way every night. I could never do those sort of gigs, I’d get sacked. I just can’t even play the same phrase the same way – I actually can’t do it; I’ve tried, but I don’t hear it like that. So, I call it jazz. I mean, I can’t really call it anything else.

SIMON BARKER: Well, if it’s my own stuff, which is a lot of solo drumming music, I would say that the community would probably think that it’s definitely not jazz, but the infrastructure that I get to play in is that infrastructure, whether it’s a jazz festival or a jazz club. So, those places

almost define the genre for the audience. I don't feel like I have a name for the music I make, a box that it sits in, but those venues and that infrastructure, and the people that go there seem to accept that that's where it's being played. And so, even though it may sound sometimes light years away from the (jazz) influences, I feel like for me, it's definitely responding to all the drummers that came before me, but it may not sound like that. It's not that I'm trying to add to the jazz tradition, but I'm definitely wanting to throw something back to all the drumming people that I really admire and have listened to, and personally I like the idea of being able to just contribute something to that drumming story that's come from here. Some sense of it may not sound American, and it may not be trying to do that, but I'm definitely trying to offer something into that ongoing, evolving music that happens on the instrument.

GIAN SLATER: I have a lot of thoughts in common with everybody, and I think I would add that, for me in particular, there are even more stereotypes attached to a jazz singer – that's been a very real struggle to find a place where I fit. I think my personal perception of what jazz is, and whether I feel that I'm a jazz musician, is that I 100 per cent am. I operate with those values that we've been talking about. And I think having a great respect for the tradition, having kind of gone through that study process of harmony, and history, and the emphasis on ensemble playing, being an individual in an ensemble, these are things that are very important parts of my artistic identity and process. In actual practice, I just find that people almost always say that I'm not a jazz singer because I'm not singing standards. I think that there are many other steps away from standards for an instrumentalist before they may not be considered a jazz musician, but for a singer, if you step out of singing standards, you are immediately considered to be not in that group. So there's two parts to it. One is the way I feel about it, and the other part is how everybody else feels about it, and I've found that really difficult, because it doesn't really matter what music I'm making, it's just not considered to be an easy fit into that space, that jazz space. Improvising has been my greatest musical love, and I think despite the amount of improvising that I do in performance, I'm weirdly still considered less of a jazz singer than a jazz singer who sings a standard and doesn't improvise. But I think this idea of taking all of this influence, and this love for the tradition, but doing it through your lens, with your life experiences, the other things in this day and age that we're relating to – this feels like an important part of an evolving jazz musician.

KRISTIN BERARDI: Sometimes I do call what I do jazz . . . sometimes I don't, to be honest. Sometimes I just say I am a musician. I have found jazz, especially in Australia, has certain connotations. I identify and feel like I am a jazz singer; however, I also feel like I am just trying to be a good musician

at the core of it all. This allows me to be more free and flexible in what I do in terms of projects, and also keeps me more focused on the main parts of my development. I must admit, when I was living in Sydney, because I received some awards in jazz during my time living there, I was not considered in other (musical) circles. In Queensland I was known as a musician – an alto saxophone player, a composer, a singer – jazz, pop, folk, soul . . . I guess we do that as humans, we put one another into boxes to organise the facts/information. In Australia I wouldn't say I was a jazz musician outside of musician connections. Whereas in Europe, and America when I would tour, or just be talking to someone on the street or in a bar, I would. The reaction outside of Australia was always one of respect and interest, which I can only assume is because generally more people in these continents have been exposed to that music, than in Australia.

## The Australian Jazz Identity

JAMIE OEHLERS: So, it feels like the genre definition is definitely more for other people than for us, but that does lead to a different question that's come up so many times in the last fifty years around the Australian jazz identity.<sup>3</sup> Do you think there is an Australian jazz dialect? Does anyone feel like we've got to the point where there is an audible quality that is recognisable in Australia jazz music?

KRISTIN BERARDI: Yes, I really do. When I was starting out – my first connections were with Vince Jones,<sup>4</sup> and Sandy Evans<sup>5</sup> (especially as a woman playing the saxophone myself) and The Catholics.<sup>6</sup> Of course, I was obsessed with the American crew, and I remember at one stage even giving my mum a hard time about not marrying an American musician, so that my jazz career would be slightly easier. But I remember hearing Ishish play in Brisbane at the Zoo and being blown away, and feeling I had neglected my own community.<sup>7</sup> That helped me really connect with a feeling of pride in where I was born. I had ordered all the Vince Jones and Christine Sullivan CDs that the Mackay record stores could find between them.<sup>8</sup> Then I found all the instrumentalists that I really connected with who were Australian and supported them, and learnt their tunes. I remember blasting an Ishish CD in my Brooklyn apartment in 2004, and just feeling so proud to be an Australian jazz musician. It was different – it was grungy, it was loose at times, to me it had more rock influence in it. But it still had swing, it still had improvisation. I felt I could hear people's personalities, whereas the American stuff I felt sometimes was more 'educational' – not all, but some felt that way to me.

SIMON BARKER: There are lots of people coming up with really interesting ideas here in Australia, but I'm not sure if they fit together as a sound, a singular concept. I definitely feel like there's all of these incredibly highly developed individualistic ways of doing things, yet they're strung together maybe more by the question of, 'What do I do?', than the actual sound that comes out. I seem to go through the experience of just resetting my entire vocab every few years, just literally starting again, and trying to invent a new language for myself and it seems that's happening a lot with people in Australia. I feel like it's part of being on an island where we're isolated, and we can either stay the same or our musical life can be this sort of self-reinvention throughout our lives, and accepting that. I've found that seems to be a common thread of these people whose playing has changed so much. I think a really beautiful part of the Australian jazz scene is accepting change in each other, and really enjoying that, witnessing each other's radical evolution as players. It is interesting to try and keep regenerating, finding new things, really to share with your friends.

JAMIE OEHLERS: It's so true, and there is something really rewarding about seeing your friends play. I remember, Simon, when I saw your solo gig for the first time, after playing with you in a whole pile of different formats, and hearing it and thinking, 'This is so different, it's amazing.' It was something I hadn't heard before. It felt for me, because I'd seen you play in so many different formats, it sounded like a complete divergence from the standard way that you were playing. Just seeing your friends kind of stretch beyond what you know them to be in their current state, it's really rewarding.

PHIL SLATER: I think part of this Australian dialect thing, it's about acknowledging that being an artist in Australia is a different thing than being an artist in other places – not better or worse, it's just a different thing. And so, Australian audiences are different. Australian venues are different; the ecology around performing is different; the funding opportunities are different; the universities are different. People start playing instruments usually a bit later in life, so techniques are different. All those levers that go into contributing to the way that musicians play and the way that the music works – what is the music that you make, if you don't think anybody's ever going to listen to it? If this is not really a commercial enterprise, if that's the path you choose (and it can be an incredibly liberating path to choose), then what do you go and make? If you can't afford extensive rehearsals, how does that affect the music that you conceive of and write down for the other musicians to play? I mean, how much are you relying upon improvisation as the generating force? All those things, to me, they all come down to economic questions; that's the economics of playing music in Australia. How can you do it in a sustainable way? It's no different from building a house, or growing wine, or whatever. It has to be

appropriate for the circumstances and the resources that are available, and if you want to do it for a long period of time, you have to solve that problem, how to do it efficiently and sustainably without losing your mind, and being able to live life.

ANDREA KELLER: I don't necessarily think there's a dialect. I've always been really troubled by that question about the Australian sound. I feel like things are distinctive here, but as Phil said, it's the ecology, everything's distinctive here. The community, the friendships, the musical relationships we've got. I agree; the economics of it, like can you afford rehearsals, or are you just getting on stage and just trying your best with what you've got and relying on the skills of those around you? I suppose everyone everywhere is doing that, they've just got different environments, and different relationships, and different funding opportunities, et cetera. So, I think what we've got is distinctive, but I couldn't describe it and say that it's an Australian sound or anything.

GIAN SLATER: Yeah, I was just going to add I think that there's a lot to be said for maybe the kind of lack of opportunities here, meaning that you sort of just get on. You just get on and make music, and do the things that you love, and I think that there's a lot to be said for that. When you go elsewhere in the world where there is a hustle to be had, there's something to hustle for (like touring circuits), then you sort of maybe calibrate something that you think somebody's going to like, and you just push that. I don't know whether that's a more common thing elsewhere, but it feels to me like there's nothing really to hustle for here, so you may as well make your music that you think might be interesting, something that you think is interesting. So, this kind of thing of having each other and playing for each other, and pursuing our kind of curiosities, that feels like a really uniquely Australian thing. I don't think it's a sound, but I do think it's an approach that seems to be very common among creative musicians here.

## Awards and the Public Perception of 'Jazz' in Australia

JAMIE OEHLERS: So, I wanted to bring up the ARIA Awards. Some would say in recent times that there's potentially been some winners that don't resemble jazz at all. There's often been (at times heated) social media discussion around these things, but does it really matter? Does it impact us in any way whatsoever, or impact our opportunities in any way?

GIAN SLATER: I think that for me, those things, they have less impact on me personally, but more on just the signalling of those things – what it

signals to the rest of the jazz listeners, or a wider audience, and I think when things stylistically are stretching the boundaries of what we consider jazz, I think that's what jazz is supposed to do, in many ways. But I think that potentially what troubles people is that the jazz community is a quite tight-knit community, and I think that when you see people that are actually not involved in that community, then I think that's what troubles people. We have so few opportunities, and I think that if one of these few opportunities is taken up by people that are actually outside of the jazz community, it rubs people the wrong way – like turning up to a jazz awards ceremony and not seeing any other jazz musicians there. It's strange, because it doesn't feel like it represents or is a celebration of all the different ways that we make music within our community.

JAMIE OEHLERS: That makes perfect sense, and there's certainly been a lot of really deserving ARIA awards, and the members of this panel have received awards in the past. I guess at times there have been nominees or winners that don't resemble the process we were talking about before, that jazz is a certain approach to making music. And because we are such a tight-knit community, I know for me, seeing the music my friends and my community is making, and super-creative, boundary-stretching kind of music that's being made, not being recognised in any way by the major awards platform in Australia is really frustrating.

ANDREA KELLER: I think you've all hit some really crucial points here that we are quite a unified community. Even though there's a lot of different types of music that people are playing within our creative music community, amidst that diversity, we are quite unified. Jazz defined by descriptions of process that we've spoken about, by being members of a community and actually contributing to that community in multiple ways. I suppose the frustration is, as Gian expressed, and even Jamie, when other people get recognised as being part of that community and part of that process, when we in the community can't actually see that.

Awards and competitions are tricky things when it comes to music and creative endeavours. But the truth is in our music, to win those awards, it's not going to give you fame and you're not going to pay off your mortgage or anything. But certainly for me, the awards that I've been honoured enough to receive have certainly lifted my profile and been responsible for me getting a festival gig that then maybe led to something else. So, it's been really meaningful for me in my professional life, just for that. I suppose we want other people in our community to be reaping those benefits and being rewarded and recognised for all of that work they're doing, often for very little money.

## Summary

It was clear that the panel were aligned with their thought that, from a practitioner perspective, 'jazz' was a process, an approach to music-making, rather than an easily defined genre. This definition has been captured by many other artists in the field and moves people away from a definition of jazz as a music that must have a 'swing' feel, contain elements of the blues or embed other specific musical devices. The need for a 'jazz' genre categorisation seems more important for audiences, music organisations and performance venues than the artists themselves, though the impact of this categorisation (or not) can be significant to a performer's career. The seeming dichotomy of jazz being hard to define stylistically, yet being easier to define in terms of what is 'not jazz', speaks to the challenges facing the community and the organisations when funding or awards are being disseminated. An open discussion on the ingredients of the jazz process may aid this space. It became clear in future communication with the panel (not transcribed here) that in order to make an impact on associations such as these, and to control the narrative around what 'jazz' is in Australia, we need to organise ourselves more than we currently do. As a community, we are wholeheartedly united in creative music-making but somewhat disjointed in our approach to developing opportunities for the collective. It may be time to develop a national jazz organisation once again – one that can navigate the nuances of the modern music industry and support the incredibly diverse and creative musicians that we produce in Australia.<sup>9</sup> As to whether there's an identifiable Australian 'sound' or dialect within the jazz music being produced here, the panel presented some differing opinions; while no one could specifically attach a specific stylistic reference to Australian jazz, some felt they could hear it in the approach to music-making. Perhaps because of a lack of larger organised opportunities (like comprehensive touring circuits), we seem to just get on with making music while reinventing ourselves more often than most, due to the fact that we are playing to a smaller audience base and to our desire to present fresh creative material to these audiences. Challenges aside, Australia continues to develop incredible artists who are gaining global recognition. Artists such as Linda Oh, Troy Roberts, Shannon Barnett, Tal Cohen and Evan Harris, to name a few, are forging pathways for the next generation of Australian jazz artists in the international arena. And the next generation are ready to play – a few that stand out in 2022 include Flora Carbo, Niran Dasika, Helen Svoboda, Harry Mitchell, Jessica Carlton,



the Avgenicos brothers and Freya Garbett. All fiercely original in their approaches to composition and improvisation, these young Australian jazz artists will undoubtedly continue to add to the diversity of music being produced here.

## Notes

1. *Extempore* journal was published between 2008 and 2012, and featured interviews with Australian jazz artists.
2. Archie Roach (1956–2022) was an iconic Indigenous music artist, known for working with spontaneous and adaptable musicians.
3. See J. Shand, *Jazz: The Australian Accent* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008).
4. Vince Jones is one of Australia's most widely recognised jazz vocalists.
5. Sydney-based saxophonist Sandy Evans has been at the forefront of jazz and improvisation in Australia for the last forty years.
6. The Catholics are a Sydney-based ensemble led by bassist Lloyd Swanton that features original founding members Sandy Evans on saxophone and James Greening on trombone, among others.
7. Led by drummer Ronnie Ferella, Ishish were a Melbourne-based ensemble, active in the 1990s and early 2000s.
8. Christine Sullivan is a prominent Australian jazz vocalist.
9. From 1983 to 1992, the Music Board of the Australia Council funded the National Jazz Coordination Program, with state-run coordinators and a national coordinator. This programme aided in developing touring circuits and both national and international opportunities for jazz artists around Australia.

## Further Reading

- Bartleet, B. L., D. Bennett, R. Bridgstock, S. Harrison, P. Draper, V. Tomlinson and C. Ballico, *Making Music Work: Sustainable Portfolio Careers for Australian Musicians* (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, Griffith University, 2020), [https://makingmusicworkcomau.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/mmw\\_full-report.pdf](https://makingmusicworkcomau.files.wordpress.com/2020/06/mmw_full-report.pdf).
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