

DON HARPER: AN EXPATRIATE RETURNED

by Eric Myers

[This article appeared in the Summer/Autumn 1986 edition of Jazz Magazine.]

Don Harper returned to live in Australia in 1983, after nearly 30 years as an expatriate in England. A brilliant violinist, he was able to carve out a distinguished career in the competitive English music profession, playing jazz, classical, country-&-western music, and other musical idioms. He was busy for many years in the recording studios as a performer, arranger and composer. Now, back in Australia, he heads up a jazz studies program at Wollongong University, south of Sydney, and has been performing with his group the Australian Chamber Jazz Ensemble. This article delves back into the history of a man who has had an outstanding career as an all-round professional musician.



PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Don Harper was born in Seddon, Melbourne, in 1921. He took up violin at the age of eight, despite some parental opposition. (“It’s the only bloody instrument I can’t stand”, said his father.) Studying with local teachers, his instruction was basically classical. Reg Bradley, one of the principal violinists in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, heard Harper in an amateur competition on radio

3UZ and taught him for some years — at first, in the spirit of the 1930s, for nothing — until Harper could afford the lessons.

In his teens, Harper played in dance bands and formed his own trio which played for functions like Footscray Football Club dances. One day he was invited to the home of the pianist Nancy Warren and heard her play some improvised jazz with her brother. “It was the first time I’d ever heard anything like this,” he recalls, “and I was terribly excited by it. I went home and started mucking about, I started finding the odd little turn of phrase, really just playing around the melody at the beginning ... variations and stuff.

“In those days you didn’t have all the books you have now; you could only buy the occasional good record, and I discovered Joe Venuti. The first record I ever bought was his *Satan’s Holiday*. I later got into Duke Ellington very much — he and Joe Venuti were the two, I suppose.



The American violinist Joe Venuti: the first record Harper ever bought was his Satan’s Holiday... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

“Then I heard a bit of the Hot Club, I used to like them too. But I think Venuti had much more influence on me than [Stephane] Grappelli. Then I started getting interested in more percussive playing — people like Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins. I developed more of an attacking style, a sort of refined ‘Stuff’ Smith style, I suppose. He, to me, swung more than anybody; a little bit rough at times, not always playing as close to the chord as perhaps he should. But I think ‘Stuff’ Smith was the most honest of the jazz fiddle players.

“I’m not so keen on the way Grappelli plays today, I’ve drifted away from his playing, he seems to have got a bit bland. He’s getting a bit busy. Venuti went through a funny stage; he went right off for a while and, as he got older, he came good again and, when he died, he was playing great.

“I think you can play the violin well and improve until you’re quite old, if you keep fit. You do need to be very fit to play the violin.”

In his early 20s, when Don Harper might have embarked on a professional career, the Second World War was on and, of course, music was a shaky profession in those days. His parents insisted that he enter a trade first, so he went into precious metal refining, then metallurgy. At the same time, around 1942-43, he played at night with various bands: Carlo Briglia’s 3AK radio orchestra, and Claude Carnell’s big band which played regularly at the Melbourne Town Hall and the Geelong Palais. In the latter band Harper was playing baritone sax as well as violin. “At that time they were booking me because of my fiddle playing; they used to feature me out the front, and then I was a passenger in the sax section.”

Harper was later in Glenn Gilmour’s band, Bob Gibson’s band, and also Gordon Jackson’s band at the St Kilda Town Hall. [Gordon Jackson was later to become chairman of the Music Board of the Australia Council.] When Jackson went to the 3AK radio orchestra, Harper stepped into his shoes at St Kilda Town Hall in 1944. “I took to running a big band like a duck to water,” says Harper. “The band, called Don Harper & His Music, became very popular.” The band was very busy around Melbourne for some ten years, continually doing balls, dances and radio work.



Harper’s quartet, which won the Floorcoverings Talent Quest in 1954: L-R, Jack Grimsley, Harper, Roy Blakston (drums) and Geoff Mallett (bass)...

PHOTO CREDIT ATHOL SHMITH

These were still the great days of the big dance bands in Australia — an extension of the Swing Era, before the onslaught of rock-and-roll. Between two and three thousand people used to line up outside St Kilda Town Hall to dance to Harper’s two nine-piece ensembles.

Meanwhile, Harper had a small group going, which played at the Galleon Coffee Shop in Footscray, and did various gigs. His quartet, including Jack Grimsley (piano), Roy Blakston (drums) and Geoff Mallett (bass), won the Floorcoverings Talent Quest in 1954, and he used the prize money to help him get to England. “I was conducting the band at St Kilda Town Hall one night, and I looked around and

thought ‘God, I’ve been here ten years; the way things are going, I’ll be here another ten.’ I went home, and I said to my wife, ‘We’re going to England’ and she said ‘When?’, and that was it.”

Harper had done a show in Melbourne with the British entertainer Tommy Trinder, who offered to assist him if ever he came to England. Harper went to see Trinder virtually straight off the boat, to a huge theatre where Trinder was starring in a pantomime. Trinder began taking Harper with him around London: “We used to go to the Hungaria for lunch, which was a beautiful restaurant, and we’d always be sitting next to some very famous bloke — Chesney Allen, Billy Butlin, or someone like that.” Trinder introduced Harper to Billy Cotton, who said that Harper was “the only kangaroo [he’d] ever heard with talent”. Cotton used strings for television, records and broadcasts, so Harper worked solidly in that group for about three years.



UK entertainer Tommy Trinder : he helped Harper find lucrative work in London...

So, Harper stepped straight into some lucrative work. But things were not as easy as they appeared. “I got big things straight away, but I discovered that you don’t get the bread-and-butter stuff straight away. You can be on television one night playing to ten million people, but what really keeps the cash flow going are the gigs, the little jazz clubs, the cabaret appearances. It takes a long while to build them up.”

Harper got into session work, played in symphony orchestras, and had his own quartet which did broadcasting and television work, and he worked solo as a cabaret artist. He performed at the famous Windmill Theatre as a cabaret act, and established himself steadily. “I became I suppose, the number one jazz and country fiddle player in London for sessions for quite a while. I was always first call if there was a jazz track to go onto a record. That went on for years.”

He worked at the Talk Of The Town nightclub for about five months, conducting Geraldo’s 20-piece orchestra, and then went on to Quaglino’s for two years, an up-market restaurant in Mayfair with continuous dancing, attended often by the Royal

Family. Also he played, for many years, in the string section of the George Melachrino Orchestra.



The Don Harper Quartet at Quaglino's Restaurant , London, circa 1960. Harper is on the right holding the violin. Second from left is the Australian pianist Ron Loughhead...

Despite his considerable success in England, Don Harper was not sure that he wanted to stay permanently, so returned to Australia in 1962 and settled in Sydney. This was a time when the licensed clubs in New South Wales were still doing well, and Harper stepped into a considerable amount of cabaret work as a solo violinist. "One Sunday I did five jobs in one day," he recalls, "which was ridiculous at the time".



*George Golla (guitar) and Don Burrows (reeds), were both members of Harper's sextet in Sydney in the early 60s, playing contrapuntal jazz ...
PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

Also, he formed his own sextet, which included George Golla (guitar), Don Burrows (reeds), Terry Wilkinson (harpsichord), Lyn Christie (bass) and Derek Fairbrass (drums), playing contrapuntal jazz, with pieces derived from Bach and other classical composers. They did two radio series for the ABC and a number of jazz gigs. With another group under his leadership, he did an Australian tour with the Dave Brubeck Quartet in 1962.

During the four years he was in Australia, from 1962-66, Harper also did recording sessions and made television appearances. At that stage he had done little composing and decided to study with Raymond Hanson at the NSW Conservatorium of Music. "Ray opened a lot of doors for me mentally," says Don, who studied with Hanson for three years. "Quite a few of the jazz boys studied with Ray then; he was a wonderful teacher."



Harper studied with Raymond Hanson (pictured above) at the NSW Conservatorium of Music for three years...

So, when Harper returned to England he was equipped to make a mark as a composer, and broke into television writing in a big way. The television dramas he wrote the music for, would be too numerous to list, but some of them were *Champion House*, *Sexton Blake*, *Devil In The Fog*, *Saturday Night Theatre*, *The Inside Man* and *Dr Who*. He composed the theme music for the BBC's *World Of Sport*, which made him an agreeable sum in royalties: "I reckon it must have made me \$100,000— it ran for 15 years. I still get the cheques; they're beauties."

Getting into composition, Harper feels, was the best thing he ever did. Between 1966 and 1983, when he lived in England once again, he was busy with recording sessions and broadcasts, and also his solo career took off. He went abroad frequently to perform as a soloist and, on a trip to Malta, met the guitarist Denny Wright. "We just fitted like gloves, so we decided to do an LP." Overall, Don Harper made about 20 LPs during his years in the UK, which amounted to a substantial recording career.

Despite his activities in various areas of professional music, Harper still considered himself as essentially a jazz musician. "I always wanted to play jazz. The trouble is that if you're trying to bring up children [He and his wife Gloria had three] and you

want to give them a decent life, you've got to make some money; you can't make enough out of jazz."



Harper's album On The Fiddle: one of 20 albums he recorded in the UK...

One of Harper's more successful projects was writing the music for a project called *Songs For Alice: Alice In Wonderland & Through The Looking-Glass*. This involved setting Lewis Carroll's inspired nonsense rhymes to music, plus modern reproductions of Charles Folkard's 1921 illustrations. "They sold 20,000 books in London alone", says Harper, "and it went to America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. It's been released here by Avan-Guard."

A member of the British Performing Right Society since 1956, Harper became so successful as a royalties earner, with hundreds of recorded compositions, that he became a permanent member; he is now entitled to "earnings equalisation"; for the rest of his life, his royalties will never be allowed to drop below a certain figure. If they do, the Society tops them up.

In 1983, Don and Gloria Harper returned to Australia. Their parents in this country were elderly, and they were concerned about political trends in England: Thatcherism, IRA bombings, race riots, and the threat of nuclear war. "Also, it was about getting back to our roots, I suppose," he says, "although we miss England."

But, as always, Harper hasn't been idle since being back in Australia. He formed a group, The Australian Chamber Jazz Ensemble, with Steve McKenna (guitar), Julian Lee (piano), Ed Gaston (bass) and Alan Turnbull (drums) which has an impressive LP out, released by Avan-Guard. It has now been released in England and Europe by Humphrey Lyttelton on his own label Calligraph.

At the beginning of 1985 he began teaching a jazz studies course at the Wollongong University, in the Department of Creative Arts. The course now has about 30 students, and the guitarist Carl Orr assists Harper, giving arranging, instrumental studies and improvisation classes.



Guitarist Carl Orr, assisting Harper with the jazz studies course at the Wollongong University, in the Department of Creative Arts...PHOTO CREDIT ALAN NICOLLE

One of the more delightful events in Don Harper's life was the discovery that his nephew Steve McKenna had exceptional talent as a guitarist. They worked together regularly up till McKenna's recent departure for the United States, and recorded a duo album on December 13, 1985, which should be released in 1986.



A shot of Steve McKenna (far right) on his first gig in Melbourne in 1979. Guitarist Bruce Clarke is on the left; on drums is Larry Kean Jr; Ron Terry is on electric bass: Harper discovered that his nephew McKenna had exceptional talent as a guitarist...

“My sister used to write to me about Steve, and I thought she was just another proud mother,” says Don. “Then I heard him when I was back in 1978, and I realised this kid had real talent. I think he’s about the best player in the whole of Australia, now. He’s a lovely guitarist.”