

DisChords

A column by Jazz Co-ordinator
Eric Myers



JazzChord, Sep/Oct 1996

It was good to see a jazz film included in Andrea Stretton's inaugural SBS TV arts program *Stretton On Saturday (SOS)* on August 3, 1996: the 1986 film on **Miles Davis** *Miles Ahead*. This film included some of the magnificent footage of the classic late-1950s Miles Davis Quintet, with John Coltrane, always worth seeing again. According to my records *Miles Ahead* was previously broadcast on SBS on December 9, 1994. I was unnerved by Andrea Stretton's introduction, however, in which she said, "Miles Davis is considered the greatest jazz trumpeter of all time". I



Miles Davis (left) pictured with Cannonball Adderley (centre) and John Coltrane (right): always worth seeing again...

doubt that many jazz scholars would agree. The documentary itself got it right, where the narrator Oscar Brown Jr described Miles as “the greatest star in the history of modern jazz”. I don’t wish to criticise Andrea, who was probably reading a script, but such ill-informed comments about jazz are endemic in the media. People who are well-versed in art forms like theatre, classical music, opera and dance – but not jazz – tend to dominate coverage of the arts in the media. When they need information on jazz, why don’t they consult those with the appropriate expertise, instead of tossing off ill-informed statements? Getting back to *Miles Ahead*, one story I like in the film is the one told by the pianist Keith Jarrett, who played with Miles during one of Miles’s electric periods in the early 1970s. One night Miles was ill, and found it difficult to play. So, he began to play ballads, which was difficult for most of the young, rock-oriented band members, who did not know the standard jazz repertoire. Jarrett himself knew the tunes, so helped the others as much as he could. After the performance, Miles said to Jarrett, “Keith, you know why I don’t play ballads anymore?” Even though Jarrett felt he knew the answer he said no, because he wanted to hear what Miles would say. Miles said, “Because I love playing ballads so much”. “That’s the sign of an artist,” says Jarrett, “he has to be conscious enough to see that he has to move on even from the music he loves.”

*Also, in this SBS program, Andrea Stretton referred to the **Olympic Arts Festival** in Atlanta, Georgia, which included a substantial jazz component: a number of great jazz musicians gathered to pay tribute to Miles Davis. Why was there no Australian jazz musician there in 1996? There certainly was in Los Angeles in 1984 when, following my recommendation, the then 21-year-old James Morrison performed at the Olympic Jazz Festival - this was James’s first opportunity to perform in the USA since 1979 when, as a precocious 16-year-old, he played with John Speight’s Young Northside Big Band at the Monterey Jazz Festival. Los Angeles in 1984 can be regarded as James Morrison’s first serious international debut.



James Morrison (above) performed at the Olympic Arts Festival in Los Angeles in 1984... Why was there no jazz musician at the same festival in 1996?

*On August 26, 1996 I attended a meeting organised by Dr Richard Letts, chair of the Music Council of Australia, to discuss the proposed cuts to the live broadcasting budget of **ABC Classic FM**. The station currently allocates only four hours of its weekly broadcasting time to *Jim McLeod's Jazztrack* (the last cut to Jim's programs, down from six hours to four, was documented in the Jan/Feb 1994 edition of



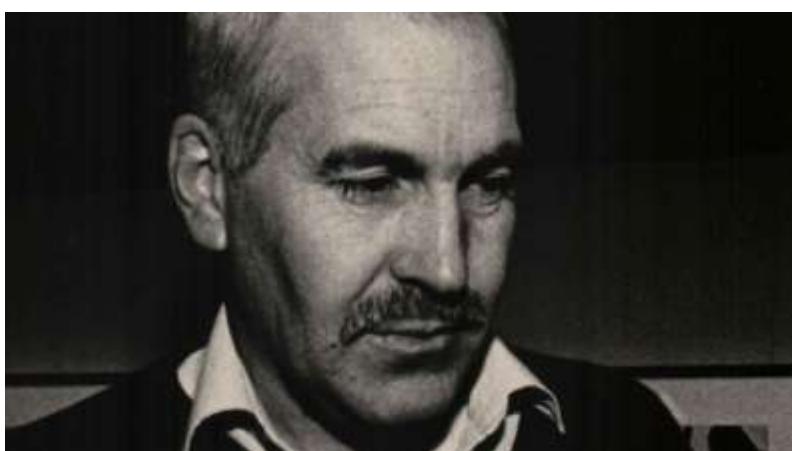
Dr Richard Letts, chair of the Music Council of Australia...

JazzChord). Most of the rest of the week is devoted to what one can term “classical music”, which amounts to a massive imbalance in favour of music that interests no more than about 10% of the population. Therefore, the current ABC Classic FM regime can hardly expect enthusiastic endorsement by the jazz community, represented at this meeting by myself, Bruce Johnson (JCANSW President) and Peter Rechniewski (JCANSW Vice-President). ABC employees attended too, including John Miller (Program Director, ABC Classic FM) and Nathan Waks (ABC Director of Music), plus representatives of the “fine music” industry, including the Australian Opera, Youth Music Australia, the Australian Music Centre, APRA, Tall Poppies, and others. Some interesting figures were tabled: ABC Classic FM’s overall budget was \$6.3 million, with \$3.5 million being spent on the network’s core activities, and \$2.8 million on the recording of live music. Although no precise figure for the recording of jazz was tabled at this meeting, it is now apparent that ABC Classic FM currently allocates around \$25,000 to artists’ fees for this purpose. It’s a paltry amount, and I was not surprised that John Miller told the meeting that ABC Classic FM management had guaranteed not to reduce its spending in this area. There is some anecdotal evidence that the station management had already come to the conclusion that its expenditure on jazz was ridiculously low in relation to classical music, and was planning to increase it substantially. But that now could be on hold. There is the possibility, I’m told, that, even though there may still be the same funds



The cellist Nathan Waks, ABC Director of Music...

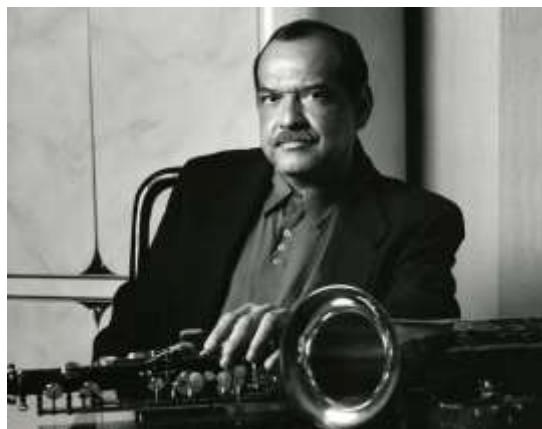
available to spend on recording jazz in the future, there may be less activity simply because many ABC technicians and operators will have been made redundant. One point, however, is worth noting. With the best will in the world, I can't help thinking that those who are responsible for privileging classical music and marginalising jazz, usually seek the support of the jazz community when this sort of crisis erupts: we in the jazz community are expected to go in and fight for the measly crumbs we are currently allocated. Of course, we come to the party, because we know that acts of vandalism against the ABC are a threat to the vitality of Australian cultural life – even though we strenuously disagree with the ABC's music policy. But, when the dust clears, will jazz music be any better off? Sometimes I imagine a situation in which the situations of classical music and jazz are reversed, ABC Classic FM is ABC Jazz FM. All types of jazz idioms are broadcast seven days a week, with the exception of four



Bruce Johnson: he has found evidence indicating that the audience for live jazz in Australia is about two-and-a-half times that for classical music...

hours that are given over to classical music, on Saturdays and Sundays from 5-7 pm. Afficionados of classical music are protesting that the imbalance between jazz and classical music cannot be justified... Ridiculous? Not when you consider the sort of little-known evidence that Bruce Johnson has turned up, which indicates that the audience for live jazz in Australia is about two-and-a-half times that for classical music. But, let's return to reality. With ABC Classic FM, it is jazz that has to be satisfied with four measly hours a week. Sometimes jazz enthusiasts feel like those African-Americans who fought in overseas wars for the US, then returned home to find they still had to sit in the back of the bus. Isn't it time that the ABC Board had a look at way the Corporation privileges classical music on its stereo network? Can this still be justified in today's multicultural Australia?

* The jazz scene in **Brisbane** has had a shot in the arm in recent times, according to jazz co-ordinator Lynette Irwin and Niels Nielsen, lecturer in jazz history at the Qld Conservatorium of Music. For a long time jazz performance relied on the Brisbane Travelodge, but that venue only included jazz amongst other contemporary musics. Also, I'm told, there was a hip little venue called Van Gogh's Earlobe. In addition to The Bass Note, which opened 12 months ago, Brisbane now has another major venue, The Healer, run by the former Hong Kong musician and club manager Ric Halstead. There are now more visits to Brisbane by international and interstate artists. Recently Ernie Watts, brought to Australia for Perth's Jazz Australia, played Brisbane (but not Sydney significantly). The jazz course at the Qld Conservatorium of



American saxophonist Ernie Watts, brought to Australia for Perth's Jazz Australia, played Brisbane, but not Sydney...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Music, now headed by Frank Millward, has become a full degree course: there are 21 first-year students, and the plan is to have 60 full-time jazz students. Then there are the activities of Greg Quigley: he appears to have successfully re-established the summer jazz clinic concept which was so influential in Sydney in the late 70s and early 80s, and he's opened a shop called Jazzworx in Paddington, which markets various jazz products, including education aids. Through all of this, the Qld Jazz Co-ordinator Lynette Irwin has been active, primarily in facilitating performances. So generally the Brisbane scene is much more vibrant than in the past. There is, however, one aspect of jazz activity that Brisbane has not cracked: the recording of local jazz groups by the ABC. Despite energetic lobbying, the ABC in Brisbane appears to be totally disinterested, which makes it significantly out-of-step with Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.