

OBITUARY: BERNIE McGANN

by John Clare



Bern McGann May 2008 © The Shot

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No sooner had I filed the review of the Bernie McGann album *Wending* on this site than McGann's closest musical associate John Pochée phoned me with the news that our great and dear friend had gone. Neither of us was surprised, having seen him in hospital days before. The surprise was that he had fought on for so long. McGann died in Royal Prince Alfred Hospital not far from where I live. I was not long out of there myself and did not know until very recently that he was there having a serious operation at about the same time as I was.

Towards the end of his life Bernie McGann instructed his record company (Rufus) to list his name as Bern, which seemed quite mystifying to those of us who had called him Bernie for nearly 50 years, and in some cases more. Confusing also, no doubt, to those international musicians and critics who had come to realise that there was a musician of true greatness in Australia, whose name was Bernie McGann. Bern is

what his wife Addeline and his family had called him apparently, so Bern it was. Not exactly a commercial decision. Bern McGann had made very few of those. I can think of only two artists who have changed the names they virtually traded under at the height of their careers: Cat Stevens and Prince. But they were so well-known there was no chance of anybody losing track of them under their new names.

Bernie – sorry, Bern – was a singular man, and a stubborn and courageous one. Here are some things that I remember. The small Catholic school McGann attended at Granville – a couple of train stops before Parramatta – had an asphalt playground. As you drew near, that familiar railway voice would crash down through the tinny speakers: Next stop GrAAAAnville!’ The A was harsh as the garbage being crushed outside your house.

Granville was already an industrial zone, but there was still bush there in McGann’s time. He loved that. A curious rumour would run through the working class institution from time to time that the Kings School nearby would soon vacate their expansive grounds and grand buildings and McGann’s classmates would move in. The Kings School was the first independent school in Australia. Pupils wore – and probably still do – uniforms that made them look somewhat like toy soldiers. They did move to North Parramatta, but sadly McGann’s classmates did not move in. I am not even a Catholic but I was actually touched by this rumour. Bern laughed, however, when he told me. He also said that some of the Brothers were bastards and some were great guys.



McGann worked as a postman in Bundeena...Here he practised the alto saxophone in the bush after work, developing a huge and unique sound... PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS PRODUKTIONS

Cut to the 60s and 70s. McGann worked as a postman in Bundeena, a small town enclosed on three sides by the Royal National Park south of Sydney. The other side

was water. Here he practised the alto saxophone in the bush after work, developing a huge and unique sound. I went out into the bush with him one day and watched him take up his position high on a long slope of heath and boulders that ran down to the edge of a high cliff. He played toward that cliff edge, out at the vast blue Pacific. He loved it there, and he loved the paintings of Clifton Pugh, who combined close-up, harshly realistic depictions of the Australian bush with surrealist distortions of scale. In the undergrowth of one painting two boys stand beside a live and a dead magpie, both bigger than them.

Around this time McGann made forays into the Sydney and Melbourne jazz scenes. His colleagues and friends included Pochée, pianists Dave McRae, Dave Levy and Bobby Gebert, bassists Jack Thorncraft and Jonathan Zwartz. His style was so original that many disparaged him. Earlier, some had even accused him of imitating Ornette Coleman. McGann had heard Coleman once and was a little surprised to hear that they were moving in some of the same directions. Earlier, in England, I had heard a West Indian player called Joe Harriott. It is now well accepted that he, Coleman and McGann had arrived at similar but by no means identical positions independently.



West Indian player Joe Harriott: it is now well accepted that he, Ornette Coleman and McGann arrived at similar but by no means identical positions independently...

Moving in a related direction, but incorporating deeply informed elements of what was later called World Music was the multi-instrumentalist Charles Munro. Munro's instrumental accomplishments were such that even those who hated what he did had to pay grudging respect. He also became a friend of mine. I remember him saying one day. 'John, I think this Bernie McGann has got something very important!' As to McGann not playing very well, Bob Bertles once told me, 'He's a better saxophonist than I am. Of course he practises more.' The only regular musical job McGann held during that time was with the New Zealand rock band Blerta. They all admired him. Another of his fans was a fantastic bluegrass violinist who accompanied Jerry Lee Lewis in his Sydney stadium shows (the same stadium, now gone, where Jack Johnson fought fellow American Tommy Burns for the world title). Actually they admired each other.

The opening of The Basement in 1974 coincided with McGann returning from a brief retirement (he had practised in the bush the whole time). Not that he played there all

the time, but three of the great bands with which he was associated or which he led played there from time to time. First there were two editions of the Bernie McGann Trio. One comprised Bern, bassist Jack Thorncraft and drummer Phil Treloar. The other: Bern, bassist Lloyd Swanton and drummer John Pochée. The other band was John Pochée's The Last Straw with McGann and Ken James, saxophones, pianist Dave Levy (succeeded by Tony Esterman), bassist Lloyd Swanton and drummer Pochée. These bands played at a number of other venues and the Straw and the

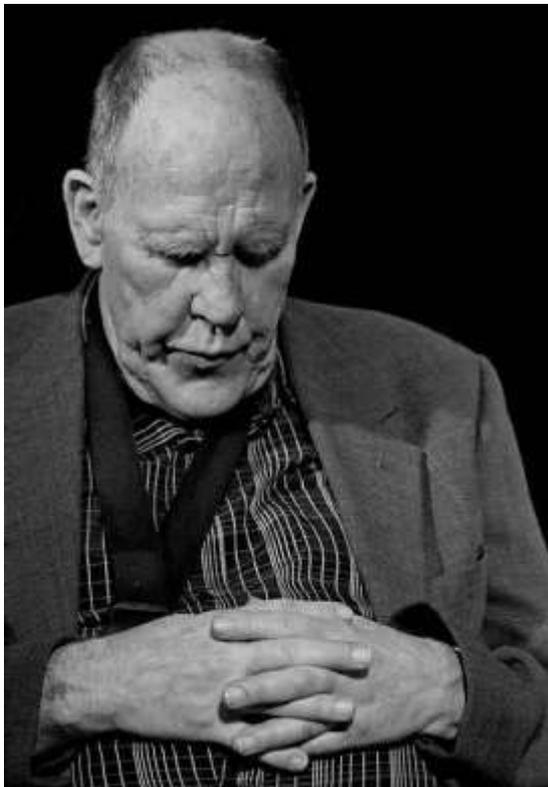


The Last Straw, L-R, John Pochée, Tony Esterman, McGann, Ken James, Jack Thorncraft...

second trio toured internationally with considerable success. The Sydney Improvised Music Association (SIMA) played an important part in their careers. During that period McGann and his colleagues sustained a peak of soul, excitement and invention that will never be forgotten by those who were lucky to be around. At least three strands of contemporary jazz found their place and were transmogrified by the brilliant colleagues. McGann, who was the eldest, was often the focal point and inspiration in their musical adventures. Somewhere in that time McGann drove me back from Bundeena while his tapes of music from around Lake Chad in Africa played. There was so much of it that I was still hearing new stuff when we reached my street in Glebe.



Since then of course there have been the two great McGann Quartets (see reviews of *Wending*), sensational performances with Paul Grabowsky and with American pianist Kirk Lightsey, and much more. Oh, and of course McGann's extraordinary



*McGann: an essay is called for on his luminous compositions... PHOTO CREDIT
ROGER MITCHELL*

performances with Pochée's band Ten Part Invention. I suggest you explore the Rufus catalogue. From being scarcely represented on record when I first heard him, McGann has amassed a catalogue so beautiful and exciting that it is hard to choose from. An essay is called for on McGann's luminous compositions.

Bern McGann, born in Sydney on June 22, 1937, died in Sydney on September 17, 2013, from complications following heart surgery. He is survived by his partner of the last three decades, Addie (Adeline) John, his children and four grandchildren.