



JAMES MORRISON AT FOUNDRY 616

James Morrison (piano, flugelhorn, trombone, trumpet); Harry Morrison (double bass); William Morrison (guitar); Patrick Danao (drums)

Foundry 616, 616 Harris St Ultimo, March 10, 2023

Reviewed by Eric Myers

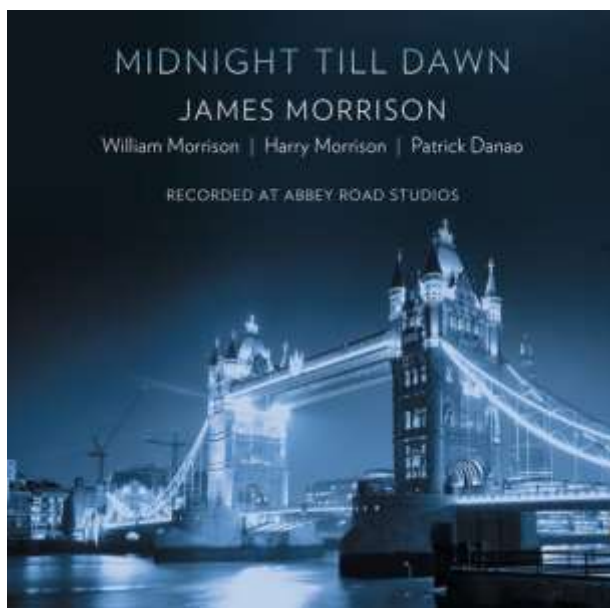
This review appeared in the April, 2023 edition of the Music Trust's e-zine Loudmouth.



James Morrison: unusual to hear him in the intimate surroundings of a small jazz club... PHOTO CREDIT STEVE DUFF

This was a gig to be savoured, for the simple reason that we're not used to hearing James Morrison, far and away the most popular drawcard in Australian jazz, in the intimate surroundings of the small jazz club. In a nutshell Morrison's performance confirmed why he bestrides the Australian jazz scene like a colossus. There are good musical reasons for his popularity, and I will do my best to delineate some of them here.

Firstly, he now has what I've previously described as possibly his most swinging quartet ever, and it must be heartwarming for James that two of its three members are his highly talented sons: guitarist William Morrison, now 27, and bassist Harry Morrison, now 25. There's no doubt that the sons of the father have inherited much of James's extraordinary musical ability. The fourth quartet member is the brilliant Patrick Danao, 27, on drums.



While they all played beautifully on the album *Midnight Till Dawn*, recorded in London in 2018, I imagine that the fact that their music sounded thoroughly road-tested and well-integrated in Foundry, can be explained by solid work opportunities playing live onstage since then, so they've been able to hone their music. The chief generator of evolving jazz artistry is of course frequent opportunities to play to a live audience.

Morrison began his program with the lovely Henry Mancini composition *Days of Wine & Roses*, now a well-known jazz standard. It was followed by two equally well-known pieces, with very beautiful melodies, *There is No Greater Love* and *If I Were a Bell*.

Immediately it was apparent how the quartet wished to treat those pieces. They of course featured, in James's improvisations, his virtuosic knowledge of the melodic possibilities inherent in a set of chord changes. Morrison, now 60, always demonstrated this extraordinary ability, even as a young man.

A handful of jazz writers, and some musicians, were detractors of James Morrison from the time he emerged onto the scene in the late seventies. Without going further into that can of worms, I can say I was out of step with them: I was a fervent admirer of Morrison's playing from the outset. I had often singled him out for special mention in reviews of the Young Northside Big Band, usually bracketing him with Dale Barlow, and sometimes Paul Pax Andrews, as the most exciting soloists in that band. Later, when I was writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 1980, Morrison was prominent and hard to miss.



Morrison and Dale Barlow (right) were usually bracketed together as the most exciting soloists in the Young Northside Big Band... PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN

In the *Herald*, on April 8, 1980, I reviewed a performance at the Rothbury Estate in the Hunter Valley, by the Don Burrows Quartet. The band included George Golla (guitar), Tony Ansell (keyboards), Stuart Livingston (drums) and featured Morrison. In a piece which a sub-editor headed "Showcase for a Talented Newcomer" I wrote:

This concert was, in many ways, a showcase for the burgeoning talent and versatility of James Morrison, who is known for his trombone work with the Young Northside Big Band. Here, he played not only trombone, but also trumpet and euphonium with astonishing facility. Since each of these instruments requires a different embouchure, or lip position, Morrison's mastery of these instruments is a major achievement at the age of 18. His playing was always thrilling at this concert, and he was in no way outclassed by the surrounding musicians who are, after all, some of the hottest players in Australian jazz...

A year later, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, on June 23, 1981, when Morrison was 19 years old, I wrote:

James Morrison, like the bebop veteran Dizzy Gillespie, uses a trumpet with the bell bent upwards. This would be a pretentious gesture were it not for the fact that Morrison's fiery trumpet style has many of the hallmarks of a true Gillespie disciple: heat, vitality, brilliant technique and beautiful jazz ideas. Morrison is not

only an extraordinary brass multi-instrumentalist but an excellent pianist as well. In terms of natural ability, he is one of the outstanding figures to have emerged in Australian jazz in recent years... It appears certain that James Morrison will become something of a jazz star. Lovers of good music are advised to turn out and listen to this young man before audiences are queuing for the pleasure.



Morrison on his trumpet with the bell bent upwards... PHOTO COURTESY BLOWING MY OWN TRUMPET

At least from when I began to seriously listen to Morrison, around 1980, I never heard much development in his playing; frankly, there was little need for it. He had simply arrived on the scene as a virtuoso, as a mature player.



Morrison: as a young man he simply arrived on the scene as a virtuoso, as a mature player... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Returning to the Foundry gig, it was remarkable how well-integrated the quartet was in articulating the inner rhythmic structure of each composition. Each player was completely aware of the rhythmic possibilities inherent in each composition, and where the most significant accents should be placed.

In my experience this contrasts with the approach taken by many contemporary jazz groups over the years as the music has become more “modern”. Improvisations have come to be played so freely that the result is often a sprawling canvas of undifferentiated sound. Musicians have more and more tended to follow the cues of the soloist, while the flavour of the harmonic and rhythmic structures inherent in written compositions have been minimised in favour of supporting the soloist’s freedom of expression.

In contrast, the approach in the Morrison quartet’s music invariably enables the harmonic structure of a tune to be clearly in the air – even in Danao’s drum solos, one could hear that he had in mind a composition’s melody. The practical effect of this is that those who are listening closely will be well aware of where they are, in relation to the harmonic structure in most of the compositions. In my view this is, and has been for many years, one of the primary reasons for James Morrison’s great popularity: his music, as it travels through the air into to your ears, makes it ridiculously easy for the listener to relate to it. Morrison may lose in mystique, but gains in accessibility.

There is also the use of dynamics, or light and shade. Here once again, the sensitivity and moderate volume level of drummer Danao were crucial. It was a nice touch for him in *There is No Greater Love* to use a gentle Latin time-feel reminiscent of the famous Ahmad Jamal hit *Poinciana*.



Patrick Danao: even in his drum solos, one could hear clearly that he often had in mind the composition’s melody... PHOTO CREDIT STEVE DUFF

The members of the quartet did not sustain an indefinite, undifferentiated volume level; rather they frequently brought down the energy level and indeed the volume level, allowing for the expression of rhythmic accents which were extremely hip. In my experience such attention to detail in a jazz band is rare.

This is not to suggest that other groups should be playing like this. There are many equally valid approaches available these days which individual jazz groups can adopt. Freedom of expression is everywhere.

One might say that the Morrison approach minimizes experimentation, but experimentation is only one aspect of the jazz firmament, and by no means is its most important element. Another important element is consolidation of its essential verities. With the Morrison approach, there is a particular musical philosophy in operation.



James Morrison on piano with his sons William Morrison (left, on guitar) and Harry Morrison (right, on double bass)... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Although one now takes for granted Morrison's versatility on instruments he has to blow, it has taken me some time to come to grips with his evolving ability at the piano. After soloing on one of his horns, his practice is to go to the piano and provide a chordal background to solos from guitarist William Morrison. James's judicious comping on piano behind others, however, doesn't quite prepare you for the full-blooded piano style which he employs when he features himself on piano.

In the group's first set James played *Autumn Leaves* on piano in a style which initially suggested the influence of Erroll Garner, but morphed into a full-blooded style reminiscent of the famous "barrelhouse" piano style favoured by pianists who played in saloons and bars in the first half of the 20th Century.

Morrison opened his second set on piano with a similar treatment of *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Then, as further evidence of the extraordinary variety which James Morrison was able to deliver in this program, he picked up the trombone and played a lovely version of Luiz Bonfá's *The Gentle Rain*.



Morrison: he picked up the trombone and played a lovely version of Luiz Bonfá's "The Gentle Rain"... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Later, after an exquisite version of the ballad *I Fall in Love Too Easily*, which he played on his specially built rotary valve flugelhorn, he delivered the evening's coup de grace: the conversion of the corny old piano piece *Chopsticks* into a pianistic tour de force. Frankly, it brought the house down.

It was interesting that it was these piano pieces which prompted the most enthusiastic applause from the Foundry audience. Not that the applause otherwise was indifferent; this was an audience that had been won over by the Morrison quartet from the first note.

After *Chopsticks* the quartet presented the little-heard standard (*The End of A Beautiful Friendship*), before receiving the obligatory standing ovation, and leaving

the stage. As the applause went on indefinitely, they could not avoid returning for an encore. It turned out to be a stirring version of Kurt Elling's great tune *Did You Call Her Today*, the first and only vocal of the night – a pleasant surprise – sung very capably by guitarist William Morrison.



William Morrison: a pleasant surprise to hear him sing the Kurt Elling tune “Did You Call Her Today”... PHOTO CREDIT STEVE DUFF

One final thought: I was struck by William Morrison's smiling as he looked at his Dad performing at the piano. I found this very moving – perhaps only a father who has a son can feel this way. In these moments I felt that love was in the air, underlining the more general sentiment that - as one could hear in the music - these four musicians really dig each other! And they love what they're doing. And they bring it off.

After this splendid concert and over the next couple of days, my thoughts inevitably turned to all those in the ABC who believe that the art music of today can be found only in rock and pop musics, and consciously ignore jazz in their various programs. Have these misguided enthusiasts never heard music like that of James Morrison and his colleagues? I wonder.
