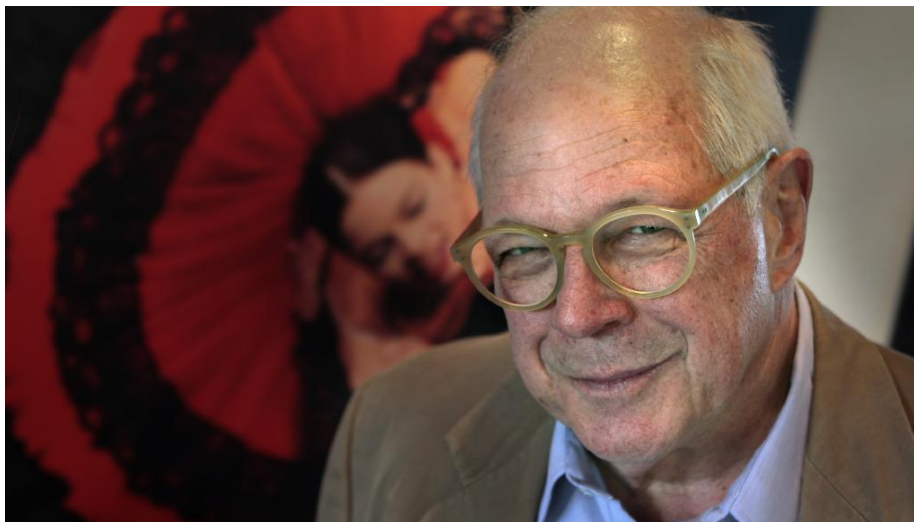


A RESPONSE TO GAIL BRENNAN

by Bruce Johnson

[This article, which appeared in the Sep/Oct, 1994 edition of JazzChord, is a response to Gail Brennan's article in the Jul/Aug, 1994 edition of JazzChord, entitled "A Defence of the Avant-Garde" which can be read on this site at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-12>. The latter was in turn a response to Bruce Johnson's original article in the May/Jun, 1994 edition of JazzChord, entitled "The Myth of 'The Cutting Edge'," which is at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/jazzchord-articles-11>.]

Thanks to Gail Brennan for putting pen to paper (*JazzChord*, 20, Jul/Aug, 1994). It prompts me to reflect more carefully about what I think and how much more clearly I might have expressed it. Fundamental to the position I am taking is this: jazz is one of the significant sources of musical enrichment for a great many people in Australia. This enrichment is trivialised by sections of the arts bureaucracy. Look at Leo Schofield's explanation of the negligible jazz content of the Melbourne Festival as an example (*JazzChord*, 20, p 2). This trivialisation is achieved by the construction of various cultural categories. This demeans a great many people, and I would like to question the power base from which such devaluation is conducted.

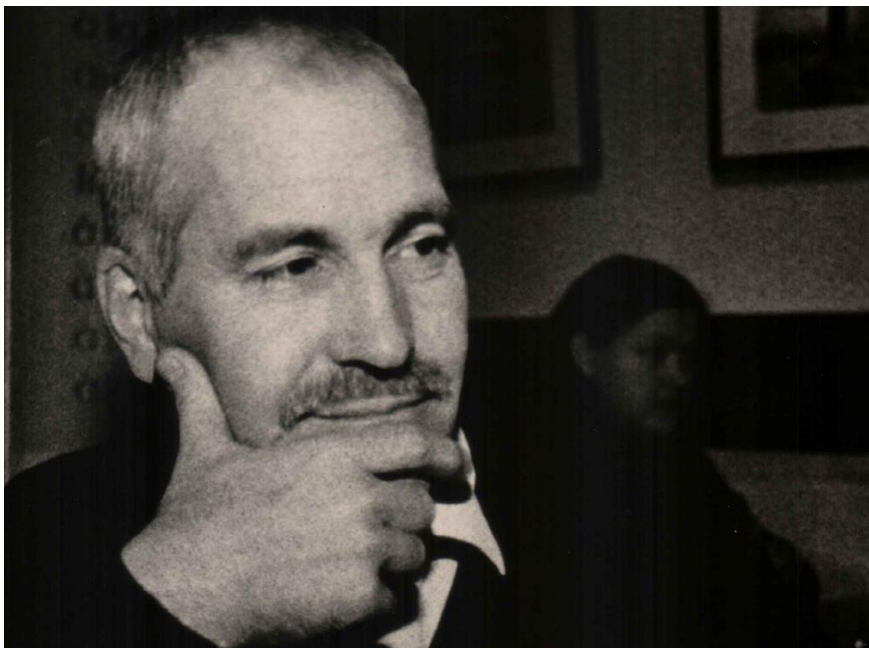


Leo Schofield: trivializing jazz, achieved by the construction of various cultural categories...

I think that Gail and I share this objective. It therefore seems wasteful that his piece should spend so much time making the discussion about me instead of the larger issue. His assertion that I am not competent to reply to his article until he is satisfied that I have been present at a sample of avant-garde events deflects the debate.

The easy response is to give vent to irritation. Apart from squandering a forum, however, that facile private gratification is always purchased at the expense of public credibility. What matters here is not ego, but the opportunity of maintaining a debate that really could contribute to the effectiveness with which jazz followers can marshal their energies in dealing with anti-jazz prejudices. Allow me to stress this: this kind of radical debate has not been conducted in a local jazz forum before. In the context of current shifts in the Australian cultural map - exemplified in recent perturbations in the Australia Council - there is a real chance for jazz to find a space on its own terms, and the free play of provoked egos could blow it. I can't see that a subculture enhances its credibility by the unedifying spectacle of two of its members shoving each other's shoulders like pub drunks and saying 'Did', 'Didn't', 'Did', 'Didn't'. Such exchanges provide a morbid diversion, like a highway accident, but they also provide a gratifying spectacle to those who wish to insist that the jazz community is infantilised. It is therefore important to move beyond personal vexation.

Evidently it is necessary to indicate some basis for my right to participate in discussion. Do I have any entitlement to talk about the way the word 'avant-garde' is used? (though I would tend to avoid the word for reasons that this debate should make clear). Gail disqualifies me presumably on the grounds that he doesn't see me very often at the places he goes to. But there are many ways of experiencing what is designated as the avant-garde, beyond the horizon of where one individual might happen to be at any particular moment.



Bruce Johnson: there are many ways of experiencing what is designated as the avant-garde... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

There is a lot of activity designated avant-garde, and I have been involved in it in various ways. I don't know what counts as enough to qualify me to talk about it, but I would need to reproduce a very lengthy CV to do the job exhaustively. Apart from frequent attendance at functions in many countries as a spectator/audient

(exhibitions, theatres, installations, performances), I have also been a 'producer' of various events which have attracted the description 'avant-garde'. A cross-section:

* Chairman of the committee that ran Australia's first experimental radiophonic composition awards, and producer of the recording of the winning entries;

* Organising, promoting, recording, broadcasting work by performers such as Amanda Stewart, Pio, Billy Marshall Stoneking, Jon Rose (probably over 30 such functions over the last few years, including in other countries);



Bruce Johnson has been involved in organising, promoting, recording and broadcasting work by performers such as Amanda Stewart (left) Billy Marshall Stoneking (below) and Jon Rose (far below)...

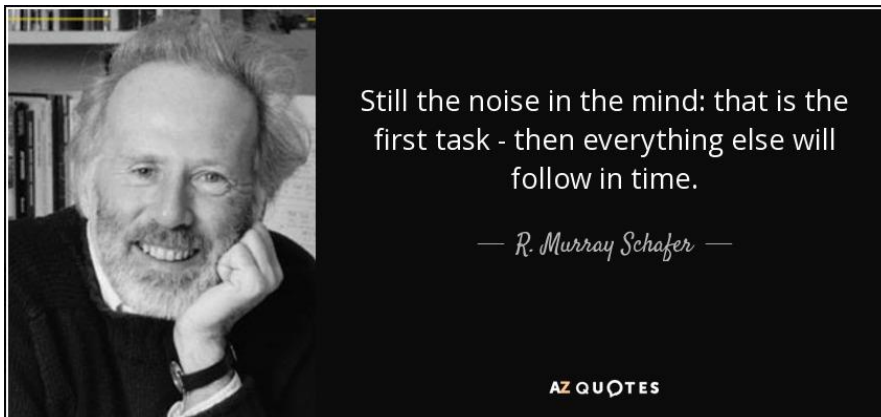


* Producing radio documentaries on installation artists and collaborating composers such as Sarah de Jong;



Freelance composer Sarah de Jong...

- * Reviewing (sympathetically) projects undertaken by Jon Rose, Rainer Linz, and others associated with the NMA group;
- * Producing a video archive of the work of contemporary performance poets, many of whom work in conjunction with musicians also designated as avant-garde. There are over a dozen performers represented on the videos I have produced. This is one of the largest archives of this currently active group of 'radical' performers in Australia;
- * As a Director of 2MBS-FM, vigorously championing the cause of such projects as Alessio Cavallaro's late night experimental broadcasts;
- * I teach around half a dozen courses which focus on aspects of the avant-garde, all of which require students (and me) to attend and sometimes participate in public functions, installations, exhibitions, forums;
- * Participation in conferences, policy symposia, media seminars examining the place of radical, experimental and other non-mainstream forms in society;
- * A founding member of the International Sound Forum, established by Canadian avant-garde composer and soundscape pioneer, Murray Schafer;



Still the noise in the mind: that is the first task - then everything else will follow in time.

— R. Murray Schafer —

AZ QUOTES

* Dozens of publications reassessing cultural categories, here and overseas, the most recent of which is *Vroom and Moo: Soundscape Essays*, published in Finland, to which I both contributed and acted as translation editor. Closer to home, my article in the most recent issue of *Meanjin* raises cognate issues in cultural politics. Currently at the invitation of OUP I am preparing a proposal for a print/tape volume of contemporary performance poetry.

I don't list the records I have listened to, or books I have read on the subject, though as a matter of general interest, Burger's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* provides a useful way into the debate. That reference is not given in a patronising spirit. I have always been grateful for any information that might expand my horizons, including that which I have derived from Gail's writings. I mention several texts here in the same spirit that I have received his suggestions. The foregoing account is incomplete but I hope it will do. If I may therefore proceed through some of the points made in Gail's article, I might be able to clarify some of my own a little more effectively, try to isolate holes in the debate and do something about them.



Peter Burger, who wrote "The Theory of the Avant-Garde": a useful way into the debate...

* Gail derides the idea that there can be a representation or imitation of something that doesn't objectively exist (a cutting edge, in this case). This should not seem startling. This is at the centre of the continuing debate about 'imitation' (mimesis) that goes back to ancient Greece. That is the very nature of myth, from unicorns to national identities. Have a look at advertising images, leaf through *Cosmopolitan*, for 'imitations' of things that don't exist.

* He asserts that I have ignored the 'widespread assumption' that 'all fresh endeavours are avant garde'. I didn't ignore it; in discussions with literally hundreds of individuals I just hadn't encountered it as a widespread assumption.

* I disagree with his assertion that it is 'natural' to take artistic terms from technology, and this is close to the heart of the debate. We are frequently persuaded that certain words or forms of conduct are 'natural', that they are determined by

'nature'. But 'naturalisation' in this sense has the effect of persuading us that a/ something can't or shouldn't be changed and b/ anyone doing it another way is deviant. Gender and race are particular victims of this swindle, which operates from deep within the structures of language. It is 'natural' that women should be in the home ... meaning, it should not be questioned, and any woman who is not is deviant. Far from being 'natural' to frame aesthetic ideas through technological imagery, it is a practice specific to a very small time and place in human history. It manifests culture, not nature. Likewise, I have specifically written against the implication which Gail finds in my article that folk music is 'natural' (and 'static').

* I applaud his opposition to 'dismissing something by categorising it', though find it hard to reconcile this stated position with his dismissive categorisations: 'I call that something like classic fascism'. Maybe I am also a 'quaintly old-fashioned crypto-Marxist' (though I don't think so, and I've certainly never consciously been a Marxist, as Stuart Hall has testified) ... but what if I were? I don't see how describing me in this way takes the debate beyond sophisticated name-calling.

* I regret that the meaning of my phrase 'intellectually pampered' is not clear. I mean people who are not challenged to examine their assumptions, and I am referring here to policymakers, not to musicians. Now it seems to me that this approaches the nub of the matter. Gail's irritation perhaps arises from a supposition that I am questioning the work of certain musicians whom he likes (as do I also). Can we clear this up? My primary target is, and I said this clearly more than once, 'the realm of arts support and funding'. Gail challenges me to identify the avant-gardist musicians I am talking about, then he names people like Bernie McGann, Mark Simmonds and Sandy Evans as possible candidates. He is puzzled because I am on record as admiring and promoting their work, and wants to know if I think Bernie and Sandy are pretentious. Well, no, I don't.



Bernie McGann: Johnson doesn't see how musicians such as McGann got into the discussion at all... PHOTO COURTESY AUSJAZZ.NET

I don't see how these musicians got into the discussion at all. I wasn't thinking of them, I didn't make any mention of them. I don't think of them as distinctively avant-garde, Gail evidently doesn't think of them as avant-garde, as far as I'm aware they are not on record as thinking of themselves as avant-garde. Gail talks about how people like Bernie McGann have suffered by being situated in the avant-garde. I have never situated him there. Precisely the contrary (see, most recently, *Sounds Australian*, 39, Spring 1993 pp 51-52).

My comments seek to liberate individuals from the restrictive categorisations used uncritically by many arts institutions. My subject is the language of the arts, and those who control it, those who draw the map of the arts. I don't just mean jazz, though jazz is affected. Notions like 'avant-garde' and 'cutting edge' are 'countries' on this map, whose shapes are determined by the shape of adjacent countries with names like 'ethnic', 'traditional', 'contemporary', 'innovative'. I am suggesting that the map still being used by arts bodies no longer reflects the actual shape of the culture it represents, as a map of Africa from the nineteenth century is no longer an adequate representation of its subject. If we distributed financial aid to territories as defined on such a map, we would often be supporting non-existent entities, and neglecting new ones that have come into being. It would be self-evidently absurd. Yet I think something of this is happening in many arts institutions - that various kinds of cultural reality are not yet inscribed on their maps, and some that are, are being supported disproportionately to their relevance.

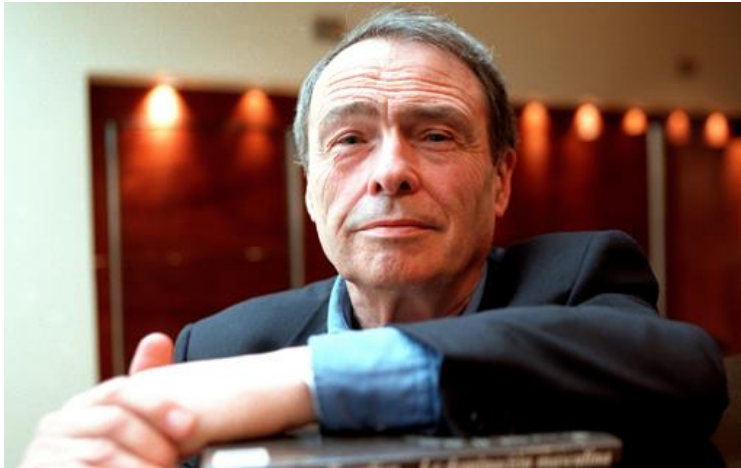


Gail Brennan (above) attributes to Johnson 'telepathic access' to the thinking of arts bureaucrats... Johnson responds "we do not need to guess what they think"...

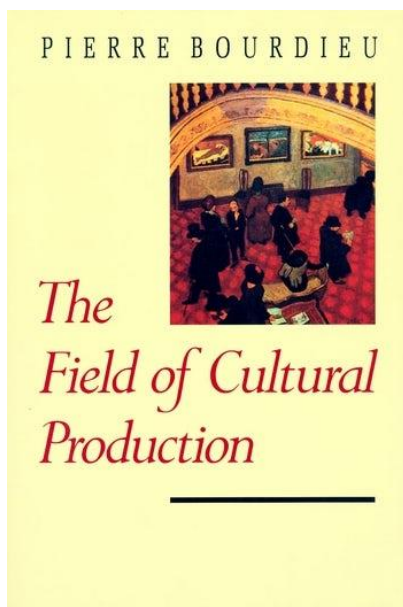
It is the whole map which I am questioning. This is my point: terms like 'avant-garde' are part of the maps used by cultural power blocs to create divisions, to create exclusions, to generate cultural inequities. How do we know? Gail tartly attributes to me 'telepathic access' to the thinking of arts bureaucrats. This voluntarily relinquishes power we have to confront bureaucracies. We do not need to guess what they think. I know what such institutions think on these matters because I communicate with them several times every week, I read their voluminous literature, I engage in correspondence, I attend (and on occasions organise) public forums and tribunals. We don't have to disempower ourselves even further by pretending that we cannot know the agenda of arts funding and policy making bodies. There is a self-defeating syndrome here: we cannot know, we cannot act. Not true. We can know. It is a matter of public record. We do the homework. Read publications like *Artforce* (and in turn the publications which it lists), read the scores of publications that come out of the Australia Council, read the policy documents that come out of state and federal government agencies, read the Australian Research Council's guidelines, read the vigorous debates that come out of the Australian Music Centre, 'Heritage' documents, read *Author*, *Viewpoint*, and other journals that emanate from arts organisations. The problem is not that there is no evidence of how these bureaucracies think, rather, unless we are prepared to put in some serious time, we feel defeated by the proliferation of information.

And we can act. We do not live in a closed society, and those who spend public money should be publicly accountable. Indeed, if they are doing their job conscientiously, they should welcome debate and accountability. Read that sentence again, because it also implies clearly what fear of debate means. Badger the bureaucrats for interviews until you get them, petition the policy makers, attend the forums, stand up and speak and question, demand explanations and accountings. A large number of highly vocal jazz supporters attended the public forum of the Performing Arts Board held in Sydney in July, 1994. I did not have to be telepathic to discover later that this made an impact on the representatives of the PAB. And it was those who actually attended and spoke who generated that perception. Question the rules, question the definitions, question the borders. A map appears to be about the character of a continent, but it is more often about political control. Terms like 'avant-garde' might appear to define something about 'art', but the fact is that they are also deployed for political objectives. By 'political', I mean that they are used as instruments of power while masquerading as instruments of aesthetics.

The question of who owns meanings is central to cultural power. If we leave the bureaucrats in control of the discourse we surrender control of the music. I don't know if lobbying will help, but I do know that doing nothing will produce nothing. It is essential to question the very fundamentals of their discourse. If they say, for example, 'jazz is not art,' before we obligingly fall over ourselves trying to prove that it is, ask them what they mean by it ... after all, they used it, and for purposes of exclusion. The political dimensions of aesthetic categories should not be so surprising to people interested in these matters. There is abundant literature on this, and, again, in a constructive spirit, I would suggest that a good way to get a feel for the issues would be to begin with Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*.



Pierre Bourdieu, whose book is entitled “The Field of Cultural Production”...



I'm glad that Gail Brennan has given impetus to this debate. Without his contribution it would have proceeded no further, and it has also been useful for me to revisit my own position. I would have liked to take it further at this stage, by, for example, analysis in the plainest terms of some very specific case studies. I have been somewhat elliptical, because I have had to devote some time to what seems to me to be a distraction. It really does seem to me more useful to the jazz community to pool its resources rather than to dissipate them in the attempt simply to silence allies. I am not interested in point scoring over members of the jazz community here, and I have not tried to write in an inaccessible way. But I must also say that, if we are enjoined to expand our receptivity to jazz vocabulary, why should we not also try to expand the vocabulary through which we conceptualise it? It is easy to be sceptical about unfamiliar words but remember this: the bureaucrats who control those 'words' - the discourse - control the cultural space within which we all live and work.

[Editor's Note: Gail Brennan's response to this article will appear in the Nov/Dec, 1994 edition of *JazzChord*.]