

JIMMY SHAW & THE GAIETY SWING BAND

by Max R Harris*

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As a 14-year-old lad, it was almost impossible to contain my excitement whenever I arrived at the Gaiety Milk Bar in Oxford Street, Sydney. I would almost break into a run as I hurried to the back of the milk bar and pushed through the swinging doors to enter the sprung floor dance hall at the rear.



Jimmy Shaw: of Sydney's great jazz musicians who came through the spawning-ground of the Gaiety bands...

It was 1948, and at that time nowhere in Australia could one hear a band that played the modern arrangements of Kenton, Herman, Ellington and Krupa et al with such conviction and fire. Run as a dance 'club' to overcome the strict licensing laws that

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prohibited profit-making on a Sunday, the Gaiety was a meeting place for the culturally progressive musicians, dancers and the fashion-conscious young people of Sydney.

The athleticism of the jitterbugs was a wonder to behold as people would form a circle around the rubber-limbed dancing genius Milton Mitchell and one of his equally talented partners, either Lee Neilson or 'Midge' Macintosh. Sharply dressed males with crewcuts or 'Cornel Wilde' haircuts would pose in their zoot suits, drape jackets, pegged pants and mirror-shined shoes. Gorgeous young females looked cute in their sweaters, pegged skirts and bobby sox. Many of the punters would hide their wine in the toilet cisterns (alcohol was not permitted), or drink it in the lane behind the hall where you could hear the clomping of happy feet and the squeaking of the sprung dance floor (especially in the orchestrated pauses of the band's theme, Gene Krupa's *Leave Us Leap*).



Rubber-limbed dancing genius Milton Mitchell, dancing here with Mrs Jimmy James...PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NEW ZEALAND

The Gaiety bands were the spawning ground for many of Sydney's great jazz musicians, among them drummers Alan Geddes (who took over from Joe Singer) and Jimmy Shaw who came after Alan in 1952. In 1987 Jimmy Shaw with the assistance of John Ferguson (who provided many of the arrangements), reunited 15 out of 17 of the original players as well as Norm Pearson the band's original vocalist. Conducted by John Ferguson, the band rehearsed at the Sydney Journalists Club and were engaged by Bill Mordey, the boxing promoter to play at the Sydney Entertainment Centre (between rounds) for two of the Jeff Fenech fights.

The 1987 line-up featured Norm Pearson (vocals), George 'Strop' Thompson (bass), Terry Wilkinson (piano), Jimmy Shaw (drums). Saxophones were Bill Barlow, Ron Mannix, Dave Rutledge, Ken Malone and Jock McKenna. Trumpets were Chris Hamilton, Bob White, Eddie d'Amico, Allan Cantwell and Kevin Robinson. Trombones were Pete Haslam, Peter Horton, Arthur Hubbard with Darryl Long replacing Norm Wyatt.

I caught up with Jimmy Shaw at his Kingsford home and asked him about the current band and to recall some of the highlights of his career.

Max R Harris: You've managed to keep your people interested in the band Jim.

Jimmy Shaw: Yeah. I'm knocked out about it. The loyalty is very good. Some good things should start to happen for us. We miss out on a lot of gigs because there are 18 of us. But I won't break down in size.

Max: You've actually adopted a purist approach in that you won't compromise. I mean, no straight eighth-note rhythms. Just all swinging stuff.

Jim: No, there's no rock and roll. We play some Latins and some waltzes, that sort of thing. We play for dancers.

Max: Are you getting fresh arrangements?

Jim: Yes. Mal Francis has been doing some nice charts for us, and Freddy Hill (1st trumpet) does some transcribing for us and also does some originals. So we're getting a good programme. In fact, I'm thinking about culling a lot out of the library because it's getting too heavy to carry (laughs)!



Lead trumpeter Freddie Hill: he does some transcribing, and also does some originals... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN MUSIC CENTRE

Max: The good thing about the band is that as well as tight ensemble playing, it's full of soloists.

Jim: Yes, you can go almost right around the band and get a good solo. They're all experienced guys. You know?

Max: Can you name me the regular players starting with the trumpet section?

Jim: Yes, there's Freddie Hill on lead trumpet with Eddie d'Amico, Keith Stirling and Tony Herman. The trombones are Jim Elliott, Viv Williams, 'Slide' McBride, who plays with us from time to time, Reg MacDonald and Gerry Ramage generally plays bass trombone. With regard to the saxophone section we've had a few different lead alto players. At the moment Paul Cutlan is playing with us. Marty Mooney on tenor, Ken James, tenor; 'Jock' McKenna, baritone; and Dave Jensen plays second alto. The rhythm section is 'The Judge' (Peter Piercy) on piano, and yourself (Max Harris) or Brian Fagan on bass, Grahame Conlon or Peter Power on guitar, myself on drums and Bobby Scott on vocals and Irish jokes (laughs)!

Max: What gave you the idea to get the 'Gaiety' band happening again?

Jim: I used to practice down at Bunk (Ralph) Sawyer's art studio in the Waterside Workers' Federation building. Bunk was a trumpet player in one of the original Gaiety bands (John Ferguson's band), and talking to Bunk gave me the idea, and I got 15 out of the 17 original players. We used to rehearse at the Journalists' Club in Sydney. Bill Mordey the boxing promoter got to hear of us, and we played at a couple of the Jeff Fenech fights between the rounds, you know? We were at the Entertainment Centre (Sydney) in 1987 when Fenech knocked out that guy in the first round. Terry Wilkinson was leaning on the piano and we were watching the start of the fight and I turned round to say something to Terry and I looked back and the fight was all over, Fenech had knocked the other guy to the ground (laughs)! Anyway we kept the band going, but the older musicians were not interested in coming along to rehearsals, so we just grabbed some of the young blokes and whoever was around.



Boxing promoter Bill Mordey: he got the Gaiety band to play at a couple of the Jeff Fenech fights between the rounds...

Max: Can you remember the line-up of the original band?

Jim: Yeah, there is some footage around on a Cinesound newsreel of the Town Hall (Sydney) concert. Dick McNally was playing lead (trumpet), and Ron Falson and Alan Nash were there. Terry Wilkinson was on piano, Ronnie Hogan was on guitar,

Joe Singer was the drummer and the bass player was Johnny Edgecombe. I think Johnny Green was on lead alto. Maurice Le Doeuff (reeds) was in the band, Clare Bail (reeds), Andy Macintosh (reeds), Jock McKenna (reeds), and Ralph Mallen (trombone) led the band.

Max: When did Billy Weston (trombonist/ trumpeter/arranger) come into it?



Billy Weston (left) pictured here with trumpeter Ron Falson... PHOTO COURTESY DON'T WORRY BABY, THEY'LL SWING THEIR ARSES OFF

Jim: Johnny Ferguson (trombonist/trumpeter/ arranger) had a Sunday afternoon rehearsal band happening there, with Bruce and Chris Hamilton, Carl Shafts and Bunk Sawyer (trumpets), and Billy took over that one, and eventually the Sunday night band. Alan Geddes was playing drums with Billy before I was. Alan left and Billy asked me to come in and that was about 1952. The Gaiety was burnt down in 1954, some say deliberately. It's a Clancy's Supermarket now. You know the Gaiety had a sprung-floor dance floor?

Max: Yes, I remember listening to it.

Jim: What, the squeaks?

Max: Yes, you could hear it really well down the back lane.

Jim: I can't forget to mention Norm Pearson who was the vocalist, and sometimes Laurel Quinnel and sometimes 'Midge' Macintosh (nee Ruth Upton) who was married to Andy Macintosh, one of the band members.

Max: I guess that over the years the Gaiety was a springboard for most of Sydney's top players.

Jim: Oh yeah! Most of the musicians around Sydney who were keen on big bands or jazz went through at least one of the Gaiety bands. Doug Foskett (reeds) played in the Weston band, also Johnny Green (reeds), Frank Smith (reeds), Reg Price (reeds). Arthur Hubbard and John Ferguson were two of the trombone players. Errol Buddle (reeds) was there for a while. Doc Bertram (bass) who ended up with Horrie Dargie's group. Milton Saunders and Mal Pierce were piano players at different stages.

Max: How did Ralph (Mallen) come by the arrangements?

Jim: I guess he would import them ... When Ralph was getting happening he played a lot of Stan Kenton's things. Billy Weston used to do some originals. He was a lovely arranger, Billy. *[Billy Weston later confirmed to me that he did at least 30 to 40 arrangements for the Gaiety band – MH]*

Max: Did many of the arrangers transcribe by listening to records?

Jim: Yeah, in fact Wally Norman was one of the first to do all that man. He had the band at the Roosevelt (night club) in the 40s. Charlie Munro and Noel (Bill) Coady I think were there, and Johnny Blevins and Don Burrows. They were playing Gillespie charts man. Wally took them off (laughs)!



Wally Norman (centre) on trumpet, with Jack Crotty (left) and Billy Miller (right)...

Max: To think that there was no Conservatorium for jazz studies then ...

Jim: No! You got it the best way you could, on the gig, or at home with your head buried listening to records, trying to figure out what they were doing you know?

Max: Who were the organisers of the Gaiety scene?

Jim: Billy Weston, Del Perriot a jitterbug champion and Wilson Douglas, who eventually became a trombone player in Billy's band, were the directors, and they ran it as a dance club to get around the licensing laws of that time. It was five shillings admission and you had to sign in, and you were issued with a membership card.

Max: A bit about you now Jimmy. You've played with a lot of people, but are there any things that stand out as special?

Jim: Yeah quite a few man — all of them (laughs)! It's funny about being a bandleader now. My first gig was as a bandleader. Me and Mrs Williams on piano at the Gladesville Scout Hall. It was 1945 and I only had the drums for a month! A few months later I got a job with Warren Gibson's five-piece band at Gordon Hall, Gladesville and we used to do big band charts. In 1957 we went down to the Ironworkers (Federation Hall) with Johnny Bamford's band the year Stan Kenton



Johnny Bamford Big Band in Sydney, circa December, 1961. Back row L-R, Colin Jones (trt), Mal Pearce (trt), Jimmy Shaw (drs), Jack Iverson (trt), George Thompson (bass), John Edgecombe (gtr), Neville Blanchett (trt), Jimmy Stokes (trt). Trombones middle row L-R, Arthur Hubbard, Peter Haslam, Norm Wyatt, Wilson Douglas, Cec Regan. Saxophones front row L-R, Ron Gowans, Errol Buddle, Johnny Green, Johnny Bamford, Ron Mannix, Syd Powell... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

came out. Then I got a job as a flight steward with Qantas for about four years. I was still playing all of the time. Jazz sessions with the ABC and a few commercials and that, you know. I did the Mobil-Limb Show for three years (1961-1964) with Burrows and Errol Buddle and I used to be at the El Rocco with Judy Bailey and Rick Laird, and Sangster had a band down there. I also worked down at Thredbo and Top of the Cross (restaurant) with Alan Pennay. The Gaiety band keeps me interested now, and I've been working with Susan Gai Dowling, a lovely jazz singer who sings all the standards and things.



Rick Laird, Judy Bailey & Jimmy Shaw, pictured on the roof of the El Rocco...PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

Max: I must ask you Jim, who influenced you drum-wise?

Jim: I dig them all man, but I guess Philly Joe, Buddy Rich and Dave Tough.

Max: Who was the major influence overall?

Jim: I don't know, I dig everything. Everybody has influenced me. I just love playing good music.

Max: But obviously, big band playing is your favourite thing to do.

Jim: Yeah, there's nothing like being in the middle of a big orchestra. It's like everybody's playing just for you. No matter what instrument you play, it's a big buzz.

I played with Mel Tormé a couple of times with Wally Norman's band. Mel was out for the Tivoli circuit and we did a concert at Sydney Town Hall, and Mel was coming on to play a drum solo, and it was the second-last time we had to play. I broke the batter head on my snare drum, so I turned it over for the next tune and used the snare head, and of course I broke that! So when Mel came on to play a drum solo I was so embarrassed man. It's got to be the most embarrassing moment of my life. He said "What are you trying to do to me, don't you have any spare heads? I said, 'No, I've never actually broke any heads!' I bet he's dined out on that one for years.

Max: You've done quite a bit with Keith Hounslow.

Jim: Yeah, we've made a couple of tapes. In fact, we were at the Manly Jazz Festival last year.

DISCOGRAPHY:

Jimmy has recorded two albums (1987/1989) with Keith Hounslow (pocket trumpet and fluegel horn), Grahame Conlon (guitar), Paul Williams (tenor sax and clarinet), and Dieter Vogt (bass). For Bill McColl (radio announcer and concert promoter) at EMI Studios. 1954 with Eddie Shu (USA) on tenor sax and trumpet, George Thompson (bass) and Terry Wilkinson (piano).



*Jimmy Shaw (left) on drums, performing with the American saxophonist Eddie Shu in 1954. Others are George 'Strop' Thompson (bass) and Terry Wilkinson (piano)...
PHOTO COURTESY JIMMY SHAW*

1957 an EP on Diaphon label with the 'Clare Bail Sextet'. Clare Bail (saxophone and clarinet), Ken Brentnall (trumpet), John Bamford (trombone), 'Django' Khan (bass) and Noel Gilmore (piano).



Vocalist Bobby Scott: singing with the Gaiety Swing band at the Bondi Golf Club in Sydney... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

At the time of this interview Jimmy Shaw has been leading the Gaiety Swing band (17 pieces, plus vocalist Bobby Scott) at the Bondi Golf Club in Sydney on Wednesday evenings.
