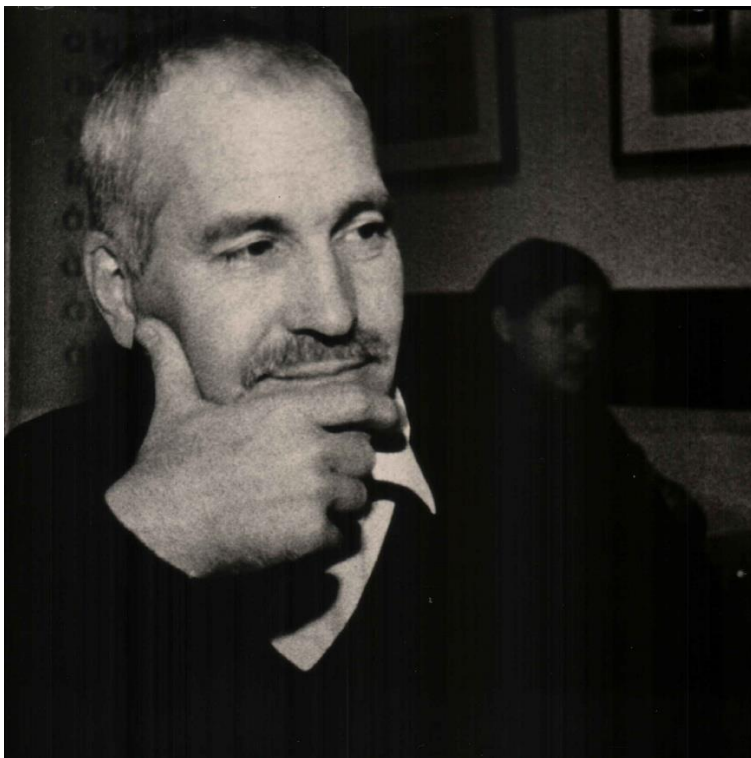


## THE MYTH OF 'THE CUTTING EDGE'

by Bruce Johnson

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*[Editor's Note: This article was introduced in the May/June, 1994 edition of JazzChord as the first of JazzChord's articles written by a guest columnist. It was hoped that subsequent editions of the newsletter would include such an article on a subject to be agreed upon, relevant to Australian jazz. Another writer had agreed to provide a piece on the emerging young jazz musicians in Melbourne, but was unable to complete it in time for this edition of JazzChord. Bruce Johnson therefore kindly agreed to provide the following article at short notice.]*



*Bruce Johnson: a unitary view of cultural dynamics that posits anachronism and innovation as absolutes, is itself now a discredited construction... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

**T**he editor of *JazzChord* has invited me to open up some debate on the subject of 'the cutting edge' because it is central to discussions of mainstream funding and support for the arts in this country.

When words like 'excellence' and 'quality' are deployed in relation to contemporary performance and composition, much is made of music which is at the 'cutting edge'. What it is the edge of, and how the idea of a single edge can define the parameters of a multi-dimensional cultural field, are not disclosed or reflected upon. The purpose of this brief essay is to suggest that it is almost entirely without validity as a way of deciding which among a range of projects is likely to enhance a culture. Like so many

putatively objective artistic criteria, it actually functions politically, to consolidate an existing power base.

First, the pedigree of the phrase is profoundly inappropriate to ways of visualising cultural practices like music. 'Cutting edge' is imported from the discourse of a scientifically-based technology which is fixated on the exploitative transformation of the physical environment. This is not just New Age eco-babble. The whole image of the 'cutting edge' brings with it the historical and ideological luggage of dissection, dismemberment: the axe, the blades of earthmoving equipment, the drilling bit. The actual meaning of this phrase is generated by an increasingly discredited intellectual realm based on the notion of man's right (the gendering, here and elsewhere, is deliberate), to impose his will on the shape of the physical universe. Its consequences, applied to the arts, are having a similarly destructive effect on our cultural ecology.

The paradox at the centre of this phrase is that, borrowing from the milieu of bright shiny new industrial toys, 'the cutting edge' is invoked as a sign of heroic avant-gardism, yet in an era in which the simplistic idea of technological progress is being recognised as dangerously past its shelf life, and entering the phase of toxicity. The phrase 'cutting edge', wielded to privilege current conceptions of the up-to-date, the (post)modern, the avant-garde, is itself quaintly old-fashioned. To hear it repeated like a mantra of relevance is like seeing an academic trying to be hip by wearing a baseball cap backwards.

The unreflective migration of the image from the realm of technology to the realm of arts support and funding, simply results in the reification of culture, and the sacralisation of the 'style statement'. Consider what might be abstractly implied by the phrase ... What does it actually mean, when applied to cultural practice (and that is what 'the arts' are)? It implies, first of all, a single, linear movement towards the new, going where no man has gone before ... But no culture works like that, or ever has. Culture is dynamic, but not in one direction or dimension. And culture is not 'out there' being made by a privileged production monopoly. It is being produced constantly by every individual, looking and moving in all directions. The meanings of its processes and products are not absolutes. For example, 'development' is a reactive notion, and always entails retrieval, rearticulation, rediscovery. Technology can be new, but this does not mean that it creates new cultural meanings. The development of the video, for example, has enabled us increasingly to frame our ideas non-textually. But this is not innovation. It is retrieval. Non-textual cultural transmission is ancient, pre-technological.

The point is that a unitary view of cultural dynamics that posits anachronism and innovation as absolutes, is itself now a discredited construction. There is no such absolute as 'innovation in artistic practices and meanings, merely renovation, restoration, rearticulation. And these can take place in any genre, whether located in folk tradition or in so-called 'high art forms' This is not really recognised by arts establishments in countries where 'cutting edge' philosophies are centralised, in spite of the fact that the process I am describing - that is, innovation by retrieval - is an active feature of all societies. The innovations of jazz itself have been characterised by

revivals of earlier forms and functions: even the free jazz avant-garde invoked the early New Orleans folk base in defining its objectives.

To find an appreciation of this at the institutional level, it is often necessary to look at a country or community that operates largely outside of the Anglo-Gallic intellectual models which still dominate theories of culture in Australia. Finland is such an example. There is a Folk Music Programme at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki established in 1983 and headed by Heikki Laitinen.



*Heikki Laitinen: head of a Folk Music Programme at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, established in 1983...*

It gives training in folk practices, but at the same time encourages experimentalism rather than just staged re-creation. Its graduates are actively enriching every musical sphere - pop, jazz, folk, art-music - and they constitute a recognised school of musicians known as Avant-garde Traditionalists. For Australian arts organisations, the term would be dismissed as oxymoron, yet the movement is producing some of the most powerful and fertile music coming out of the whole Nordic axis.

In practical terms, the effect of 'cutting edge' philosophies is paradoxical. On the one hand, it banishes the great majority of expressive practices, as having nothing of any importance to say. Tradition is erased. Intelligibility is scorned. The past is out. Yet on the other hand, because there is, in practice, no such thing as a 'cutting edge' to a culture, its proponents are forced to look for a simulacrum, for the appearance of cutting edge activity. Let me stress this: as conceived institutionally, there is no such thing in practice as a cutting edge music. There is only music which imitates, which looks like, the cutting edge. And it achieves this 'look' by style gestures, by the discourses and performance conditions it wraps itself in, by a certain pretentiousness through which it mystifies and privileges itself.



*Bruce Johnson (left, holding flugelhorn) pictured here with saxophonist Splinter Reeves: there is no such thing in practice as a cutting edge music... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

In relation to jazz, the results of these contradictions include a profound alienation from our own traditions and history, traditions which have been perhaps more internationally influential than any other artform produced in this country. They have also produced an intellectually pampered Establishment which is highly suspicious of debate, and whose activities become increasingly remote from the grass roots activity which literally keeps jazz (a)live from week to week. The problem with the 'cutting edge' as a criterion is that it is a blunt instrument.

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**Note:** *Bruce Johnson adds: Since drafting the foregoing, we can be encouraged at the news that the Australia Council is re-evaluating the notion of 'excellence'. As it was put to me, this will involve a recognition of geographical relativities: what is excellent in one community might not necessarily be so elsewhere. This seems to me to be an admirably thoughtful way into a review of the subject, and perhaps we can hope for a continuing interrogation which is prepared to examine the deeper and self-reflexive implications for the Australia Council itself.*