

BENNETTS LANE: A DEDICATED JAZZ CLUB

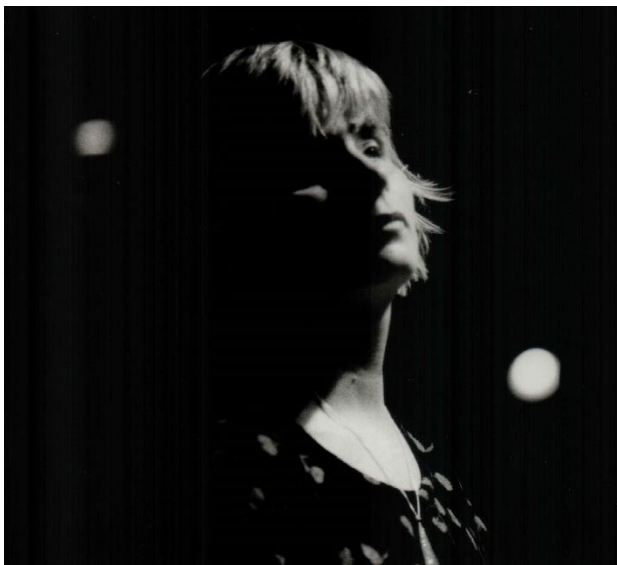
by Eric Myers

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In November 27, 1995 the Melbourne venue Bennetts Lane celebrated its third anniversary, presenting the trio featuring Allan Browne (drums), Ben Robertson (bass) and Geoff Hughes (guitar). The Sydney pianist Jann Rutherford, who performed the previous evening with her quartet, made a guest appearance.



L-R, Geoff Hughes, Allan Browne & Ben Robertson: celebrating Bennetts Lane's third anniversary on November 27, 1995... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN Sydney pianist Jann Rutherford (below) made a guest appearance...RUTHERFORD PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER



Bennetts Lane opened on November 27, 1992 after owner Michael Tortoni spent a year renovating a three-storey building in what Melbourne jazz writer Jessica Nicholas has described as "a dark, seedy-looking laneway: the perfect setting for the quintessential jazz club". In the great 'labour of love' tradition of many jazz venues, Michael says that he did his own renovations, with the exception of the plumbing and electrical work which was sub-contracted out.



Michael Tortoni: keeping the focus on hard-core jazz... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Michael has no record of which musicians actually opened the club, but remembers that one of the earliest groups to perform there included Tony Hicks, Joe Chindamo, Christine Sullivan, Jeremy Alsop and Darren Farrugia.

Three years on Michael Tortoni now confidently claims that Bennetts Lane is "the only jazz club in Australia" - in the sense that it is dedicated exclusively to jazz (in contrast to other clubs in Sydney and Melbourne, which present jazz occasionally and program non-jazz music to cover their overheads).

You only have to speak to Michael, who now runs a successful stockbroking firm as well as Bennetts Lane, to detect that he is very proud of his club and its purist policy. Of course, he is a musician himself, holding a BA (Mus) from the Victorian College of the Arts (1984) and spent much of his youth playing in the rock band Taste, which included the drummer Virgil Donati and released records which made the charts.

In a short time, Bennetts Lane has become Melbourne's key venue (only recently, in the view of some, challenged by Peter Gaudion's Jazz Lane). It was there that Wynton Marsalis and his six-piece group turned up for an impromptu performance in December, 1994, to warm up for their concert hall appearance at the Victorian Arts Centre. And in February, 1995 the Harry Connick Jr band jammed there, with Connick assuming the role of sideman (playing piano and acoustic bass), while his musicians were joined by members of the Janet Jackson Band.

"My philosophy is hard line," says Michael, "I'm absolutely determined to keep the focus on hard-core jazz. I like to think of Bennetts Lane as a meeting place for musicians, where they play and exchange ideas - a sort of jazz laboratory." He qualifies his attitude by conceding that jazz is a broad term, which encompasses various styles from acid jazz (the [Sydney fusion] band DIG did its first Melbourne gigs at Bennetts Lane) to the avant-garde.



Sydney fusion band DIG, L-R, Rick Robertson, Tim Rollinson, Scott Saunders, Alex Hewitson, Terepai Richmond: they did their first Melbourne gig at Bennetts Lane...PHOTO CREDIT TONY NOTTA

Jessica Nicholas continues: "Inside it's small & cosy. Very small, in fact: Bennetts Lane can hold only about 100 people. The room is long and narrow, the decor simple and unassuming. At the front there are tables and chairs and, unlike some of the other venues, you don't have to pay extra for the privilege of sitting down. The door charge is eminently reasonable."

Michael Tortoni told *JazzChord* that the club is open every night up to December 31, 1995, then closes until January 19, 1996. Two forthcoming highlights are the US saxophonist John Stubblefield on December 1 & 2; and the return from the US in early February, 1996 of the Australian bassist Nicki Parrott, with the American guitarist Ron Jackson.



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The club is located at 245 Bennetts Lane, Melbourne, tel (03) 9663 2856, fax (03) 96506244.