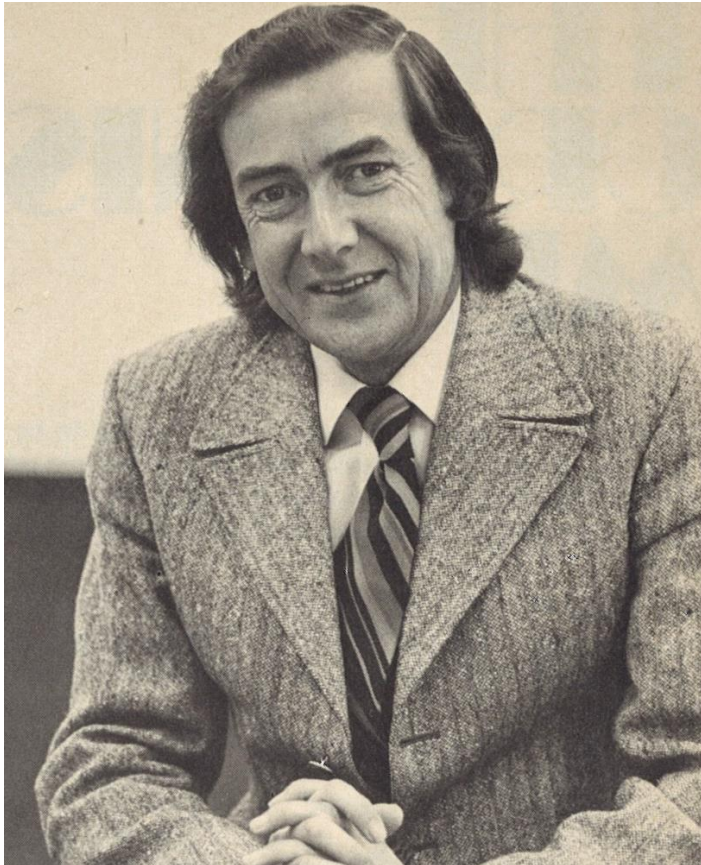


JAZZ IN OUR MUSICAL WORLD

by Don Banks*

[Editor's Note: This is a transcript of a broadcast over the BBC, London, in 1971 by the distinguished Australian composer, the late Don Banks. My thanks to the Australian Music Centre for providing this very interesting document and to Don's wife Val Banks for her permission to reproduce it. This transcript appeared in the Mar/Apr, 1994 edition of JazzChord.]

Jazz has been with us most of this century, and I'd like to comment on its existence and influence from the viewpoint of the (so-called) serious composer of music. This may seem a limited stance to take but believing, as I do, that we are seeing a very interesting period of interaction between jazz and concert music, then I think it is well worthwhile to examine this area.



Don Banks: we are seeing a very interesting period of interaction between jazz and concert music... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ AUSTRALIA

** Don Banks was Head of the School of Composition Studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, when he died in 1980. As a composer he was best known for his classical works, but he also made crucial contributions to Australian jazz.*

The code of conduct between the two styles of music would seem to mitigate against their meeting. Certainly it is instructive to observe the reaction of a normal concert-going audience to a programme based on jazz. One of the ways this happens [in the UK] is through the efforts of Cleo Laine and John Dankworth who have, for some time, been carrying the message of jazz interpretation and phrasing into the prim gardens of our festivals of contemporary music. After the group has played their first item John usually has to explain to the audience the protocol of listening to a jazz concert: that it is quite in order to applaud during an item to show your appreciation of an outstanding solo (only normally allowed after an operatic aria in the audience's previous experience), and that really there is nothing wrong with showing that you are enjoying the music. Gradually the audience relaxes and becomes involved with the players and their instruments: they start to appreciate the dicing with death of improvised solos where, at times, it seems impossible to them that the players can possibly know where they are. There is a genuine excitement generated by live improvisation of music, and this is something which has been lost to 'serious' music for centuries.



Cleo Laine (left) and John Dankworth: carrying the message of jazz interpretation and phrasing into the prim gardens of festivals of contemporary music...

At one time any serious self-respecting musician would be expected, at least, to improvise his own cadenza to a concerto. There was a call on musicianship involved in this, and a necessity to know the musical material as deeply as possible, so that one could indulge in imaginative flights. In recent times these delights have been left for the composer working alone in his study to experience. This has been fine for us (I speak now as a composer), but at the same time I must also claim a background as

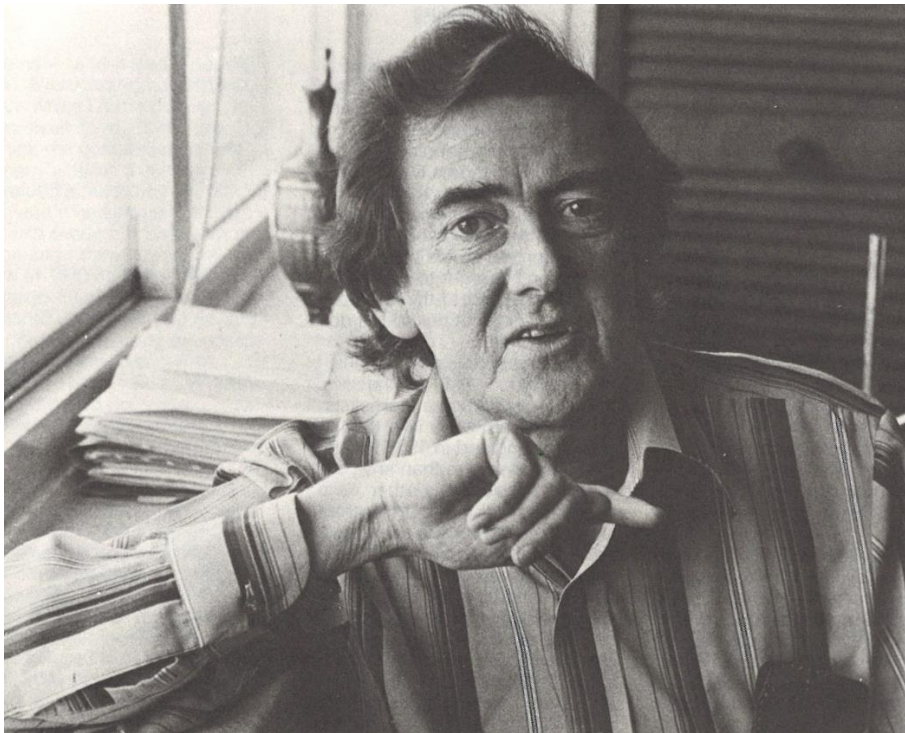
a jazz musician where the experience of improvising in groups has led to a kind of musical situation which the putting down of notes on paper cannot match.

As composers we are in the communication business. We have to convey by means of an often inadequate sign language our intentions to those who are to perform our music. This involves notating the attack and decay of a sound, the pitch frequencies to be played, the degree of loudness of a tone, how long to sustain a sound, and so on. This is complicated enough for one player, but when we have to multiply it by 100 times, as when writing for a symphony orchestra, then it seems improbable that the result will match our original thought, and perhaps it would be safer to feed the input into a computer for a truer realisation.

The more refined and subtle we make our language of communication to a performing musician then the greater restriction we place on him, and the greater degree of built-in error we chance in performance.

We chance in performance... Let's take those words, as the element of chance in performance (apart from obvious wrong notes) [that] has been missing for some time from music, until quite recently. Its reappearance has been partly a reaction against the extremes of integral serialism, and partly because composers have wished to involve more and more the personality and ability of performers in their music.

You will have heard of terms such as 'aleatory', 'aleatoric', 'chance music' and even 'random-generated computer music'. Big deal! All it means is that musicians have started to improvise again, and I can't help feeling that jazz - with its continuing example of improvisation in music - has played a part in this.



*Banks: part of the secret of a successful improvisation is that the performers are tuned into one another, they listen to what the other person is doing and blend, or contrast, with this....*PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH THE AUSTRALIAN JAZZ EXPLOSION

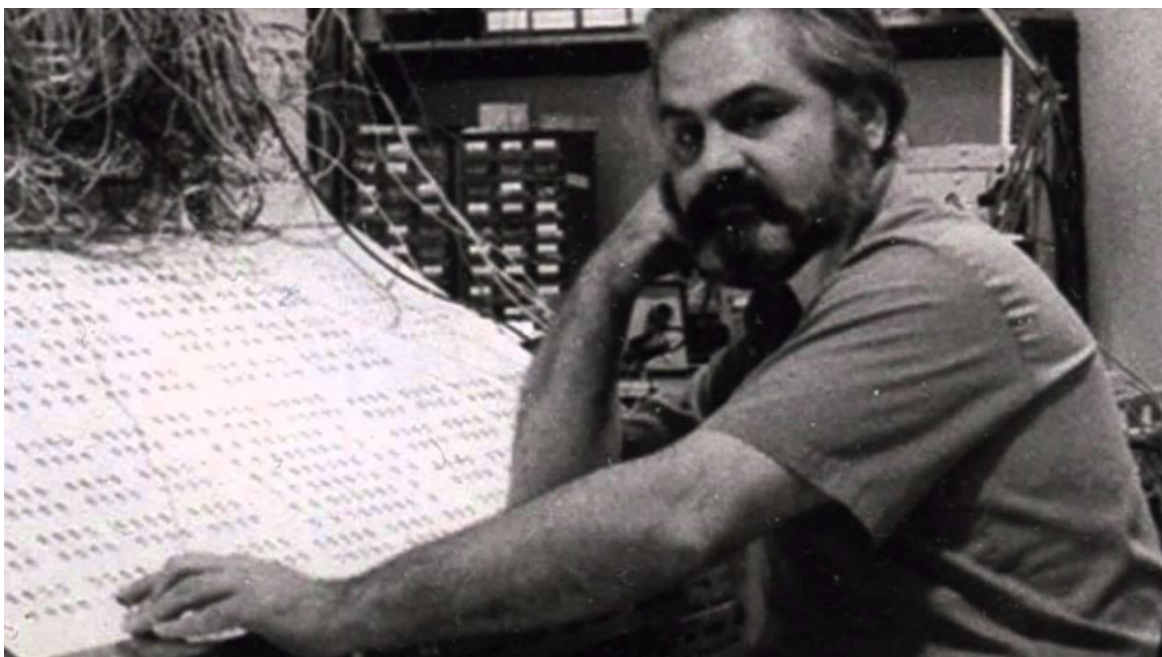
Improvisation in 'serious' music has, in the main, been confined to small groups of players because (with rare exceptions) who would expect symphony orchestras to improvise? Certainly not the orchestras themselves, who would reject it as part of their function. In any case I, for one, would not wish to hear 100 different personalities improvise. You might as well listen to the sounds, coming from your local pub at closing time on a Saturday night.

Part of the secret of a successful improvisation is that the performers are tuned into one another, they listen to what the other person is doing and blend, or contrast, with this. Multiply it by too many factors and the result is confusion. Some kind of control is needed. Either on a large scale, where the performer is free to decide the order in which to play given sections of material - or on a small scale, where a general overall scheme may be indicated but the details are left to chance, thus giving more scope to a player's personal abilities.

This latter scheme is more akin to what happens in jazz, where the 'given' musical material is often a harmonic sequence used as the basis of improvisation. Whether it's the 12-bar-blues or *Body And Soul*, thousands upon thousands of jazz musicians have poured out their hearts into presenting a new way of looking at this often simple musical material. Popular songs and ballads provide much of the repertoire for the jazz musician, but each performance is ideally a new and fresh one.

There can also be a more sophisticated way of using this material, and I'd like to play for you the opening of a piece called *Ballad* by the American composer Salvatore Martirano. He has taken seven tunes and arranged them for the singer Don Smith and a chamber ensemble of seven players.

[Don then plays the opening song You Are Too Beautiful, from the piece Ballad, Polydor Stereo 24-5001.]



American composer Salvatore Martirano: a composer who, at one stage of his life, was a working jazz musician...

This treatment with a free line for the singer, and very contemporary writing for the chamber ensemble, is only possible because Martirano is a composer who, at one stage of his life, was a working jazz musician. His *Ballad* is an example of one way of using jazz, by means of a structure of parallel streams of jazz and 'serious' music.

A close integration of these two elements is something which has recently concerned me as a composer. In some pieces I have used a jazz group, either in strict notation or left free to improvise, in order to throw a different light on my basic musical material. I see this as adding a new possibility to variation technique. First of all though, you must find your players. You can't expect classical musicians to interpret jazz phrasing correctly, but fortunately you can find jazz musicians who are excellent readers and well-trained musicians as well. They can transform any given material into a new dimension by their improvisation. I would like to quote the reaction of a well-known music critic to a recent performance of a piece had written for Cleo and John. Peter Stadlen had previously read the score for the work, then after the performance he wrote: "Listening to what the group made of what I had read in the afternoon, it was as if an elemental force had completely transformed the pages. Often what was heard bore little resemblance to Mr Banks's staves and yet without him, it would not have been nearly so nice."



Don Banks (left) with the saxophonist Don Burrows: fortunately you can find jazz musicians who are excellent readers and well-trained musicians as well....

For me then, part of the secret of working with jazz musicians is to set up a situation within which the players can work freely. Earlier musicians such as Milhaud, Tansman, Lambert and Stravinsky were all fascinated by jazz - but they took the external trappings of the style only, and notated it for symphonic musicians who couldn't play it. Or, as in Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto*, wrote music for a jazz orchestra which turned out to be not only bad jazz but indifferent Stravinsky.



Igor Stravinsky: his Ebony Concerto turned out to be not only bad jazz but indifferent Stravinsky...

I believe that music involving jazz can only be successfully written by composers who have had experience as jazz musicians. This naturally limits the field. Although I do not deny the influence of American jazz music on composers like Copland and Bernstein, for a truer use of the style one has to look the music of younger American composers. There are a number (not very well-known [in the UK]) such as Larry Austin, Donald Erb, Kenneth Gaburo, Ed London and Gunther Schuller, who are all producing fascinating essays in the use of jazz in their scores. As an example here is the opening of Larry Austin's *Improvisation For Orchestra And Jazz Soloists*:

[Don then plays this piece, from the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Leonard Bernstein, Columbia Stereo MS6733.]

In their musical world jazz just happens, and it produces a type of music which is quite new. Jazz pulse, feeling and timbre is there, but as part of a natural context of the music - and the amount of jazz content varies from the turn of a phrase to something which permeates the whole fabric of the piece. It is all expressed quite casually and naturally.

The same kind of thing is happening in [the UK] too, and varied approaches are represented by John Dankworth, Richard Rodney Bennett, and young composers like Barry Guy. In fact, to Barry Guy there is just no difference between the music he

plays - or writes - as a jazz musician, and his work as a composer or performer of 'serious' avant-garde music. This is the scene we have to consider today. A situation has arisen where the gulf between jazz and 'serious music' is rapidly being bridged. Not, as you may suppose, to make a popular form of music acceptable to a mass public, but yet another type of art music which will appeal to a minority only. To the small percentage of audiences for music in [the UK] who are really interested in contemporary music, you can perhaps add a handful more who will appreciate jazz and its fusion with other styles.



Don Banks believes that music involving jazz can only be successfully written by composers who have had experience as jazz musicians. This is the Don Banks Sextet in Melbourne, 1949-50, L-R, Charlie Blott (drums), Ken Brentnall (trumpet), Pixie McFarlane (bass), Betty Parker (vocals), Banks (piano), Eddie Oxley (sax), Bruce Clarke (guitar)... PHOTO COURTESY CHARLIE BLOTT OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN MUSIC

The really dedicated jazz musician/composer can be expected to starve as conveniently in London as he does in America. He can only live by diluting his art for the commercial market. You must remember that jazz is not 'pop'.

The composer of 'serious music' - for reasons of national pride, prestige or what you will - now has a better chance of making a living from his art in most countries of the world. It has become accepted that his efforts are worthy of support. Jazz, as a comparatively new means of musical expression, has yet to bridge the misconception that it is a popular form of music which can make its own way in the world. In its purer form this is just not so. Certainly those aspects more concerned with entertainment may do so, but the particular area of jazz which ranks, at its best, with the music produced by other composers of the avant-garde, needs support if it is to survive and flourish.

It has a definite contribution to make to musical life, and I hope that the limited amount of recognition, at present accorded to it, will increase as soon as possible.