

THE UNRECOGNISED JAZZ ARTIST

by Ian Muldoon*

1974 was a strange time and I was in a strange place, stationed at the remote RAAF Base Learmonth airfield adjacent to Exmouth Gulf, in North West, Western Australia. To the east was one of the great desert landmasses on the planet. To the west, the magnificent heritage listed 260 km Ningaloo Reef fringing a tiny part of the 70 million square km Indian Ocean. It was a reminder of the littleness of the individual human.

I was ensconced as part of an RAAF contingent of over 200 men busily extending the airstrip at RAAF Base Learmonth to accommodate larger aircraft. At Exmouth Gulf 250 mm of rain falls per annum, usually in a 24-hour window accompanied, thank you very much, by a cyclone.

It was at this weird location, in the state of Western Australia where racism flourished and the good burghers of the State were agitating for secession from the "Communist" eastern states, because WA was enjoying a mining boom and could pay their own way; a location befuddled by wealth and sunshine and hedonism, which didn't need anything that the Eastern States had to offer; where I fell in love with the voice of Sydney vocalist Julie Amiet.



Sydney vocalist Julie Amiet: she did an improvised vocalisation based on some Charlie Parker tune...

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

She was part of a group of musicians in transit to Vietnam through RAAF Base Learmonth following in the footsteps established in 1966 by the likes of Little Pattie. I was host for Ms Amiet, Lionel Long, Renee Geyer and six or so others. These Vietnam Tour musicians and entertainers were accommodated at RAAF Base Learmonth, Exmouth Gulf, and were scheduled to perform at the Exmouth Town Hall packed with locals, RAAF personnel and US Navy personnel from Naval Communication Station Harold E Holt.



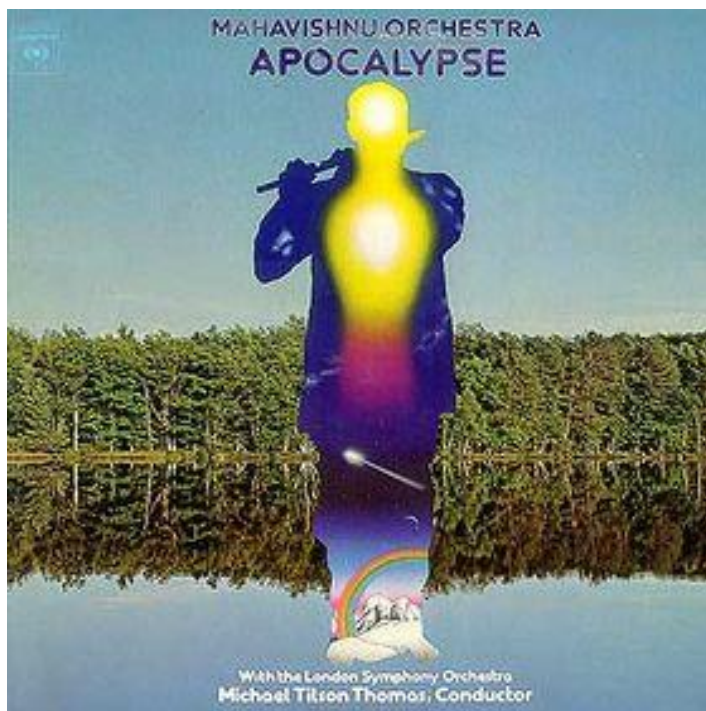
Singer Renee Geyer (above) was also in the party of entertainers hosted by the author...

By 1974, millions were now aware of the disaster that had befallen the USA and our country and the people of Vietnam by that war, which was both a fight for independence by the Vietnamese, and a civil war about the kind of independence envisaged: one under the yoke (so-called) of Communism, or one under the imperatives of Capitalism. This was to put aside the complications involved with the mix of Christians, Buddhists and other cultural elements. It was also the time when the Arabs embargoed oil, which had risen by 400% by mid-1974 as a consequence.

1974 was also the time when the world was witnessing the slow destruction of President Nixon leading to his resignation in August of that year. The Australian Whitlam reformist government was in its second year of power. There were demonstrations by “Easterners” against the presence of the US military at Exmouth which was one of three communication bases worldwide which communicated Very Low Frequency (VLF) information to the US nuclear submarine fleet, making Exmouth Gulf a prime target for the USSR whether on a first strike or a retaliatory strike in the event of a nuclear war.

Be that as it may, in Australia, streaking had become a national pastime, especially during cricket matches. Bell bottom jeans were the height of men's fashion. Perhaps these were the answers of the "ordinary Australian" to the madness in the world at large. Paul Kelly's 2020 song *Sleep, Australia, Sleep* would have been apropos in 1974. It reinforces Donald Horne's ironic depiction of Australia as "the lucky country".

For those interested music lovers, The Mahavishnu Orchestra released its fourth album *Apocalypse*. Keith Jarrett's *Koln Concert* was yet to be recorded and jazz seemed to be in its death throes, with giants such as Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Miles Davis venturing into unknown territories labelled 'fusion' - which, I mused, has poetic links to 'fission'. Coltrane's *Interstellar Space* was released, adding to the generally "otherworldly" temper of the times. Although our present times seem apocalyptic with the consequences of losing the battle against the fossil fuel industries and their lackeys, with cyclones, flooding, sinking land, countries alight: 1974 felt apocalyptic too.



The Mahavishnu Orchestra's fourth album "Apocalypse" was released in 1974...

Me? I was 34 years of age, single, a senior officer in Her Majesty's Royal Australian Air Force, without any visible physical deformity, and with a mouth full of teeth, listening alone to Julie Amiet doing an improvised vocalisation based on some Charlie Parker tune in the Officers Mess RAAF Base Learmonth, which was a cyclone-secured, rather large tin shed, complete with high polished lino and a well-stocked bar.

For all I know Julie Amiet may have the eyes of Juliet Prowse, the body of Kim Novak, the wit of Shirley MacLaine, and the allure of Rita Hayworth - I can't recall - all I could see was a young Australian singing these beautiful notes, and phrases, of music. All I could hear was the Sound of Paradise.

In 2019 what made me think of Julie Amiet? I thought of Ms Amiet when I heard Jazzmeia Horn on YouTube doing a version of *Billie's Bounce**. I'm not arguing that Julie Amiet is the equal of Ms Horn or better than she, but to my practised jazz ear she was definitely in the same ballpark as Ms Horn, and as much as any other Australian jazz singer I have heard - Gian Slater, Michelle Nicolle, Chris McNulty among them.



Jazzmeia Horn, pictured while singing "Billie's Bounce" on YouTube: Julie Amiet was definitely in the same ballpark as Ms Horn...

Ms Horn was the first time since 1974 that I had heard a singer that reminded me of the voice of Julie Amiet. Being in a remote area away from the clubs and restaurants and attractions of the city, one's tender mind and healthy body is in a heightened state of sensitive readiness for any artistic sensation, especially for sensations beyond the sounds *du jour* which were, in Exmouth Gulf at that time, the sounds of Neil Diamond and *Hot August Night* which you could bet would be played at any barbecue, party or *hangi* organised.

Julie Amiet had the sweetest voice, fine control, range, and improvisational skills, and these were a bracing reminder of the otherworldly brilliance of the art of jazz. Ms Amiet is another *unrecognised jazz artist*. I did attend a performance of hers in the 1980s at Soup Plus and discovered she is a fringe-dweller it seems, in the "music world" and the world of entertainment. Another unrecognised jazz artist perhaps?

Music is feeling, and jazz music is the feeling and expression of an individual musician developed to the highest degree possible by that individual – "there is a boundary line to music", as Charlie Parker said, "but there is no boundary line to

*The link to Jazzmeia Horn's version of "Billie's Bounce" on YouTube is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXofzTD5cYU>

art". To listen to a held note of Louis Armstrong and then a held note of Wynton Marsalis playing classical music or Maurice Andre, is to hear the difference between art at the highest level and craftsmanship at the highest level. Is it possible that a computer programme can produce the perfect sound of a trumpet? Or is it the case that the more human sounding music is, the more a music is the sound of the unique individual, the more appealing it is to the ear? And to the heart? Here is the view of a Russian improvising artist:

*In modern "classics", unfortunately, we only see the growth of, so to speak, craftsmanship which has become a senseless cult, the goal of which is to make more and more elaborate musical constructions. They have just made a lot of "Eiffel Towers" with nothing human in them, no personality, no communication which would fascinate you. This might be the death of art I thought it over and over. What should you do if you want to be sincere in art? I came upon some remarks by Leonard Bernstein. His idea was that the music was dying and the only musical form which still had fresh blood was jazz.**



Yuri Yukechev: Leonard Bernstein said that the music was dying and the only musical form which still had fresh blood was jazz...

**Yuri Yukechev, (piano, synthesiser, clarinet, bass clarinet, soprano sax, timpani, organ and percussion) in notes to "Golden Years of Soviet New Jazz Volume 111", 2002, Leo Records, London.*

And speaking of Mr Bernstein, who would not want to choose his set of memorable songs from his *West Side Story* as interpreted by improviser Ted Nash, tenor sax and clarinet, Steve Cardenas, guitar and Ben Allison, bass, over anything, for example, by Barry Tuckwell, French horn player, played as well as he played it. And Tuckwell played it at the highest technical level. It was the extraordinary opinion voiced in a full-page obituary by the “classical” writer in the *Sydney Morning Herald* January, 30, 2020 claiming Tuckwell to be the “greatest French horn player of the 20th century” that got me reflecting on music and the unrecognised jazz artist.



Ted Nash: his set of songs from Leonard Bernstein’s “West Side Story” is memorable...

No one can take away the craftsmanship, and technical skills of Barry Tuckwell who aged 88 had just died, and who toured the world playing over 200 concerts and recitals a year and had made over 50 recordings. But to claim him as the greatest French horn player, one respectfully begs to differ. If improvisational (jazz) is the most demanding musical craft to master at a creative level, then Barry Tuckwell has a number of other French horn players worthy of that title. John Graas, Julian Watkins and Gunther Schuller may be considered superior artists in this regard as must Tom Varner. In a comparative metaphor from literature, improvising (jazz) musicians may be considered the poets of music, as they are at the creative forefront of the language of music. In literature Lydia Davis is an interesting voice and has interesting comments to make about the creative act of writing.



Lydia Davis, a writer refreshingly open to the conceptualism of visual art...PHOTO CREDIT THEO COTE

Lydia Davis is a writer refreshingly open to the conceptualism of visual art, which, perhaps, due to the physical nature of the materials and the plasticity of mind they allow, is often way ahead of the literary world. As Davis writes, “the value is in their being what they are, not in their meaning.” Davis writes: “I am interested in writing that is eloquent yet awkward... the awkwardness implying that the writer was too moved to be more elegant.”

Does this not echo Miles Davis in his advice to his musicians: “play your mistakes”?



Miles Davis in 1958: his advice to musicians was “play your mistakes”...

Tom Varner is a musician who was taught piano by Capitola Leodra Dickerson. He went to the New England Conservatory of Music, where he studied horn with Thomas Newell. He studied composition and improvisation with Ran Blake, George Russell, and Jaki Byard. He has performed and recorded with Steve Lacy, Dave Liebman, George Gruntz, John Zorn, Bobby Watson, La Monte Young, Miles Davis with Quincy Jones, Bobby Previte, Jim McNeely, McCoy Tyner, Reggie Workman, the Mingus Orchestra, Franz Koglmann, and appears on more than 70 albums.

There is no record of the number of live performances he has made compared to Tuckwell's 200, but it is likely to be hundreds. Whether as a composer - suites, concertos - as a player, or leader, or arranger, Varner is, compared to Tuckwell, the superior artist and master of the French horn.



Tom Varner is, compared to Barry Tuckwell, the superior artist and master of the French horn... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The French horn is a beast - six meters of brass plumbing, with valves, sockets, slides and keys on which you have to produce the note yourself by vibrating your lips. Varner plays a Paxman 'normal double' instead of a 'descant' horn. Having mastered it, Tom Varner, in a comprehensive interview with Luigi Santosuosso on the 23/3/2002, makes the following interesting and insightful comments:

Just like the cello the French horn is an instrument of a certain versatility that can combine the warmth and depth of a trombone with the articulation of a trumpet, its suitability for improvisation being paradoxically more evident to very early jazz musicians. The French horn makes all the other instruments sound better! Well... any ensemble with a French horn sounds fatter and richer.

I think this has happened because there were no influential musicians who picked it up – perhaps because it was so much part of the classical world. And yes, the fact that it is an extremely difficult instrument to play probably contributed to this. It is just so damn slippery—like trying to do a ballet with just your socks on. It takes some extra time and effort to get the accuracy similar to a trumpet or sax. But interestingly enough, it was used on New Orleans riverboat brass bands up and down the Mississippi.

I have had to overcome any and all preconceived notions of what a French horn can or should do, or cannot do or should not do. I did this very early on by listening to everybody - tenor sax, trumpet, flugelhorn, trombone, even piano - and trying to incorporate the language – sometimes slowly going over a phrase over and over, getting comfortable and relaxed with the musical idea, getting the fingers, brain, and breath to work together.



At age 14 Varner heard Cootie Williams (above) on plunger mute: Varner’s conception of the power of music was drastically altered... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

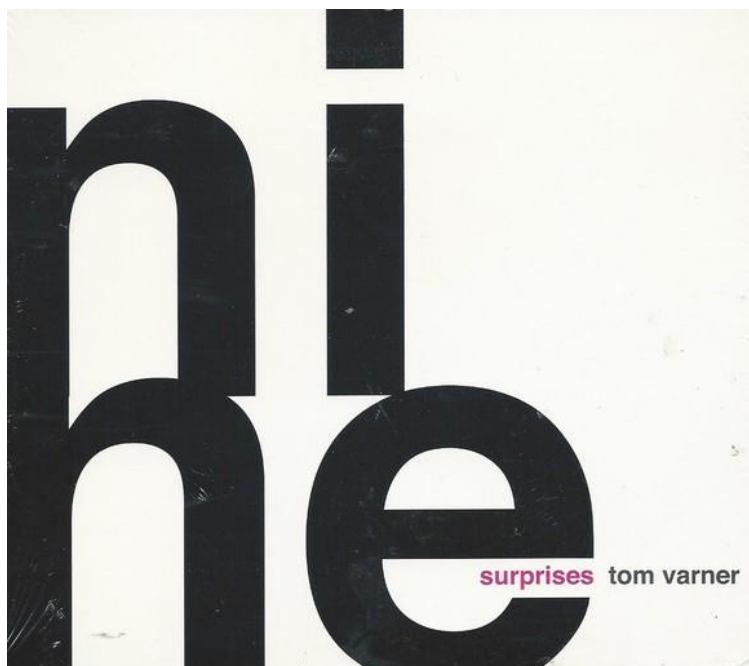
Varner was trained in classical music on piano from eight, and then the French horn (formal lessons from 14). It was at 14 that his mother and his piano teacher took him to a concert by Duke Ellington where they were in the fourth row and the musicians’ expressions were clear to them. He encountered Cootie Williams on plunger mute: “When Cootie Williams soloed with the plunger ... my conception of the power

of music was drastically altered - the physical power of Cootie's sound was a wonderful revelation. That power just hit you in the gut - but power with an incredible artistry, not just from giant amps. The band still had Johnny Hodges and Russell Procope and Harry Carney, too. I didn't realize how lucky I was to see that concert until many years later."

For many jazz lovers the presence of the improvising artist in the act of creating in concert with colleagues in a live venue, is an unparalleled emotional artistic experience, which is not conditional upon, nor cannot be surpassed by, the number of musicians, by the nature of the composition - Beethoven's 9th for example - by the genre, or by the numbers in the audience say with a crowd of 50,000 where the massed audience effect can have an impact.

The other interesting element to the nature of Varner's art is the musical interests he has cultivated.

I enjoy a wide range of music and I think it shows. I love so many different styles. "Straight-ahead jazz," free improvisation, new "classical music", folk musics from all over the world, etc. When I was learning to play jazz in the mid and late 70's, I was listening to Anthony Braxton, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Ornette, AND Clifford Brown, Sonny Rollins, Miles, AND Schoenberg and Berg and Webern and Messaien, AND Steve Reich and Philip Glass, AND African music and American folk music. You get the picture. I try, in some way that is not forced and with a personal vision, to incorporate all these musical loves." (ibid, Santosuosso).



Nine Surprises is a 15-part suite recorded on 20th August 2012, composed and arranged by Varner. The group is called the Tom Varner Nonet and comprises musicians from the Seattle, Washington, area including the Cornish College of the Arts. The suite is supplemented by three Varner compositions. The musicians are Thomas Marriott, trumpet; Tom Varner, French horn; David Marriott Jr, trombone; Steve Treseler, clarinet; Mark Taylor, alto saxophone; Eric Barber, tenor saxophone;

Jim Dejoie, baritone saxophone; Phil Sparks, bass; and Byron Vannoy, drums: viz, three horns, three reeds, bass and drums.

The first thought by the music lover when encountering the Tom Varner Nonet is perform the pianoless Miles Davis Nonet which recorded *Moon Dreams, Reception, Rocker* and *Darn That Dream* on 9th March 1950. In this band were Miles Davis, trumpet; J J Johnson, trombone; Gunther Schuller, French horn; John Barber, tuba; Lee Konitz, alto saxophone; Gerry Mulligan, baritone saxophone; Al McKibbin, bass; Max Roach, drums; with Kenny Hagood on vocal *Darn That Dream*. The Nonet proper included a pianist, either Al Haig or John Lewis.



The Miles Davis Nonet, recording in March, 1950... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

The music was labelled “cool” and historically was distinguished as a “West Coast Sound” even though recorded in New York City and even though the musicians were not exclusively from the west coast - Davis, Illinois; Roach, North Carolina; Lewis, Illinois; Johnson, Indiana; Konitz, Illinois; Mulligan, New York; Kai Winding, Denmark; and Haig, New Jersey.

The polyphonic harmonies, the vibrato-less Davis trumpet and the (then) unusual pairing of instruments for duo, created a “cool” sound. In this regard, Tom Varner’s pairing of trombone and horn on his *Spackle*, and on his *Low Guys*, and the tenor and horn on his *Mali King County*, all from *Nine Surprises*, is an example of this new convention. Trumpet and baritone saxophone pairing was most famously exploited by Gerry Mulligan in his pianoless quartet.

In *Nine Surprises* and, apart from the unison sound and rich harmonies of this “little big band”, which are reminiscent of the Davis Nonet, the emphasis of bass and drums that Varner provides, makes for a more vibrant, swinging and moving listening experience. In short, Varner does not imitate the Davis Nonet, but builds on

it, enriches it, and uses it as a launching pad for different harmonies, longer and more involving and individual solos, livelier rhythms and more entrancing melodic invention. As opposed to so-called classical music where old works are hashed and rehashed to sonic and emotional death.

There are six longer pieces in the suite, interspersed with brief musical statements or interludes by soloists except *Modern Love* which is a humorous but musically rich conversation between Varner's chattering horn, and David Marriott's gruff exclamatory trombone. From the outset of the suite the listener is alerted to fine bassist Phil Sparks whose bedding of these compositions and the nonet, adds considerably to the overall richness of the performances, especially the swinging *Main Theme*, *Seattle Blues*, *Low Guys*, and the brilliant and swinging *Mele*.



Bassist Phil Sparks (above) whose bedding of these compositions and the nonet, adds considerably to the overall richness of the performances...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

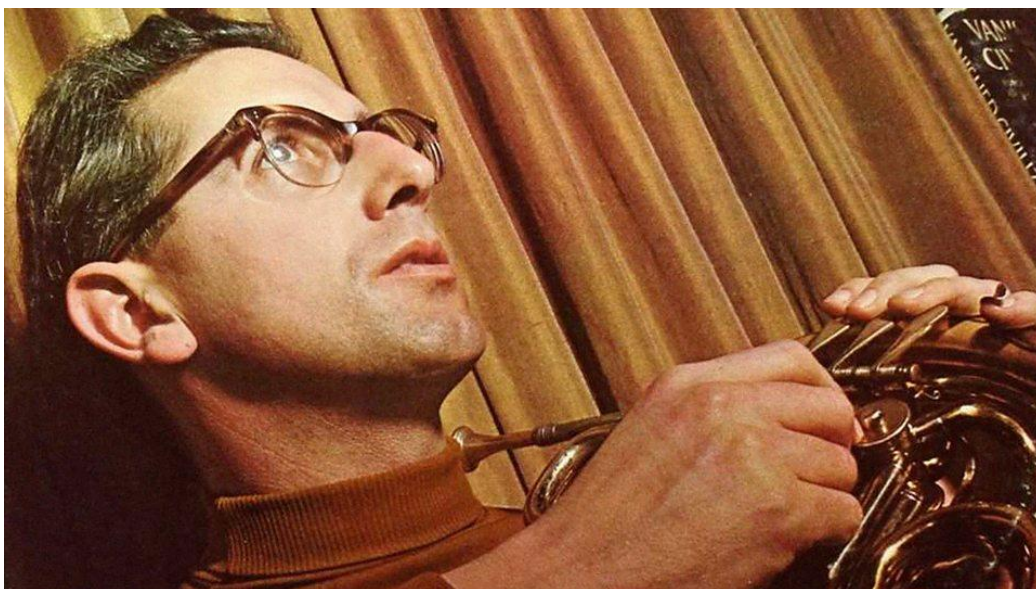
This is not to ignore his solos on *Phil Speaks*, *Phil Whispers*, and *Phil's Advice* which are all a reminder of the deep beauty of that instrument and its powerful contribution to improvised music. Added to that is Varner's preference for the fatter, fuller sound of the Paxman horn in the lower register with the goal of attempting the sound of the bass trombone. That said, the bass reproduction *inter alia*, as captured in the recording production by Jack Straw, Doug Haire and Rick Fisher, is state of the art, making the listening experience a deep pleasure.

The title *Nine Surprises* recalls Whitney Balliett's coining of the phrase that jazz is "the sound of surprise". And the nine compositions and arrangements by Varner provide a rewarding panorama of musical delights. Some highlights include the

bright dancing mood of *Main Theme* with its mid-tempo swing, quite beautiful harmonies and musical conversations between soloists on alto, horn, trumpet and tenor and chorus; the fine clarinet on *High Guys*; the brilliant up-tempo swing and forward momentum of *Seattle Blues* with an outstanding solo on alto sax, horn and trumpet with drums throughout providing a Philly Joe Jones-like backing and solo. The African-tinged rhythm on *Mali King County* sets up chorus responses reminiscent of the telegraph drums of Africa with a masculine horn and feminine tenor in conversation. The range of colours in this piece and the interchanges are quite exhilarating. The *Reprise and Finale* concludes the suite with some rich orchestral harmonics sans solos.

The supplements are *Spackle* which is a “melodic interval order” study in several parts filtered through a reflective jazz waltz with relaxed baritone sax solo, a trombone/horn duet, followed by a clarinet/tenor duet; a horn solo by Varner on *Go Northwest*; concluding with a Gil Evans-influenced swinging *Mele* which the composer claims is a variation on the harmonic structure of a pop Hawaiian Christmas song. The piece has superb voicings, a long tenor solo, and a resounding collective improvisation of the band, causing the listener to almost shout for joy in the confines of one’s own lounge room. It’s a very fine programme of music.

Now to a popular piece of Robert Schumann’s performed by, in the words of Barney Zwartz (*Sydney Morning Herald*, January, 30, 2020), “the greatest French horn player of the 20th century” Barry Tuckwell. It is *Adagio and Allegro in A Flat Major*, Op 70, with Tuckwell supported by Vladimir Ashkenazy, piano. Is “supported by” the correct phrase? I say this because form is important when it comes to such music. Schumann wrote the piece specifically to be played by amateurs but it was expected to provide a distinct challenge as it was the first solo piece for horn to exploit its capabilities. The valve horn, as it was known, had only been invented three decades before (1814) and the *Adagio* was an exercise in musical capabilities.



Barry Tuckwell: described by Barney Zwartz in the “Sydney Morning Herald” as “the greatest French horn player of the 20th century”...

Tuckwell and Ashkenazy perform the piece with precision and consummate technical ability but, as music, it seems interesting but dry. One listens to the performance unmoved. The possible reason for this is sociological and psychological. In general, classical music (so-called) is a reminder to the listener that things have not changed, that the world is still as it should be. Such a listener is generally from the middle and upper classes: in other words, those who want to hold onto what they have, or the world they see as how it should be, or a sentiment rooted in their past experience. This is not to say that one is not thrilled by the brilliance of Frederik Øland, Fredrik Sjölin, Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen, and Asbjørn Nørgaard (The Danish String Quartet) playing Beethoven's late quartets, but even these are a fresh reworking of familiar masterpieces.



The Danish String Quartet: their playing of Beethoven's late quartets is a fresh reworking of familiar masterpieces...

Such psychological and sociological arguments may have merit, but the arguments advanced in the book *The Jazz Scene* by Francis Newton in 1959, are much more convincing of the true standing of jazz in the world of music. Francis Newton was the *nom de plume* of historian Eric Hobsbawm, and it may be that he used it to protect his reputation as a distinguished historian - a sad additional commentary of how jazz was viewed and in some quarters still is.

Newton put the case that practitioners of music could not equal that of the jazz player, but that jazz could not aspire to the larger "architecture" of classical music where it prevailed. Newton was correct in the former but incorrect in the latter where there have been considerable achievements in larger forms since he put pen to paper in the 1950s, beginning with Duke Ellington. More recent larger works have

been composed by such masters as Leo Smith, Dave Douglas, John Coltrane, William Parker, Charlie Haden, Don Cherry, Carla Bley, Wynton Marsalis, etc and this is without considering the work of Anthony Braxton whose professional working life has been taken up with the challenges of composition within the genre, cf, *Eugene* (1989).



The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who wrote on jazz under the pseudonym of Francis Newton, the name of a communist trumpeter who apparently played on Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit"...

Hobsbawm (as Newton) put the case that "man for man, the finest jazz players are ... considerably superior to their classical opposite numbers".* He went on that "its art is not reproduced, but created, and exists only, at the moment of creation." (*ibid*, p 811). "It is music for use... not museum music, or music for ranking by examiners (cf Hindemeth, *ibid*, p812).

*The most intelligent jazz composers have always recognised that jazz is not composed with notes or instruments but with creative men and women. As M Hodeir, the best of the classically trained critics has put it, in jazz the 'fusion of individualities takes the place of architecture.' The good jazz composer-arranger either imagines his sound and then looks for particular individual players whose personal voice comes nearest to his ideas, (cf Tom Varner) or derives his ideas from the personalities of his actual team (cf, Duke Ellington, *ibid*, p 814). Jazz "stands or falls by the human emotions it generates, and not by its qualities as 'pure' music." (*ibid*, p 815) "...left to themselves, jazz players or composers formed in jazz will experiment with everything except musical forms (*ibid*, p 816).*

**The Musical Achievement* by Eric Hobsbawm quoted in "Reading Jazz: A Gathering of Autobiography, Reportage, and Criticism from 1919 to Now", edited by Robert Gottlieb, Pantheon Books, NY, 1996, p. 810).

Hobsbawm wrote his analysis with three particular artists at the forefront of his mind: Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker, and his arguments regarding form (architecture) now seem less assured in the light of works by those cited above, such as Leo Smith et al and especially Anthony Braxton. In this regard works such as *Ambon* by Lloyd Swanton are examples of longer, more ambitious “jazz” compositions unthinkable up until the emergence of the LP in the 1950s before which the dictates of the three minutes of a 78rpm 10” shellac record was the guiding principle of jazz composition.

Jazz music so-called, represents and is about change and freedom and the “sound of surprise” where being moved to tears and shouting for joy are not uncommon responses to this greatest of musical genres. And Tom Varner is one of its most accomplished and distinguished practitioners.

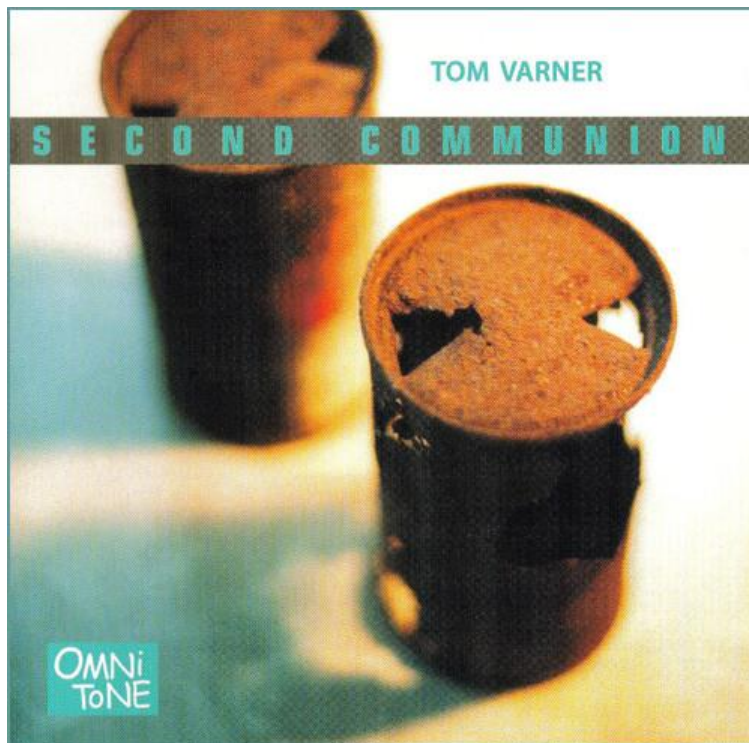


Jazz music is about change and freedom... and Tom Varner (above) is one of its most accomplished and distinguished practitioners...

In comparison to almost any work by Tom Varner on any document he’s made, Schumann’s *Adagio and Allegro in A Flat Major, Op 70*, lacks emotional resonance and power. It’s true that music has moved on, but it is also true that audiences have not moved on as much, so that the classical musician regurgitating the old over and over, places into shadow the artists of the new such as Tom Varner, whose brilliance and brilliant accomplishments are relatively speaking unrecognised. The music of Tom Varner - as soloist, innovator, educator, composer, arranger and leader - can stand as some of the finest music of the last 100 years regardless of genre, and the evidence is before us if we choose to pay witness to it.

Take for instance his *Second Communion* (2001) which is a tribute to Don Cherry’s *Complete Communion*. This latter (Blue Note) album was released in 1966

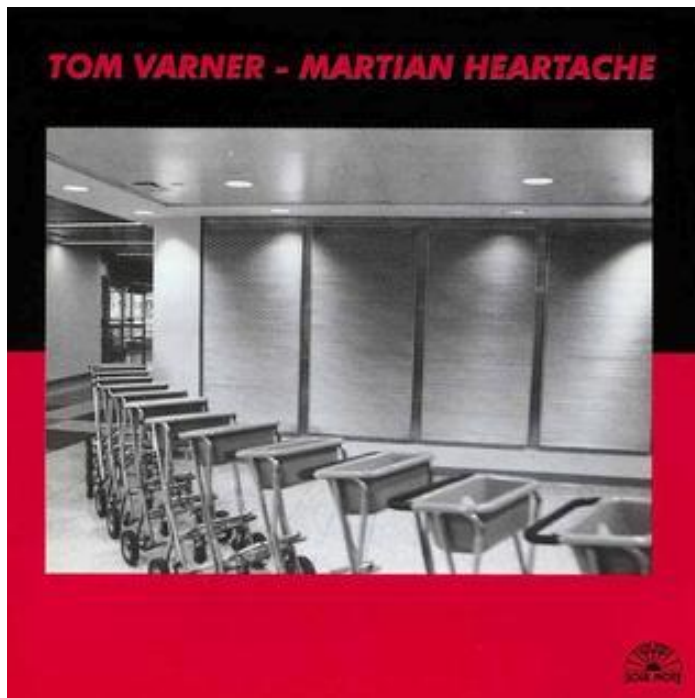
and was Cherry's answer to both athenatic music and monothematic music. In the former, a listener may experience seeming chaos, and in the latter, a formulaic approach which seems delimiting of the individual musician. Don Cherry was on cornet; Leandro "Gato" Barbiera, tenor sax; Henry Grimes, bass; and Ed Blackwell, drums. The two mini suites were *Complete Communion* (in four parts) and *Elephantasy* (in four parts).



Tom Varner's "Second Communion" (left) is a tribute to Don Cherry's "Complete Communion" (below)...



In my view, in all his music Tom Varner has achieved a delicious balance between the two (athematic and monothematic) especially and particularly in “little big bands” such as the octet, the nonet and the dektette (cf Marty Paich). Nevertheless, on *Second Communion* the group is a quartet (the original Cherry format) augmented by guitar and cornet as follows: Tom Varner, French horn; Tony Malaby, tenor saxophone; Cameron Brown (Cherry alumni) bass; Matt Wilson, drums and percussion; plus Pete McCann, guitar and Dave Ballou, cornet. In addition to the suite in six parts there are two extra compositions by Cherry, *Cherryco* and *Elephantasy*, and four by Varner, who also did all the arrangements.



A quintet of Varner on French horn; Ed Jackson, alto; Ellery Eskelin, tenor; Drew Gress, bass; and Tom Rainey, drums; augmented by Peter McCann, guitar on tracks 2, 5 & 11 and Dominique Eade, voice, on track 15; make up the band on *Martian Heartache* recorded March, 1996, with all compositions and arrangements by Varner. The rhythm section of Gress and Rainey is noteworthy, even to the extent that the bass seems to function as a horn in some solos, eg *Keep it Up*. And *Isaac has a Vision on the Subway* swings with a relentless power. The bass solo of *Betsy Says Yes* also provides a minute of the brilliance of the low end of that instrument. Varner notes in his composing for *Tough Luck*:

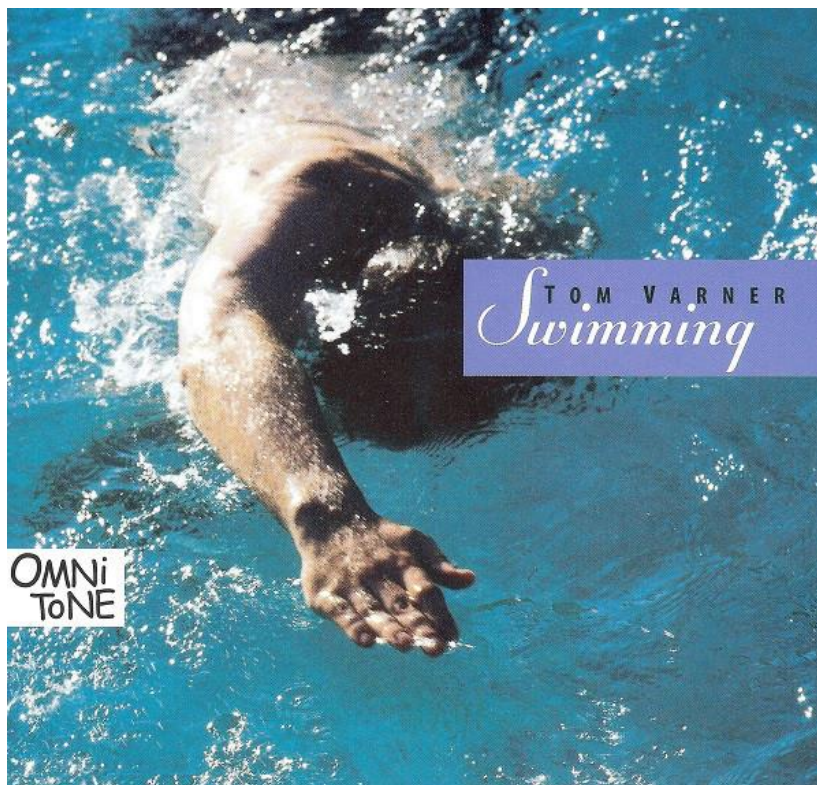
People like Charles Ives, Earle Brown and Anthony Braxton have been working with ‘mobiles’, setting different systems in motion. I wanted to do that with one element being really swinging jazz. Very abrupt stops, like the needle coming off the record, just checking to hear what else is happening, then BOOM! right back again.

Some musical highlights include the trombone-like horn solo on *Venus with a Syringe*; the up-tempo powerful swing of *Isaac Has a Vision on the Subway*; the expressive range of Varner’s horn on the interlude *Anxiety All the Time*: and the tempo changes, busy to swaggering, on *Small Cry Big Laugh* where

Ed Jackson digs in on alto reminding one at times of Cannonball Adderley's confident swagger at high tempo, with the climax of the piece a magnificent cry of the whole band. The concluding take, on a traditional country song *Lady Gay*, from the Smithsonian Collection of Classic Country Music, which has the vocal by Dominique Eade, is a track of painful beauty where there seems to be a meeting between "Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* and Emmylou Harris's *Orphan Girl*." The repetitive chorus figure by the horns in counterpoint is dramatically effective.

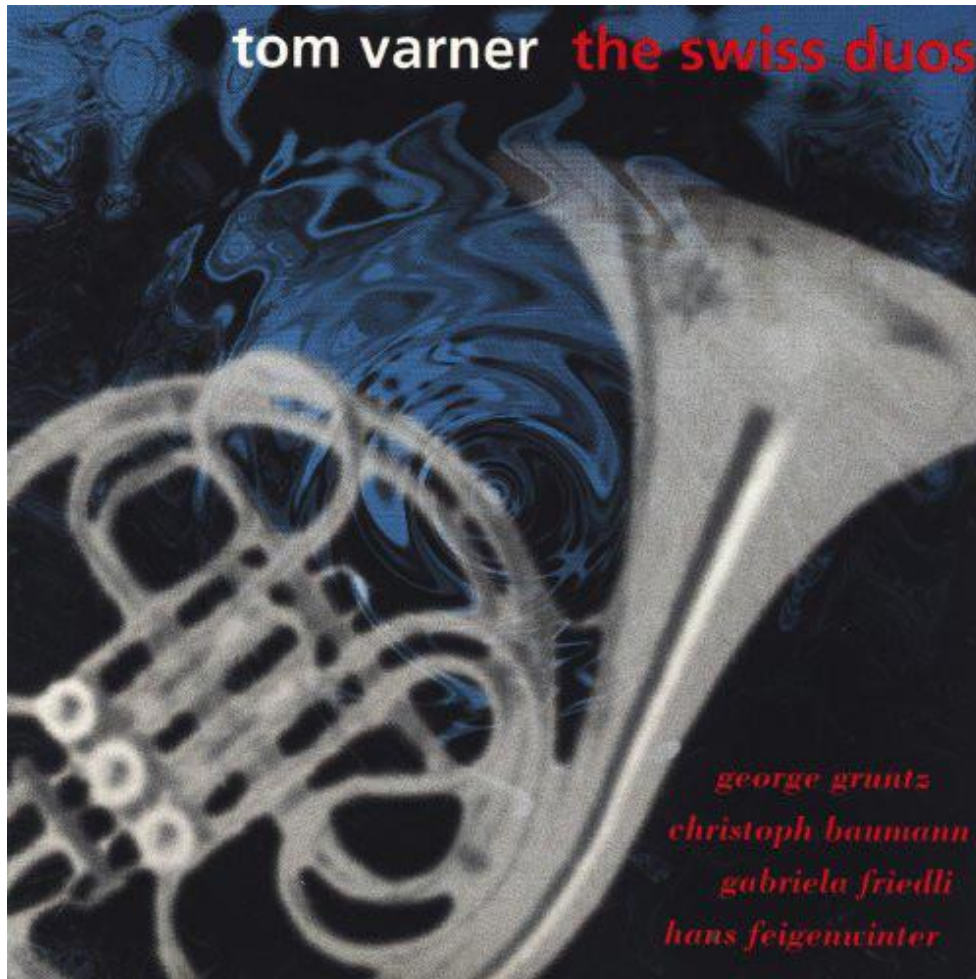
It's another stunning programme of works from Tom Varner.

The document *Swimming* was recorded 7-8 June 1999 in New Jersey by an octet comprising Tom Varner, French horn; Steve Wilson, alto saxophone; Tony Malaby, tenor saxophone; Cameron Brown, bass; Tom Rainey, drums; Mark Feldman, violin; Dave Ballou, trumpet; and Pete McCann, guitar. The centrepiece is seven brief pieces, vignettes or miniatures inspired in part by Ligeti's *Bagatelles for Wind Quintet* and by the virtuoso violin mastery of Mark Feldman. The composition *Paul Goes to Rome* was inspired in part by a book on counterpoint by Johann Fux (which Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven used as youngsters). *Chicago Interlude* is to my mind a miniature masterpiece in which a chorus figure is repeated and a solo on horn, the individual voice could we say, over the relentless motion of a city's life.



The Swiss Duos document may stand as a useful comparison to Tuckwell and Ashkenazy; then again, it may not. Recorded 7/8 August 1998 at Radio DRS, Zurich, Switzerland, it might be at least a masterclass on the range, expression, beauty and power of the French horn. There are 24 separate duos comprising Tom Varner partnered at different times by the pianists George Gruntz, Christoph Baumann, Hans Feigenwinter, and Gabriela Friedli. The duo format seems a crucible of creativity where the piano mimics an orchestra, and the horn is the concerto-like solo

voice. Some tracks like *Summertime*, have the horn blurry and human, imperfect and full of feeling and imperfections. *Matisse* is brilliant and free. Sometimes the interplay between horn and piano is the focus. It's a rich programme of music which may be usefully listened to and thought about and felt over and over.



In his earlier career, Varner explored the quartet format and the challenges of bebop. *The Tom Varner Quartet* (1980) comprised Varner, French horn; Ed Jackson, reeds; Fred Hopkins, bass; and Billy Hart, drums. All compositions are by Varner, some quirky and playful (*The Otter*), some jittery and fast (*TVTV*), some very expressive (*Compassion*) with a number giving prominence to the great bass player Fred Hopkins. The document *Jazz French Horn* is unusual for Varner, in that the band includes a pianist, Kenny Barron. Jim Snidero is on alto; Mike Richmond on bass; and Victor Lewis, drums. Both albums are exemplary blowing bebop albums, which can happily sit beside the best in that style.

Master though he may be, Tom Varner is to my mind a seriously under-recognised and under-appreciated jazz artist. But there may also be whole countries that fly beneath the radar in this regard, perhaps because of the dominance of the marketing power of the American record industry. The Ganelin Trio, Homo Liber, Vladimir Chekasin, Sainkho Namtchylak and Vladimir Rezitsky are some but, thanks to Leo Feigin and his Leo Records (UK) they do get some exposure.



Tom Varner: a seriously under-recognised and under-appreciated jazz artist...

In Australia, many accomplished jazz players struggle for recognition and work, and even senior masters such as Mike Nock, who produced 60 Naxos modern jazz albums over four years (resident in USA 25 years) pianist, composer, leader and significant presence in Australia for over 30 years, does not have the recognition and rewards relative to the contribution he has made to his art.



Pianist Mike Nock (above) does not have the recognition and rewards relative to the contribution he has made to his art...PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY

Similarly, the brilliant junior masters of the Oostende Quartet of Adelaide - Dylan Paul, bass; Jack Degenhart, alto; David Goodwin, piano and Sam Millar, drums - is struggling for venues since the 2020 closure of an excellent one in that vibrant city. The quartet members graduated from Adelaide University Conservatory of Music 2015. They won the Small Combo Award at the 40th Annual Downbeat Student Awards in 2017.



The Oostende Quartet at the University Of Adelaide Union on February 22, 2020. L-R, Jack Degenhart (alto saxophone), Jack Stempel (keyboards for David Goodwin); Sam Millar (drums), and Dylan Paul (double bass): winners of the Small Combo Award at the 40th Annual Downbeat Student Awards in 2017.

My personal answer has been to expose my children and all my grandchildren to this brilliant art form in live performances whenever and wherever I can. Love of this art may spread like the coronavirus, given enough of us try (it is not a crime to dream!). The impact, importance and brilliance of this astonishing art deserves no less.

Barry Tuckwell was undoubtedly an accomplished and wonderful French horn player and artist, but Tom Varner is more accomplished and a finer artist. The classical music writer, and the arts editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, should know better than ignoring the accomplishments of those in the genre known as “jazz”.
