

THE 1998 BELLINGEN JAZZ FESTIVAL

by Eric Myers

[This article appeared in the Summer, 1998/99 edition of JazzChord, on page 10.]

I have a feeling that I've not heard the Bellingen Jazz Festival at its very best. When I last attended, in 1994, it rained throughout most of the weekend, washing out most of the outdoor events. But, despite the somewhat chaotic re-scheduling that had to take place, I left believing I had attended a marvellous festival.

So it was again in 1998, on August 14-16, a weekend dominated by rain and mud but accompanied by fine music to lift the spirits. Bellingen, situated in a rain forest area on the mid-North Coast of NSW, is such a nice place to be, with such a lovely ambience, that it was a great pleasure to be there once again, even if one was trudging around under an umbrella for most of the weekend.

I started off on the Saturday morning at the Old Butter Factory, hearing the Sydney duo Ocean City, with Roger Janes (trombone, pedal steel guitar, vocals) and Peter Anson (rhythm guitar), plus the fine singer Carol Ralph. It's difficult to put into words the pleasure of hearing such exquisite music in an outdoor venue, rugged up to withstand the cold, under cover and protected from the drizzling rain, with a hot cup of coffee.



The group Ocean City featured Roger Janes (trombone, pedal steel guitar, vocals, above)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM, and the fine singer Carol Ralph (see over the page)...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



I then went back to the town itself to hear the local band Bellinghen on the Rocks, which was set up on the footpath outside the Federal Hotel. This was vigorous, spirited traditional/mainstream jazz, with festival organiser Mauri Thomas on the drums, and featuring the excellent tenor saxophone player Geoff Speed. While I was there they were joined by the lead trumpet of former Red Onion Brett Iggulden. Later in the day I heard Geoff Bull and his Olympia Jazz Band, with the great John McCarthy on clarinet. So, there was a feast of excellent traditional jazz to be heard at this festival.



Former Red Onion Brett Iggulden (above): he joined the local band Bellinghen on the Rocks: a feast of excellent traditional jazz could be heard at this festival...PHOTO CREDIT GEORGE KRUPINSKI

Meanwhile, back at the Butter Factory, the Ian Date/Ian Cooper Quartet was in full flight, with Jack Thorncraft (bass) and Lyn Wallis (drums). What struck me most about the swing players there was how well they enabled their performances to work as chamber music. They were playing in an outdoor area under a marquee, where people were ordering food and coffee. But the music, while full of life and able to be heard with clarity, was never loud enough to hurt the ears. I have a theory that modern jazz can be played at this volume level too, but I don't often hear it in practice.



Violinist Ian Cooper of the the Ian Date/Ian Cooper Quartet: the swing players enable their performances to work well as chamber music... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Trudging through the mud a little later on, I came across the lovely vocalist Sharny Russell, singing with her All Blue Trio to a very small audience at the Bellinghen Sporting & Bowling Club, in what appeared to be one of the festival's backwaters. Sharny, seated at the electric piano, characteristically sings the head of a standard tune, then takes a piano solo to which she adds, in unison, a wordless vocal. It's an exquisite experience to hear this, because it's done so well, with such musicality and reverence for the jazz tradition. In a world where many jazz singers are overstated and overrated, and take themselves very seriously indeed, Sharny Russell is a gem.



Singer/pianist Sharny Russell, here pictured at the electric piano, is a gem...

Sharny's drummer Graham Bennett also sang a boisterous version of a standard song - was it *All of Me* or *Basin Street Blues*? - but this trio, which also included Matthew Mackerras (electric bass) was a splendid one, which could headline many jazz festivals in this country. I guess, though, at Bellinghen - Sharny lives at Nambucca Heads -she is regarded as a "local", and there is nothing more levelling in jazz than being a "local".



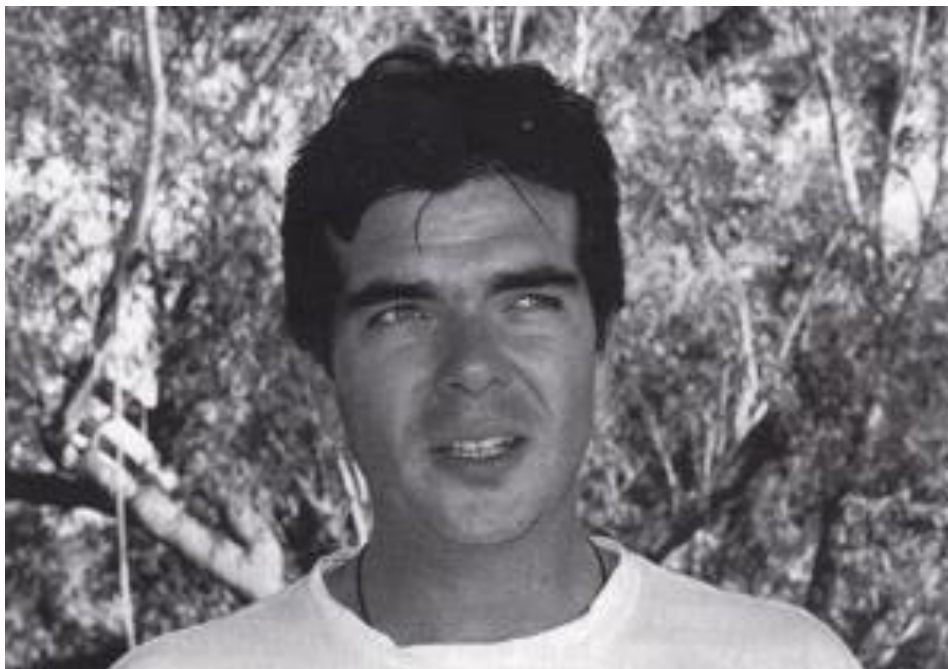
Joy Yates and Dave MacRae's 36-strong Jubilation Choir: their performance at St Margaret's Anglican Church was an immensely energising performance... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

Then it was over to St Margaret's Anglican Church for what was a big production: a performance by Joy Yates and Dave MacRae's 36-strong Jubilation Choir. I was slightly worried by the high basic volume level set by the sound technician, which meant that when the choir got hot, or sang passages at fortissimo, there was little separation of sound out front in the church itself. This might be assisted in future by situating the sound panel in the audience rather than behind the performers. But it was still an immensely energising performance and a credit to all concerned.



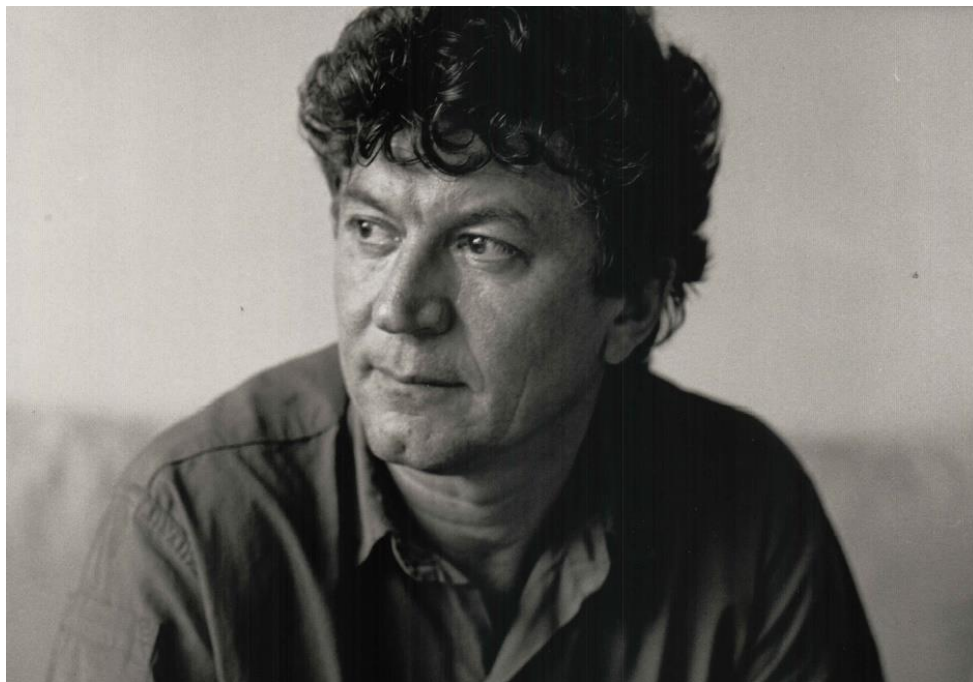
A shot of the Jubilation Choir, performing at the Manly Jazz Festival ... PHOTO COURTESY OF OLWEN WILLIAMS

I feel rather sad remembering the solo spots taken by the late Mansel Williams who, following this performance, died suddenly shortly after. He really did sing beautifully.



The late Mansel Williams, who following this performance, died suddenly shortly after: he really did sing beautifully... PHOTO COURTESY OLWEN WILLIAMS

There were other fine performances that day and the next, particularly from Miroslav Bukovsky's great band Wanderlust and the inimitable Hoodangers, who looked as if they had been partying very hard, but still played with spirit.



Miroslav Bukovsky: a spirited performance from his great band Wanderlust...

One certainly cannot fault the musical quality of the Bellingen program. Major credit as always, goes to the two people who appear to be the heart and soul of the festival, Dorothy Lang and Mauri Thomas. They epitomise the selfless dedication of jazz volunteers at grassroots level that has been so important for the survival of jazz in Australia, and has been largely responsible for the extraordinary number of jazz festivals - over 100 per annum - that present the music to the community in regional areas.

But, I wonder, how long can Dorothy and Mauri keep it up? The festival has some signs of needing stronger government support - why not through Festivals Australia? - and more generous corporate sponsorship, which might lead to the establishment of a more permanent infrastructure. Only through professionalising can a community festival like Bellingen survive and prosper in the long run.

There have been nine Bellingen Jazz Festivals and this is a magnificent achievement, but such a festival organisation relies so heavily on the blood, sweat and tears of a handful of enthusiasts, assisted by a team of volunteers, and depends so much on the success of the box office that, inevitably, many things have to be done on a shoestring. And if the enthusiasts like Dorothy and Mauri burn out, who is there to take up the reins?