

A DEFENCE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

by Gail Brennan

[Editor's Note: In the May/June, 1994 edition of JazzChord, guest columnist Bruce Johnson opened up an important debate in his article "The Myth Of 'The Cutting Edge'." It can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-11>. The following article by "Sydney Morning Herald" jazz critic Gail Brennan, published in the Jul/Aug, 1994 edition of JazzChord is a response.]

I would like to take up my dialogue with Bruce Johnson, if I may. First, I must say I agree with Bruce absolutely that established or traditional jazz forms should not be ignored in arts funding. As I have already made clear in *JazzChord*, I believe that it should be a matter of the highest priority to record the Port Jackson Jazz Band and the Yarra Yarra Jazz Band. If I won the lottery I would subsidise these projects myself. These are simply the first projects that come to mind.

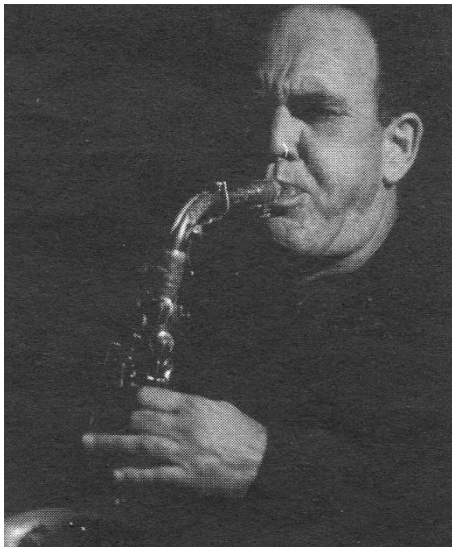


Gail Brennan says that recording the Port Jackson Jazz Band (left, in the late 50s) and the Yarra Yarra Jazz Band (below, in 1972) should be a high priority, and if he won the lottery, he would subsidise these projects himself... [For personnel of these bands, and photo credits, see page 8...]



Nevertheless, I must take issue with Bruce's attitude to the 'avant-garde', and music assumed to be on the 'cutting edge'. He is undoubtedly correct in his assertion that 'the cutting edge' is appropriated technological/industrial terminology. Nor is there any doubt that many innovations in this area have had 'toxic' outcomes. The idea of a single cutting edge of innovations is certainly fallacious - it is rather the case that one school gains ascendancy for various reasons (eg, the petrol car was much easier to start, and this eclipsed the steam car's advantages, and the petrol companies made sure that an easy-start steam car never appeared).

Unfortunately, Bruce has ignored the widespread assumption that all fresh endeavours are avant-garde or cutting edge. In fact everything created after a certain date suffers from this assumption. So, when he talks about 'intellectually pampered' (whatever that means) exponents of avant-garde or cutting edge music, a number of curmudgeons assume that he is putting all adventurous musicians in their place (remembering that in this country musicians like Bernie McGann, Charlie Munro and Mark Simmonds have suffered great disadvantage through being designated avant-garde), and a number of non-committed readers take it to be an assurance that they need not trouble themselves with anything that is not recognised as traditional or mainstream.



*Musicians such as Bernie McGann (left) and Charlie Munro (below) have suffered great disadvantage through being designated avant-garde... McGANN
PHOTO CREDIT COLIN WHELAN*



It would have been more helpful to take the bit between the teeth and identify the unnatural, incorrect avant-garde and cutting edge, and tell us in precisely what way they are being pretentious etc. But, wait a moment... I see here that Bruce reckons they don't exist! "...there is no such thing in practice as cutting edge music," he writes. "There is only music which imitates, which looks like, the cutting edge". Which cutting edge is it imitating, if there is no such thing? Okay, it imitates some notion of the cutting edge that arts bureaucrats have in their heads. Bruce has looked in there and seen it! But there is nothing in what Bruce says which precludes the possibility that someone, somewhere, is indeed at one of many possible cutting edges. "And it achieves this 'look' by style gestures, by the discourses and performance conditions it wraps itself in, by a certain pretentiousness through which it mystifies and privileges itself". To argue against this is to strike air, or at best a cloud of chalk dust. It is in the abstract realm of pure opinion, unanchored by reason or example. It is the 'posturing of the avant-garde' all over again - and once more from a writer who almost never attends events which could in any way be seen as avant-garde. Unless I have misunderstood the thing completely, it is an utterance which demonstrates the most colossal irresponsibility, and I am astounded by it.

Unlike Bruce, I do not have telepathic access to the deeper motives of arts bureaucrats, but surely this possibility should be considered - that bands like Clarion Fracture Zone and Paul Grabowsky's have been funded because they sound fresh and exciting. The terms 'avant-garde' and 'cutting edge' have then been used to convey some sense of that excitement. It is always interesting and sometimes illuminating to trace the derivation of terms, but only the silliest post-modernist would imagine that by so doing we will thoroughly cover their everyday contemporary meanings. It is quite natural to steal terms from technology, on the Hilary principle that it is there. One of the functions of art is to find an aesthetic in any environment, however benign or hostile. The jargon and grim humour within prisons is an example of this process. I'm sorry to have to drag this so far away from academe, but many (quasi) avant gardists, far from being pampered in any way, are very much out here on the street. To incorporate the environment in an artistic continuum is not necessarily to approve it. In fact, one function of the avant-garde has been to confront listeners with its less palatable features.



Bands like Clarion Fracture Zone (above) have been funded because they sound fresh and exciting... L-R, Tony Gorman, Sandy Evans, Toby Hall (behind Evans), Lloyd Swanton...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ & BLUES

Correct me if I'm wrong, but there is an assumption in Bruce's argument that jazz is essentially a kind of 'natural' folk music, quite separate from Western art music and all its pesky, restless, unnatural innovations. Now, before I address that, I should say that I join Bruce in denigrating the cultivated expectation of constant innovation. One of the sillier results was the recent Death Of Rock debate. Once more, experts decided that they knew exactly the nature of rock - all rock in all generations - and its nature was parent-shocking newness, and without that it was dead. Nonsense, of course. All that had happened was that, like any art form, it had accumulated a rich history. The means for many people to express themselves were there. Innovation was no longer such a pressing need. For jazz, this had already happened. But it does not mean that you can draw a line and say, "everything after this is not part of the tradition". Whether we like it or not, the world is changing, and musical expression will change too. Jazz will change, as it always has. New jazz will be created, which reflects its time.

There is no compelling evidence that folk music is static, if it comes to that. I guess we all have a sneaking desire to stop the world at a certain point. I sometimes wish that technology had stopped at the time of the Studebaker Land Cruiser and the Bristol 401. I certainly wish that the population had frozen at that point - that we had maintained precisely that ratio of bush to city. I am still angry that the swamp was drained, the lagoon filled in, and the sandhill flattened on the coast where I was born. I can hardly bear to think of salination and fouled river systems. But I doubt that the people who did this were much into avant-garde or cutting edge music. If there is any causal relationship - and it can only be a complex one - it surely flows the other way. Art changes in a changing world. If it went on, unaffected, it would lose an important dimension.



Mezz Mezzrow (left) pictured here with Sydney Bechet: Mezzrow believed jazz had already gone wrong by the Chicago stage...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

According to Mezz Mezzrow, jazz had already gone wrong by the Chicago stage. From its very beginnings, jazz was seen by some critics as a discordant symptom of modernity and the modern world. According to Keith Hounslow, jazz is very much Western music, and it is

being 'polluted' by world music (the very folk sources with which Bruce prefers to align it?). Amusing contradictions arise from the attempt to ally jazz with Western music, and from the attempt to isolate it, not to mention Bruce's attempt to isolate jazz from art itself.* In this day and age, everything from soap to opera is assumed to be art, and this dissolves many problems. Why is jazz so high and mighty? Larger brains than mine are eager to know what purpose is served by isolating jazz from art. I doubt that it would further one's cause with the, ah, arts funding bodies. Surely jazz is more often a point of dialogue between Western experimentalism and non-Western procedures, between 'high' and popular cultures.

There is very little to be said for Bruce's statement that jazz innovation always involves retrieval or revival. What did the Hot Sevens revive? Some say they destroyed New Orleans music. Some critics in fact saw them as an avant-garde, and therefore perverse, endeavour. The deep problems of anti-avant gardism are well illustrated by Wynton Marsalis, who ironically calls on Western concepts of musicianship in order to denigrate Lester Bowie (whose playing carries at least as much of the tradition as Wynton's) and to glorify a tradition in which they do not always apply.



Wynton Marsalis (above) calls on Western concepts of musicianship in order to denigrate Lester Bowie (below) whose playing carries at least as much of the tradition as Wynton's...
BOWIE PHOTO CREDIT JORG KRUGER



*Editor's note: see *JazzChord*, May/ Jun, 1994 for Bruce Johnson's article "The Myth of the Cutting Edge". It can be read on this website at this link
<https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-11>

Traditional and correct, Wynton plays the bourgeois Lincoln Centre. The incorrect avant gardists - far from being divorced from the folk interactiveness of traditional jazz - play in all sorts of venues, very often in an atmosphere of equality and raucous involvement. Ironically, it is the avant-garde who have so often retrieved rich folk elements that have been pared away by the more hidebound traditionalists, with their solemn, suspiciously art-like hierarchies; the more complacent mainstream; and the academically correct beboppers.

I would not call Bruce's essay 'New Age Eco Babble', but if I were an academic I might call it 'quaintly old-fashioned' crypto-Marxism. But I am not inclined to dismiss something by categorising it. That is what Bruce has done to a host of nameless musicians, who all appear to be guilty until Bruce decides to be specific. Is Bernie McGann a pretentious man? Is Sandy Evans a pretentious woman? Is there something pretentious in their musical approach? Who are we talking about? Yesterday I read a summary of the Melbourne Festival by Deborah Jones (no relation, apparently). She mentioned Bartok and Schoenberg and then said, "That should keep the elitists happy." People like myself who love these things are routinely insulted. A faint yawn is the usual response, but when the only intellectual writing about jazz in Australia gives us the same attitude with big words - well, it's very disappointing.



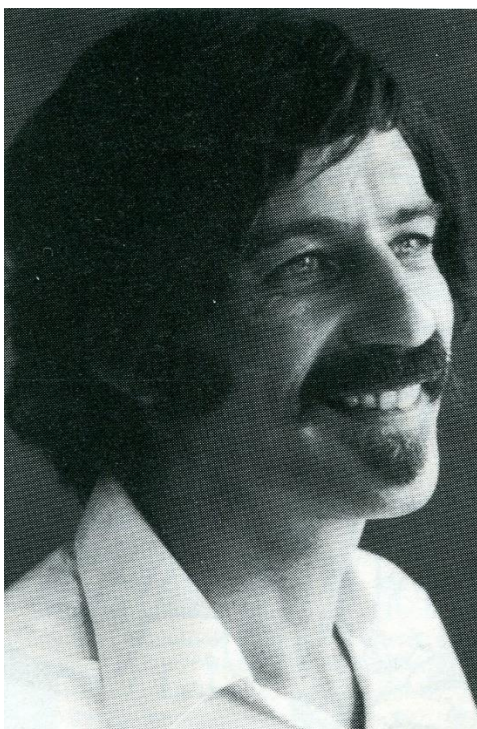
Arts critic Deborah Jones: Bartok and Schoenberg should keep the elitists happy...

In Bruce Johnson's extremely useful *Oxford Companion To Australian Jazz*, a related theme is pursued: that traditional jazz is community-oriented, more recent forms not. I love traditional jazz and have some good friends in that community, but it is not one in which I feel particularly relaxed. Call me Molly Meldrum, but I am more comfortable with young people, and even more comfortable with that community of diverse ages and backgrounds which has attended 'avant-garde' events - from Sangster in the last years of the El Rocco, through Free Kata, the KMA and Clarion Fracture Zone (they don't call themselves avant-

garde, but some do). You may say that your community is a real community but mine is not. I call that something like classic fascism, and I say put it in the same place your Marxism came from.



The group Free Kata, pictured in the mid-70s with promoter Horst Liepolt, L-R, Ross Rignold (drums), Graham Ruckley (bass), Liepolt, Serge Ermoll (piano), Eddie Bronson (saxophones): Gail Brennan (aka John Clare, pictured below in 1979) is comfortable with that community of diverse ages and backgrounds which has attended 'avant-garde' events, from Sangster in the last years of the El Rocco, through Free Kata, the KMA and Clarion Fracture Zone... FREE KATA PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER; BRENNAN PHOTO COURTESY ENCORE MAGAZINE CREDIT WALTER GLOVER



I would welcome a reply, but I can't see how one is possible until Bruce has attended a solid representative sample of avant-garde events.*

**Bruce Johnson has agreed to respond to Gail Brennan in the next edition of JazzChord.*

Editor's Notes:

Personnel of the Port Jackson Jazz Band of the late 50s, (see photo on page 1) L-R, John McCarthy (clarinet), Dick Hughes (piano), Ken Flannery (trumpet), Ray Price (guitar/banjo), John Sangster (drums) & Harry Harman (bass)...PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS.

Personnel of the Yarra Yarra Jazz Band, pictured in 1972 (see photo on page 1), L-R, Willie Watt (banjo), Frank Stewart (bass), Roger Janes (trombone/vocals), Nick Politics (clarinet), Judy Jacques (vocals), Maurie Garbutt (trumpet) & Lyn Wallis (drums)
