

## KEVIN HUNT

by Jill Morris\*

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*[This article appeared in the Summer edition, 1993-1994, of the magazine Australian Jazz and Blues]*



*Kevin Hunt: at home in a diverse artistic field of musical endeavour... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ & BLUES*

**K**evin Hunt is one of those fortunate jazz pianists who is at home in a diverse artistic field of musical endeavour. He is comfortable playing with a big band, as a keyboardist with a TV studio orchestra, leading his own world music-inspired band The Commuters, or simply playing tasteful solo piano for patrons in a plush hotel.

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*\*When this was written in 1993 Jill Morris was a prominent worker for jazz through the Jazz Action Society of NSW, and wife of the journalist Barry Morris.*

But let us not forget his role as assistant musical director for the international telecast of Pope John Paul's youth celebration in Sydney when he organised for a rock band to accompany the 600-piece choir. Or that he was the pianist/arranger with the Morrison Brothers Big Bad Band. Or that he has worked with international celebrities such as the great blues singer Joe Williams, the master drummer Louie Bellson and clarinetist Buddy De Franco during the Sydney International Jazz Festival. Other visiting artists he has played with include guitarists Herb Ellis and Emily Remler and vocalist Mark Murphy. But one of the highlights of his career to date — he is only 32 — was being in the rhythm section for the Sydney appearances of Billy Cobham, the Miles Davis drummer on *Bitches Brew* and *Live Evil*.



*One of the highlights of Hunt's career: being in the rhythm section for the Sydney appearances of Billy Cobham (above)...*

Locally, he has featured regularly with Kinetic Energy Theatre Company, transcribing piano solos by Thelonious Monk for performances, and performing Chopin nocturnes.

He has also recorded with Sydney's best including electric bassist Steve Hunter and guitarist Carl Orr as well as the award-winning group Free Spirits, of which he is a foundation member.

He has formed an enduring musical duo with fellow pianist Judy Bailey. Their two-piano recitals of the music of past and present masters has delighted audiences wherever they've played.

Despite this diversity, Hunt decided to sharpen the focus of his music by studying with former Miles Davis pianist Joe Zawinul who was a key figure in the electric jazz group of the 70s, Weather Report. Zawinul was giving a rare workshop in Vienna — one which Hunt believed he could not afford to miss. After a number of 'farewell Sydney concerts' he packed his bags and headed for Europe in July, 1993. He will be away from Australia for eight months, but he should return to these shores with his skills more finely honed by this experience.



*Pianist Joe Zawinul: giving a rare workshop in Vienna, one which Hunt believed he could not afford to miss... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

It has been a long, fascinating musical journey for Hunt who began learning piano from his father, played cornet in a brass band, followed his brother's example by playing electronic keyboard in rock bands, began a career in catering, toured with Ross Ryan, dabbled in country music for a year before taking jazz piano lessons from Chuck Yates and Dave Levy.

He auditioned three times before finally being accepted in the jazz studies course at the Sydney Conservatorium. So his advice to any aspiring pianist is keep trying. In the early 80s he played at Jenny's Wine Bar with drummer Tony Buck and Hugh Fraser doing a lot of free improvising, sometimes expanding to two keyboards with Chris Abrahams.

"That was fun. It was just a fun band," he recalls. In 1985 he formed The Commuters, made up a trio — piano, bass and drums — and vocals. Hunt wrote music with the beautiful voice of Sarah Fogarty in mind, also performing Joni Mitchell pieces and jazz. More recently the band has grown to three vocalists — Hunt, Joy Yates and Norman Mifsud, singing three-part harmony. The latest band concentrated more on repetitive rhythms and earthy music.

"With this band I have tried to strip away the elitist tag so often associated with jazz," Hunt says. "Jazz is misunderstood by so many people who don't like it because they believe it's too complicated or too self-indulgent.

"A lot of jazz music comes from black America and oppression and I — we — are not really in touch with that here. I try to be, but the bottom line is that I'm not in touch with a black American trying to express himself.

"White middle-class Australia doesn't parallel very well with that. So I'm interested in playing what I am.



*A lot of jazz music comes from black America and oppression, and I —we — are not really in touch with that here... PHOTO CREDIT DAN WHITE*

"At the same time jazz is a universal music and I love jazz music and can't help playing it.

"There's a folk element in Australian music and Australian people — Irish, English and elsewhere. It seems to bring people together. "I'm looking for a combination of interesting ideas and imagination —instant improvising — but also a common ground."

The Commuters band was earlier modelled on the music of Pat Metheny and Keith Jarrett and more recently on Joe Zawinul whom Hunt believes is in touch with the flow of communities around the world. What he calls "the aesthetics of communities".

Hunt says it is difficult to find work for a band like The Commuters without travelling, but he is confident when he returns from overseas The Commuters will be reborn.