ON DON BURROWS

by John Clare/Gail Brennan

[The following are reviews of two albums by Don Burrows: 1/ Burrows At The Winery, ABC Records, published in the Sydney Morning Herald on July 23, 1984 with the heading "Music with a dash of Claytons"; and 2/ Don Burrows: The Babinda Trilogy (WEA 90317268), published in the Sydney Morning Herald on January 8, 1991.]

I suspect that our regular reviewer Terence Maloon handed this album to me because he had become squeamish about slamming Australian musicians and thought I would be kinder. I will, but you should not infer that kindness is desperately required.

Terence Maloon: this is not his music…

This is not Terence's music, and much of it is not mine, but in the main it is very well played and should please Don Burrows's many fans. It is Don's achievement to have created a jazz that is acceptable to the blue-rinse set (the only kind of jazz that is) as well as to wild, perhaps I should say mild, bohemians, such as ABC producers and wine buffs. This recording was made in concert at the Rothbury Estate.

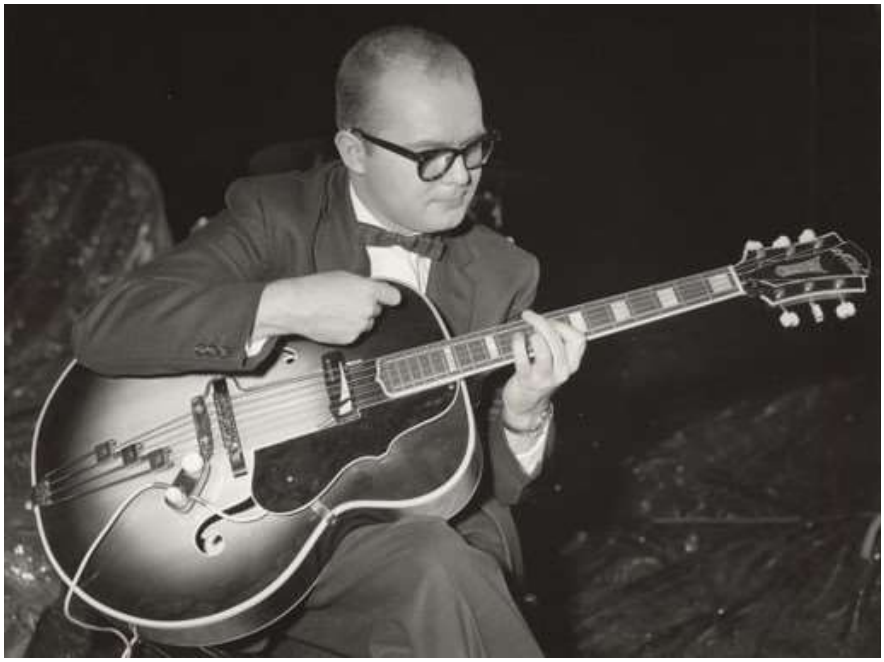
Burrows is the Peter Sculthorpe of Australian jazz, and of course success in this scarcely lucrative racket will be derided in some quarters. He is called Don Claytons — the jazz you listen to when you don't want to hear jazz — in those places where the Don Burrows smile is practised with satirical intent.

Don's success cannot be attributed solely to his keen, nervous smile. He has achieved a refinement of style, a smoothness of tone, and a neatness of format that is practically unique in this country. And he can play the jazz when he feels like it. On the baritone sax he can develop a great barrelling, rumbling momentum, without ever sacrificing good construction. There is no baritone on this recording, but there is a rare taste of tenor, an instrument he plays rather more lightly and politely.

Don Burrows recording the Babinda Trilogy: to John Clare his flute playing is largely surface mannerism…

His flute playing, on the other hand, is largely surface mannerism to my ears. You might agree when you hear the corny Latin treatment of *Satin Doll*. On clarinet he can get very hot, and very sweet. Here he favours the latter approach — on the pleasant tracks *Tenderly* and *I Can't Get Started*.

Don's long-term partner, guitarist George Golla, usually plays more interestingly away from Don, and Don plays more interestingly away from George. There are times on this recording when it seems that the security each feels in the other's presence is lulling them to sleep.



George Golla: he usually plays more interestingly away from Don…

Lately, Burrows has been featuring James Morrison as a special guest (as on this recording). This is surprising on the face of it, because Morrison is a young man who likes to try to blow the trumpet inside out. For all his extroversion, however, his notes are usually placed very conventionally, and the effect is sometimes gaudy but conservative, like certain American tourists.

James Morrison: he can play blistering jazz, and power trumpet always stirs the blood…PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Like Charles Shavers, whom he sometimes recalls on this album, Morrison's excesses can be forgiven, because he can play blistering jazz, and power trumpet always stirs the blood.

Unlike Charles Shavers, who was often quite futuristic, Morrison plays in a very old-fashioned way for a young man. What is good will usually be good for all time, but at this stage of his development I can hear little beyond technique to justify Burrows's claim in the liner notes of this album: "Morrison is the most remarkable young musician in the country."

Tony Ansell is a very proficient pianist who has never held my attention. After listening very closely to his work here, I have to conclude that his real strength is as a studio session musician rather than a jazz player. The jazz content of his work seems to me to be purely decorative.

Craig Scott is an excellent bassist, and Alan Turnbull is one of the very few world-class jazz drummers in the country, but the feeling required for the Burrows/Golla syndicate is rather dated.

I never want to hear *Sweet Georgia Brown* again, unless it is sung in Polish, as at the beginning of *To Be Or Not To Be*, but *I Can't Get Started*, *Tenderly* and Basin Street Blues can stand another run through, and they get nice ones here.

While I find this music dated, in a way that the music of traditionalists such as Bob Barnard and Alan Geddes is not, there are many thousands of Australians for whom

it is the right groove. They know what they like, and I do not feel inclined to try talking them out of it. Rather, I would suggest that there are a few other things they might learn to like if they gave them half a chance.

No-one should be criticised for sticking to what they do best. However, I have heard Burrows and Golla do remarkable things in less secure surroundings — in which Don gets very nervous indeed, but often manages to play everyone off the stage.

Someone accused Don Burrows of creating a jazz for the blue-rinse set. It might have been me. The only virtue of such statements is that they reveal the divisions and resentments in our society. Why shouldn't the blue-rinse set have their pleasures? In any case, thousands will stand up and say, "I like Don Burrows, but where is my blue rinse?"

Whenever I read a scolding, gavelrapping review of heavy metal, I wonder at the reviewer's confidence in assuming that his or her perception of the cultural gestures of an alien tribe has any significance whatsoever. On the other hand, is the sort of copout embodied by my infamous Marianne Faithfull review of any use to anyone?

Don Burrows poses the same problem, with the complication that he can, when he chooses to do so, play marvellously on a level that is meaningful to me.

Both sides of the coin are displayed on his latest, three-album set. On the one hand, there is the album of jazz-inflected easy-listening with strings that, in Burrows's own words, constitutes a plea for the return of the fare once offered on ABC by such as Arch McKirdy. This is immaculately played, superbly arranged by Julian Lee, and beautifully recorded. I listened to it with enormous fascination and a degree of nostalgia, but I don't care if I never hear it again. Thousands will play it repeatedly.

The Babinda Trilogy is superbly arranged by Julian Lee (pictured)... ***PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE***

On the other hand, there are the solid, swinging, bouncing baritone sax and bass duets, a lovely flute and percussion duet whose textural play might have been taken a little further, and a very fine quintet version of *Early Autumn* in which Burrows's alto is beautifully projected and modulated.

This is very much the Burrows retrospective exhibition, except that it was all freshly played and recorded. He can be good; very, very good. I have never denied it.
Even the superb playing on *Early Autumn,* however, begins to sound more like the work of a studio musician than jazz when you compare it with the moving, wayward originality of Bernie McGann on *Mex* from *The Last Straw* (Spiral Scratch).

Bernie McGann: his moving, wayward originality on Mex ...

That, I think, is the difference between a first-rate all-rounder and a visionary. Both should be appreciated.