

PAUL FURNISS: MORE THAN A TRAD PLAYER

by Bruce Johnson*

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Paul Anthony Furniss was born in Sydney on 2 November, 1944. The first memories he has of instrumental experience of music go back to early childhood when someone gave him a kazoo, prophetically shaped like a saxophone. Things got a bit more serious when he began the descant recorder under the tutelage of Victor McMahon whose long teaching career also benefited players like Mal Cunningham and Don Burrows. Paul graduated from recorder to flute and then at the age of 11 began the reed instruments with the clarinet. He continues to play flute on occasions, but is now known as primarily a reed player, with alto, tenor, soprano, and the more exotic saxello doing service from time to time.



The American Edmond Hall: his aggressive edge is audible in Furniss' clarinet work...

He became interested in jazz in his early teens, by which time he already had a solid grounding on his instruments, a circumstance which almost certainly contributed to his subsequent pre-eminence among other reed players of his generation who did things in reverse order; that is, they found themselves attracted to the jazz which became fashionable in the early 'sixties, and so took up the clarinet. As a young

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teenager, Furniss was already accustomed to the unique satisfaction of group playing, through the combined school orchestras. He began noticing jazz on the radio and on records brought home by his elder brothers. Bringing to bear some years of legitimate training, he found the idea of improvisation particularly compelling. He was also struck by that indefinable raw spirit of black jazz musicians. Louis Armstrong's All Stars on the *Ambassador Satch* album, made a strong impression, and to this day that aggressive edge of Edmond Hall is audible in Furniss' clarinet work.

Apart from school orchestras, his first band was a trio of schoolmates, clarinet, drums, piano, playing for school dances, and although basically a dance band playing standards, Furniss was already trying to inject a jazz feel into it. He met other jazz-interested boys at High School, but this was before the trad boom, and the subject was still rather recondite. He remembers his amazement at encountering a boy from his school — a non-musician — who was reading a copy of *Downbeat* with an article on Edmond Hall. It was unusual in those days to meet another youth whose interest extended so far as to seek out more information on the subject of jazz.

This was changing, however, with the advent of the massive jazz vogue of the early 'sixties, one of the four or five periods this century when jazz became the main youth music. The Sydney Jazz Club was enjoying boom times at its Ironworkers Hall functions, and Paul's brother suggested he should go along. Sitting in conspicuously in the back row, self-conscious about his youth, he heard his first fully-fledged live jazz performance in the form of the Black Opal Jazz Band, with Graeme Spedding on clarinet. It was through the Sydney Jazz Club that Paul Furniss made contact with the others of his generation who would form the corps of musicians who would carry the flag of traditional jazz in Sydney through to the present, along with some of the older musicians who had been active since the early 'fifties and before. He learned



The Jazz Bandits 1962, L-R, John Roberts (trumpet), Bob Learmonth (trombone), Don Bennett (piano), Paul Furniss (clarinet), Jack Connelly (bass)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

about the Club's Saturday afternoon workshops from Adrian Ford, and also began attending Friday night functions where Bob Learmonth led the Jazz Bandits. Paul sat in with this group and was asked to join. This was his first regular association with a jazz band.

The group seemed to find little work however, and in 1965 he joined what was to be one of the three or four most formative bands of his career — Geoff Bull's Olympia Jazz Band, in which he replaced Peter Neubauer in a group of musicians all of his own generation. This band enjoyed a popular residency at the Orient Hotel in George Street, and a few hundred yards away Furniss encountered another band that would become important in his career. Graeme Bell was playing lunchtime gigs during the week at the Brooklyn Hotel, and Paul would race down from work to listen and sit in, finally joining Bell in 1969 and remaining with the band for nine years. In the same



The Graeme Bell All Stars, L-R, Bell (piano), Richard Ochalski (bass), Furniss (clarinet, soprano & tenor saxes), Russell Smith (cornet, vocals), Geoff Proud (drums), Ken "Kipper" Kearsley (trombone, vocals): Furniss spent nine years with this group...

year, he received a telephone call from Peter Gallen who invited him to join a band consisting largely of Olympia Jazz Band alumni, to play at John Huie's Wine Bar, later known as Rocks Push. The band then started a residency at an unprepossessing corner pub in Goulburn Street on Saturday afternoons.

The band, with Gallen, Furniss, Dick Gillespie (drums), Noel Foy (banjo), and John Colborne-Veel (trombone) took the name Eclipse Alley Five. The pub was called

Vanity Fair. In time Paul gradually assumed leadership and the band remained resident at the Vanity Fair until the pub was demolished in June, 1986. He still leads the Eclipse Alley Five, however, a hundred yards down the road at its new Saturday residency in the Crown Hotel.

Furniss' extraordinary capabilities made him a much sought-after sideman from the 1970s on, and in 1974 he gave up his day job in the Department of Public Works and turned fully professional. In addition to lessons from Victor McMahon he had during childhood taken lessons at the NSW State Conservatorium. Since then a jazz studies programme had been introduced, and he now returned to participate, first as a student and later as a tutor, involving himself also in playing and arranging for different Conservatorium jazz groups.



Paul Furniss' San Francisco Jazz Band, L-R, John Bartlett (bass), Furniss (clarinet), Viv Carter (drums), John Bates (trombone), Paul Baker (banjo).

In 1975 he became a founder member of Tom Baker's San Francisco Jazz Band which had such impact at the Australian Jazz Convention held at Balmain in that year. In 1978 he took over as leader following the band's return from touring in the USA. In the following year he began the third long-standing association with which he is still involved when he joined a quartet formed by John Colborne-Veel to play at the Purple Grape Wine Bar in Homebush. The bands with which Furniss is currently involved as a permanent member have thus been the primary settings of his week to week performance for a period going back to the 'sixties: the Eclipse Alley Five from 1969, the San Francisco Jazz Band from 1975, and the association with John Colborne-Veel from 1979.

It is the last of these which currently occupies most of his time. With Colborne-Veel, Hans Karssemeyer (piano), and Lyn Wallis (drums), Paul is presenting jazz six nights a week at the Club New Orleans (the old Tabou premises) in Kings Cross playing into the early hours of the morning. The hours are long and the quartet might be felt to be rather a small group to sustain interest for the musicians themselves over six nights. Furniss finds the ambience stimulating however. With no cover charge, there's a fairly frequent turnover in the crowd, most of whom are in the mood to have a good time. It's a "night-life" audience with time to kill and a relaxed and friendly attitude. It often includes musicians looking for a place to wind down or eat after a gig, so sitting in is relatively frequent.



At Club New Orleans in Sydney's Kings Cross, L-R, Hans Karssemeyer (piano), Furniss (clarinet), Lyn Wallis (drums)...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

The long hours of blowing also produce a hidden bonus which musicians will be familiar with: stamina. Furniss recently played concerts in Tasmania, arriving for the first one with only a couple of hours of sleep under his belt. Even so, everything "just sort of flowed". This was partly because of the inspirational and supportive strengths of his accompanists, drummer Alf Properjohn and pianist Ian Pearce ("he's just incredible"), but it was also because of the reserves built up by a month or so of playing five or six hours a night for six nights a week.

It is also of course the solidity of the base upon which he builds, a base which began to be established with legitimate training from childhood. The boom of the early 'sixties established a fashion which attracted many musicians with inadequate (if any) instruction. When you look around the scene now, you can't help but be struck by how few Sydney-born reed players of that generation, now around 40 years old,

are still playing: count 'em. Part of the reason is that many of those attracted by the jazz vogue could (barely) play traditional jazz, and certainly very little else. Furniss is a professional in the fullest sense, and in fact has worked in areas other than strictly jazz. With the saxophone quartet Saxafari he performed material emanating from a more 'legitimate' European tradition. The breadth of his activity makes him considerably more than what was once known, with a repellent smugness, as a 'trad' player beating out the same dozen tunes from month to month. This breadth has helped to keep his eyes and ears open, to continue to expand his musical vocabulary.

Furniss has toured extensively within Australia, including with imported packages like *One Mo' Time* and Bill Dillard and his Blues Serenaders. This has given him the opportunity to hear and experience regional differences in Australian traditional jazz. He is not the first musician, for example, to detect a more relaxed approach to jazz in Melbourne. In Sydney there's what he calls "a drive, a push", both in the city and the jazz. In Melbourne the music flows in a more relaxed way. I had asked Paul earlier what he thought about the notion that there was an Australian jazz style. Initially he had expressed no thoughts on the matter. But thinking about this Sydney/Melbourne distinction he speculated that this relaxed Melbourne approach might be the source of an "Australian" sound.

Touring in America has given him the opportunity for broader comparisons. In terms of competence, he finds Australian musicians at their best to be as good as those in the US. The main difference, again, is one of attitude. In American venues it's important to "put on a show", to present a smooth, seamless, uninterrupted routine. While this has its place, Furniss finds that this sometimes leads to a predictability which pre-empts spontaneity and surprise. He has played in such a format, but one thing missing from it is something he enjoyed at the Vanity Fair and currently at the Crown: the sudden decision to try the inconceivable or unplanned, the risky, but potentially exciting pursuit of a spontaneous impulse.

Spontaneity of a certain kind is important to Furniss' work, as he likes the idea of a gig that has the feel of a casual private blow. "It's really great to sit in someone's lounge-room — I call it loungeroom jazz if you like — and play just whatever comes up ... If you're playing to a bunch of people who obviously demand entertaining, then ... I try to put together a continuous programme for them, even if it's *Basin St Blues* and *Muskrat Ramble* or whatever. It still works. There's a communication with them ... But the other one is probably the nicest, when you don't have any pressure."

It is this open-ended predictability, of starting the day, the bracket, the song, even a chorus without knowing where the music will go, that he liked about the Vanity Fair, and which has been transplanted to the Crown. On occasions it was this quality which cost the band some followers who wanted it to go on playing the same version of the same repertoire until doddering into the grave. But at the same time the band and the venue continue to attract new regulars who show appreciation for the unforeseeable development of each Saturday afternoon's performance. "In the last few years we've had the ability to write out a tune in the break and play it and come up with a pretty good result . . . It wasn't like turning up to a nine-to-five job where you knew you had to sit at a desk for so many hours and do this and that. All right, you turned up at the Vanity to play, but what happened was, well, what happened."

Stylistically, Paul Furniss is incomparably equipped among Sydney's traditional oriented musicians to lead these excursions into foreign territory. He has played in a broad range of settings. In addition to those already mentioned, he had worked in the stylistically varied big bands led by Adrian Ford, John Colborne-Veel, Dave Dallwitz, has led a bop group with the trumpeter Mike Bukovsky, has been in most of Sydney's New Orleans groups, including currently that led by Nick Boston, and in a concert group assembled by Laurie Bennett which included Bernie McGann and other authoritative Sydney modernists. Although publically identified as a traditional player, he has inspired saxophonists in other areas such as rhythm and blues, and Mark Simmonds has acknowledged Furniss' influence on his playing.



Pianist Adrian Ford: he led one of the stylistically varied big bands in which Paul Furniss served... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

With his comprehensive theoretical and technical command, does he ever feel constrained by the orthodoxies of the traditional idiom?

If I'm in a band — like, I'm playing with Nick Boston on Sundays — which is just stylistically playing New Orleans, then I love it. I don't mind playing it all afternoon. It's great. I feel good at the end of the day. But if it was my band, then I wouldn't be wanting it just to be that. [In the Club New Orleans) people come in and they ask for anything... It's nice to be able to go into whatever's asked, whatever's the feeling at the time. It's nice to be able to play all those different things.

One of the pleasures he gets out of the Eclipse Alley Five is this flexibility — “you can do anything, almost”. New Orleans Jazz “is great music. I love that music. But it's nice not to have to play it all the time. If you feel like relaxing and going into a shuffle or a grooving bluesy feel, what's wrong with that? What's wrong with the whole band doing it?”