

## DALE BARLOW

by Eric Myers\*

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*[This article appeared in the December, 1992, edition of the APRA Magazine.]*

**F**rom an early age, Dale Barlow was headed for distinction as a jazz saxophonist. In the late 1970s he was one of an extraordinary crop of talented youngsters who came to notice in Sydney through the Young Northside Big Band: Andrew Gander, James Morrison, Chris Abrahams, Lloyd Swanton, and others. They all rose to the top in the 1980s. Barlow was 19 in 1979 when the Northside band performed at California's Monterey Jazz Festival.



*Dale Barlow: from an early age headed for distinction as a jazz saxophonist...*

PHOTO CREDIT ROMAN CERNY

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*\* When this was written in 1992, Eric Myers was National Jazz Co-ordinator, a position funded by the Australian Government, and the NSW Govt's Ministry for the Arts.*

In 1981 the quartet he led became The Benders, a group which Bruce Johnson described in the *Oxford Companion To Australian Jazz* (1986) as "the most cogent, continuously active, and creative outcome of the upsurge in jazz activity which Australia has experienced since the late 70s."

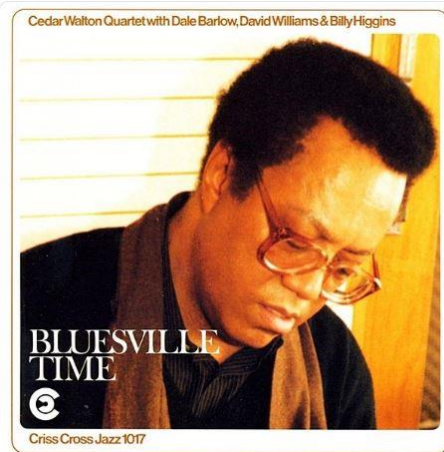
Dale Barlow always enjoyed critical acclaim at home, but praise from overseas jazz critics has been just as important in boosting his career. *Downbeat* correspondent Lee Jeske breezed in for the 1982 Sydney Jazz Festival and identified him as a future star: "Dale Barlow is, clearly, heads above every other young player I heard. He has a warm, though hard-edged, tenor sound which translates well to the other reeds but, most importantly, he has a gutsy exuberance that is... overwhelming... [In] the post-bop vein he has a real talent. I would be very surprised if he doesn't develop into one of the finest jazz soloists Australia has ever seen."



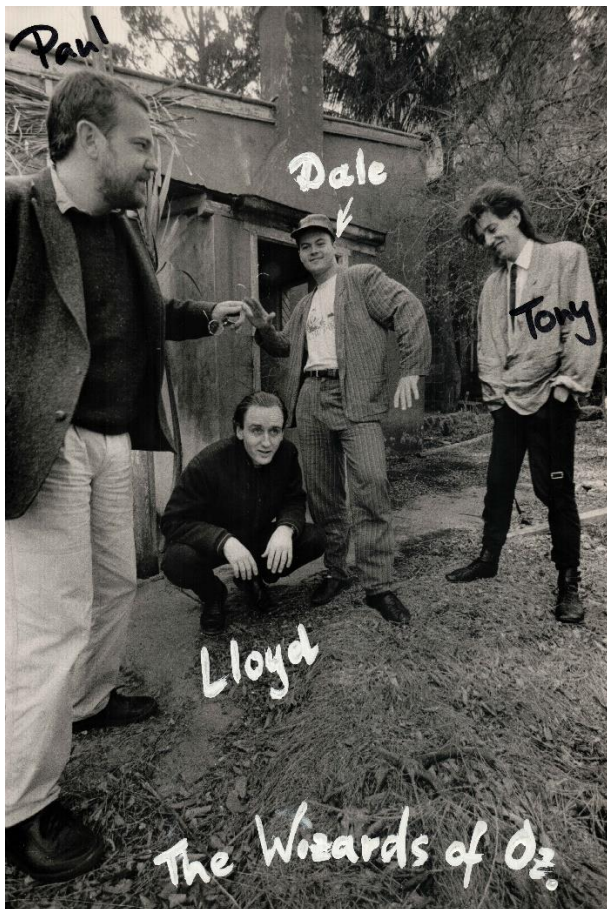
*Barlow: described by Downbeat correspondent Lee Jeske as "clearly, heads above every other young player I heard..." PHOTO CREDIT PETER SMETANA*

In September 1982, Barlow left Australia for Europe, to tour with the Australian guitarist Peter O'Mara. Except for occasional visits home, he was to spend the next eight years in Europe and America, playing with many leading musicians and groups, including the Gil Evans Orchestra in London and New York.

His finest achievement, however, was being accepted by the great black American musicians who dominate the art form internationally: the pianist Cedar Walton, for example, whose quartet Dale Barlow joined in 1985. Barlow toured Europe with the group, which included David Williams (bass) and Billy Higgins (drums) and, in Holland, recorded with them the impressive album *Bluesville Time*.



He returned to Australia in 1986 to form the Wizards of Oz with the Melbourne pianist Paul Grabowsky, a quartet which, in 1988, did a trailblazing tour of Canada and Europe funded by the Australia Council.



*The Wizards of Oz, L-R, Paul Grabowsky, Lloyd Swanton, Dale Barlow, Tony Buck...*

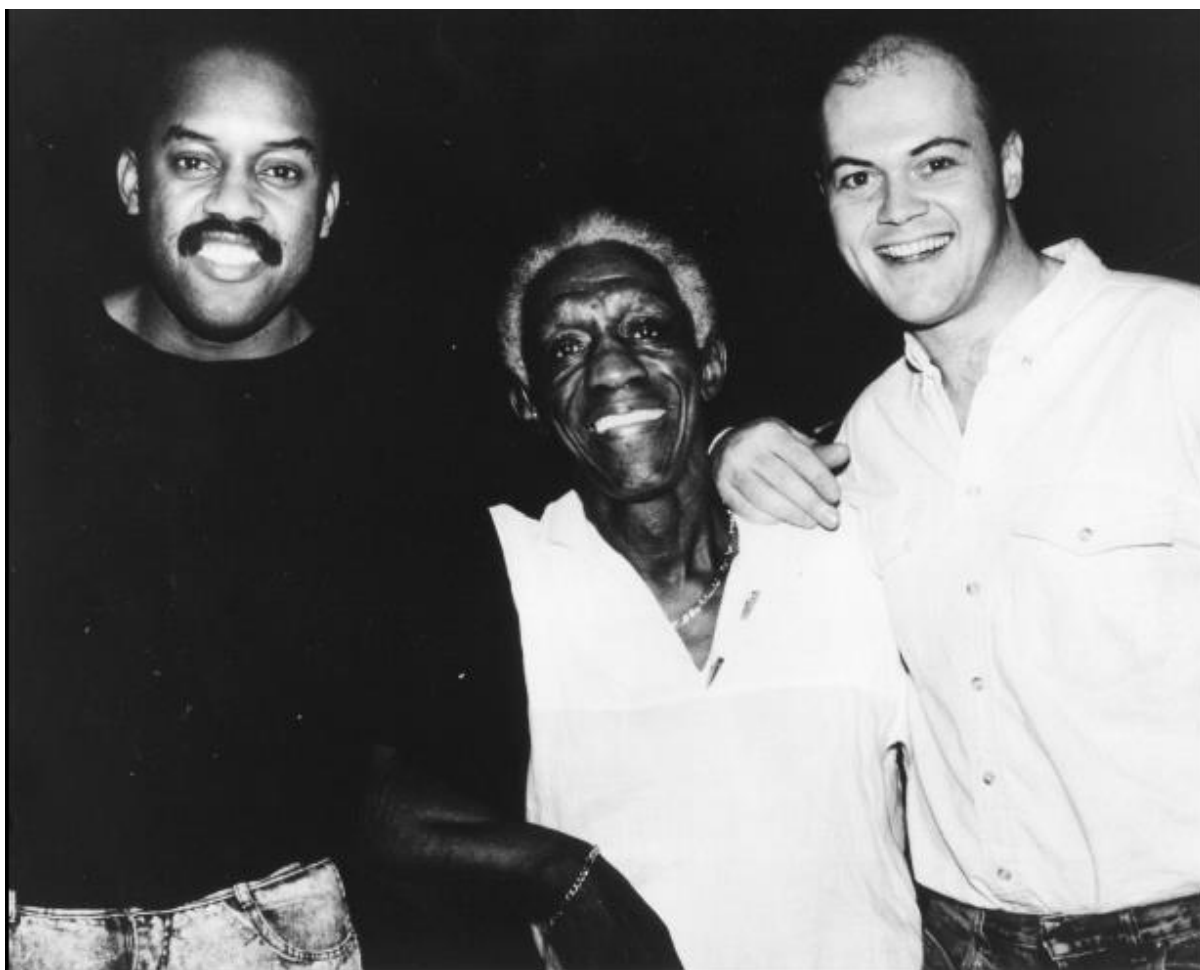
In 1988 he was a member of the Australian Jazz Orchestra (AJO), the major jazz project of the Bicentenary. The AJO did two lengthy Australian tours, and performed in six cities in the USA. On the AJO's US tour, Barlow was one player consistently praised by the critics. In Los Angeles, attention was drawn to his "rich, Coltrane-tinged sound. . ."; in New York, he was described as "a young, confident tenor saxophonist whose tone is like a big embrace."



*Six members of the Australian Jazz Orchestra, 1988, L-R, Barlow (tenor saxophone), Doug de Vries (guitar), Warwick Alder (trumpet), Bob Venier (trumpet), Don Burrows (clarinet), James Morrison (trumpet)...*

The climax of his career was the invitation in 1989 by the US drummer Art Blakey to join his group the Jazz Messengers ("the equivalent of a papal seat in the jazz world", according to *Culture* magazine). Barlow joined an illustrious list of musicians who had passed through the Messengers, including Wayne Shorter, Branford Marsalis, Keith Jarrett, Freddie Hubbard, Wynton Marsalis, and others. He spent two years with the band, and appeared on two Blakey albums *Chippin' In* and *One For All*.

Barlow now feels that being a 'Jazz Messenger' had greater influence on him than it seemed at the time. "Art Blakey always said 'Once you're a Messenger, you're always a Messenger. You've got that stamp on you, and it's something you should wear proudly'. I took that with a grain of salt, even though it was a great gig. But that big beat really stays with you; whatever you do, you're always aware of that. And I found after playing with Art Blakey that a lot of guys weren't good enough. You always noticed there was something missing. There was so much fun, excitement and energy, it was really terrific playing with him."



*Barlow (right) pictured with two Messengers, from left, bassist Essiet Okun Essiet & drummer Art Blakey, New York 1990: once you're a Messenger, you're always a Messenger...*

Barlow joined Blakey's band when he was 29. "I found very quickly playing with Art Blakey that I had to humble myself to the tradition. It wasn't as if he got me to play with the band because he wanted my sound or ideas; he wanted a tenor player to fill the Messengers chair. Within that tradition, it was open slather; you could do whatever you liked. He wanted a functional good tenor player to work with the band, and get that sound, that continued getting him work. It's what people wanted to hear; it's basically as simple as that.

"I didn't mind doing that for Art Blakey. If I had to do that for another sort of band that didn't suit my style, that'd be too much of a compromise. But, for Art Blakey, it was a great honour and privilege to have the opportunity to be a Messengers-style tenor player; absolutely nothing wrong with that."

Barlow had always composed, and he had only been with the Messengers a short time when Blakey asked him to write for the band: Two of his tunes, *Thick As Thieves* and *Bunyip*, became part of the Jazz Messengers' repertoire. Barlow chose to record them on his album *Hipnotation*, recorded in New York in 1990. This album won the ARIA award for Best Australian Jazz Record in 1991.

Since his return to Australia, Barlow has been no stranger to other awards. He picked up two Mo Awards in 1992: for Male Jazz Performer Of The Year, and Ricky May Jazz Performer Of The Year. And, to reinforce his growing stature as a composer, he was signed in April, 1992, to BMG Music Publishing.



*Barlow in 1992, holding one of his awards...*

Barlow has firm ideas about the purpose of composition in jazz. For him a composition is not an end in itself, but functional to jazz performance, and he believes that a composition must enable the jazz performer to express his individuality.

"After a while you become firmer about how you want to play, and how you want to sound. So, you have to write vehicles that are good for that. That's what I've found. So many people play only standard tunes. I've played them all my life, but I found it better to write my own tunes, because I wanted to express something a little different than what everybody else was expressing."

For the *Hipnotation* session, Barlow wrote particularly for the distinguished American trumpeter Eddie Henderson. "I know his style very well, I know his history as a jazz musician, and the sort of things that he likes to play. I specifically chose all the musicians for that purpose, musicians who would play my compositions well. I also wrote for those particular musicians."



*Dale Barlow (right) is congratulated by Jim Shipstone, Managing Director, BMG Music Publishing (Australia), on the occasion of Dale's signing to BMG in April, 1992... PHOTO CREDIT ROMAN CERNY*

Barlow believes that performance is essential to bring the music to life. "I'm really against the whole ivory-tower image of the composer, stuck away in a garret writing for himself, and the music being discovered afterwards by posterity. I think music is a living life-force, it has to reflect what is going on in the world, what you feel, what your interpretation is of your own experiences. . . The music comes to life once it's played.

"The jazz band is like democracy on the bandstand. Everyone has a role. The players have to play the music correctly, but there's always a lot of room for their own individuality to come through."

Now with his wife Alanna, and one-year-old son Marlon, Dale Barlow is living in Sydney. He has joined a handful of Australian jazz musicians who have established an international reputation, and can therefore work overseas for part of the year, and also make a good living performing here in their home country. So, he is happy to base himself here, and travel overseas whenever the call comes.

Nowadays, it is a little easier in Australia for someone to earn a reasonable living as a professional jazz musician. Barlow believes that the scene has changed a good deal over the ten years since he left Australia. "Jazz has become more official, less underground, and more part of the Establishment", he says. "There's still a little bit of an identity crisis, where it actually fits into our society. The musicians who are spending their entire lives dedicated to the music have to do a bit of soul-searching, to think about whether it's worth it. That's good in a way, because it creates a seriousness about the music. I like the fact you can study it at tertiary level, and because of that you are getting a lot of very fine players coming up now.



*Barlow says that the musicians who are spending their entire lives dedicated to the music have to do a bit of soul-searching, to think about whether it's worth it...*

"Just recently I was in Perth judging the finalists in the last year of the jazz course there, and the players are surprisingly good. They're very hip to the latest records, they sound very contemporary, they're very adventurous. A lot of them could get up in New York and sound like good students from Berklee.

"The same goes for Canberra. I've taught in Canberra a couple of times now, or given out prizes, and the students were very good. They're very enthusiastic, they do everything, learn all the records, transcribe everything —they're up with the latest, and many of them are very good writers. The standard of jazz composition in Australia is now very good, and the arranging too."



As well as his acoustic band, Barlow has an electric band, which plays funk music for young people, and has been a regular at the jazz dances which have recently become popular in Sydney. He does not see this as being out of step with the jazz tradition. "Someone came up to me the other day and said, 'I hear you've sold out, Dale'. Well, what's selling out anyway? I'm still writing all the music for the band, I'm not sacrificing my artistic integrity, it's a new slant to what I do. I'm still playing the stuff I want to play... They wouldn't say that about Miles [Davis].

"It seems ridiculous that the minute you don't play in the strict jazz context, people think you've sold out or compromised. I just find there are a lot more people coming to the gigs, they're really enjoying it, and they can dance to the music. The musicians are free to improvise in their own styles, and interpret the music in any way they wish. It's great —it satisfies all needs".

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### **DALE BARLOW: RECORDED COMPOSITIONS 1981-1992**

*Bop Shop*  
*Bunyip*  
*Bush Sense*  
*Crunchy*  
*Freaky Threekey*  
*Fringe Freak*  
*Hipnotation*  
*Jack's Tune*  
*Leaving*  
*Mean Scene*  
*Nervous Spasm*  
*Nino*  
*None Of The Above*  
*Nothing's Enough*  
*Paradisiac*  
*Sceptre Of Doom*  
*Summer Indoors*  
*Synapse*  
*13th Street*  
*Thick As Thieves*  
*Veni Vidi Vici*  
*Visby*  
*Wake Up Dreaming*  
*Wiz Biz*

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