

## PAUL McNAMARA: A JAZZ THINKER

by Eric Myers

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*[This article appeared in the May/June 1982 edition of Jazz Magazine.]*

In June, 1982, the Sydney jazz pianist, educator and composer Paul McNamara flew overseas to study in New York for eight weeks. He took up one of the two Don Banks Memorial Fellowships for 1982, sponsored jointly by the Music Board of the Australia Council and Pan American Airways.

Some people might consider Paul McNamara an Americophile, if there is such a word. In the jazz education controversy which has been simmering for some time, he has been one of the most forthright supporters of the American musicians who have been coming to Australia to teach in Greg Quigley's summer jazz clinics.

As one of the most respected teachers himself in the Jazz Studies course at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music, McNamara does not appear to be threatened by the periodic presence of the Americans. While other local jazz educators have avoided the clinics like the plague, McNamara has attended all of them since they were inaugurated in 1979.



*The jazz studies faculty at the NSW State Conservatorium of Music: Paul McNamara (at rear on the right) next to Ants (John) Neeme. In front from left, Julie Spithill, Ron Philpott, George Brodbeck... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM NEWELL*

His orientation towards the Americans goes back to 1974. Up until that time, he enjoyed a steady but unspectacular career in Sydney music. He had replaced Bryce Rohde in Claire Bail's club band when Rohde left to live in the United States; he had

played with the Daly-Wilson Big Band in its early stages; and he'd worked with Doug Foskett's quartet for three years at the Wentworth Hotel in the early 1970s.

In 1974, McNamara was in the Associated Motor Club Band when the touring Buddy Rich Big Band played a series of concerts there. This was a major turning point in his musical development.



*The American drummer Buddy Rich: McNamara experienced total involvement and total commitment to the music...*

“That was my initial exposure to live American music, which absolutely floored me”, he now says. I never realised that there were people who were that involved in music. They were totally committed.

“You’d be staying in a hotel, right? The first sound you’d hear in the morning was all these trumpet players and trombone players warming up. Around about lunch-time, if you got yourself together and staggered out to the pool, they’d all be standing around the pool, playing and swapping fours.

“It was total involvement and total commitment to the music. I stood around with my jaw open. Here, I’d never been involved with anybody who had put the music first. In this country it seems to be different things – your personality, how many schooners you can drink, how much money you’ve got in the bank. But, with the Americans I met, it seemed to me, the thing they were mainly interested in was the music”.

That sort of commitment which McNamara detected in the Americans was not totally absent from the Australian jazz world. He had also struck that phenomenon earlier with the Sydney pianist Chuck Yates, whom he had studied with extensively. He

credits Chuck Yates with giving him a badly needed sense of direction in the late 1960s.



*The Sydney pianist Chuck Yates: he gave McNamara a badly needed sense of direction in the late 1960s... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

“I can vividly remember going to Chuck and he picked me up by the scruff of the neck, metaphorically speaking, and put me on the rails. He got me to play the piano much better, to listen to the sound of the piano, he got me involved in the extensions and the substitute changes — all the things that are necessary.”

“Chuck is an excellent teacher. It’s a shame that his teaching isn’t available to more people and by that I mean that a lot of people go along to him wanting the magic wand treatment. If it takes any longer than having to concentrate for ten minutes, a lot of people really aren’t interested.”

“In those days I’d never seen anybody like Chuck before and he certainly used to scare the daylights out of me. But if you can get past that, he has a lot to offer. He’s also a lot more mellow now than he used to be.”

“He was able to give me some of the information which these Americans now give at the clinics. I don’t really know where Chuck was getting it from. I guess he worked hard at it. I think he would put on Oscar Peterson records, or Art Tatum or Bill Evans

records, try and get bits and pieces down, and later on explain the logic by which they did certain things.”

“The other guy who was doing that, 20 years ago, was Frank Smith in Melbourne. It seems to me from talking to Alan Turnbull over the years that Frank Smith was onto the same things that the Americans are talking about now. He was aware of the rhythm section finishing the phrases, the Miles Davis Quintet with Herbie Hancock, getting technique out of the road so you can say what you want to say — so many things.”

In 1974 Paul McNamara joined the popular Galapagos Duck group, and stayed with the band for two years. He had good times with them, saw a lot of Australia he'd never seen before, and got the opportunity to record with Don Burrows for the first time, on the LPs *St James* and *Moomba Jazz 76 Vol 2*.

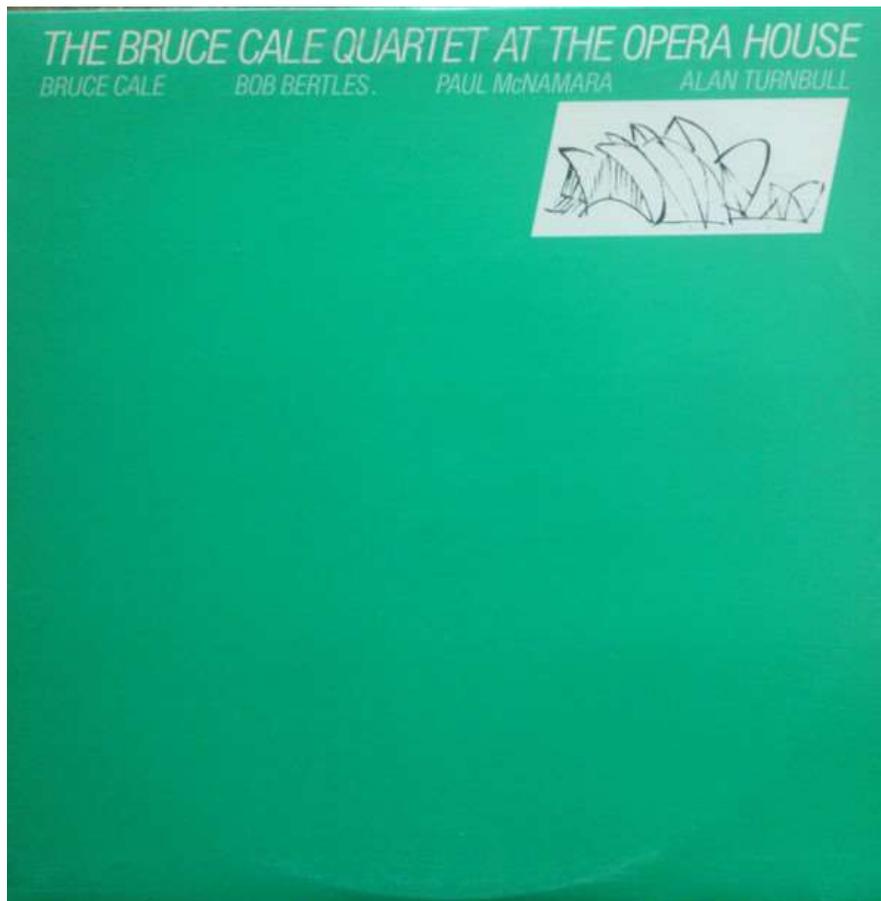


*McNamara, pictured performing with Galapagos Duck: basically he was too serious for the fun band that the Duck was...*

But, basically, McNamara was too serious for the fun band that the Duck was. “It was quite a productive time”, he says, “but musically it didn’t match up to what I expected.”

After leaving Galapagos Duck in late 1976, McNamara began to formalise his knowledge and think seriously about teaching. He wrote and recorded a cassette piano course for beginners. In 1977 he published a small, scholarly book called *A Twelve Tone Concept For Contemporary Jazz*. Commented George Golla: “I wish there had been something like this available when I started.”

In 1978 he joined the Bruce Cale Quartet, and appeared on the LP *Bruce Cale Quartet At The Opera House*, recorded when the Quartet played opposite Ella Fitzgerald. In the same year he began teaching seriously.



*Cover of the LP The Bruce Cale Quartet At The Opera House...*

That year he first met the American jazz educator Jamey Aebersold, who gave a talk at the Musicians' Club some months before Greg Quigley's summer jazz clinics started seriously in 1979. Once again, McNamara was amazed by the American approach.



*American jazz educator Jamey Aebersold: he had all this stuff at his fingertips, completely analysed, organised and structured...*

“Someone would say ‘have you got something on walking bass lines?’ Jamey would pull out the information and put it on his overhead machine. ‘Ron Carter does this and this and this; Sam Jones does this and this and this’. Somebody else would say ‘what about blues?’ ‘Right, blues’...”

“Jamey had all this stuff at his fingertips, completely analysed, organised and structured. Firstly, it never occurred to me that it was possible to systematically go through the music and codify the goings on to that extent; and secondly, to see someone do that, and not be removed from the music, but be part of it... I was moved by the way he had classified and digested the music.”

In 1979 McNamara attended the first Summer Jazz Clinic. Later in that year, he was teaching himself at the NSW Conservatorium of Music. If Paul McNamara’s star as a teacher was on the rise, so too was he developing as a player, and becoming in demand. In 1979 and 1980 he worked with Bob Bertles’s group Moontrane, did a national tour with the Daly-Wilson Big Band, played with the David Baker String Ensemble, the John Hoffman Big Band, and the Laurie Bennett Quartet, as well as a number of groups under his own leadership.



*The American cellist and educator David Baker: McNamara performed with his string ensemble...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

In 1981 he was invited to play piano for the visiting American stars Milt Jackson and Joe Henderson. At the 1981 Sydney International Music Festival, working with Jackson, McNamara found himself in an unenviable situation. During the performance, he had to play some numbers which, initially, he didn’t know the changes for, and had to work out the chord structures as he went along, listening carefully to Jackson and to the bassist Ed Gaston. Still, he took it in his stride.

“In essence, that’s what the music is about — spontaneity”, says McNamara.  
“Sometimes you fall flat on your face, other times you only fall as far as your knees, and sometimes you don’t fall at all: But if you keep doing it, eventually you get to stay on your feet.”

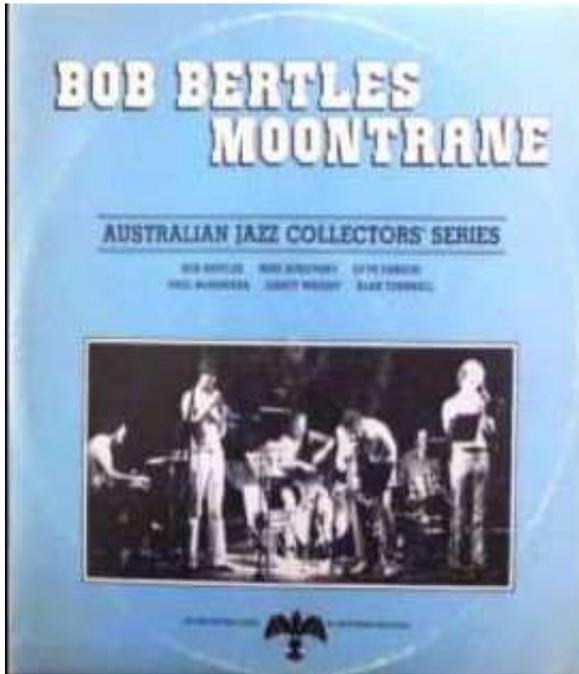
“Looking back on it, I could have handled it a bit better than I did, but it’s impossible to match Milt Jackson’s musicality. To play with him, you can feel on the bandstand the energy and the musicality pouring out of him, in a way that not many people ever get to experience. There are not many Milt Jacksons in the world.”



*The US saxophonist Joe Henderson: a man of amazing resources... PHOTO CREDIT JAN PERSSON*

“The Joe Henderson tour was a little different, because we’d run down most of the songs we played. Joe was a man of amazing resources. He doesn’t really need a band. The time, the changes are going on perfectly all the time, and yet he’s taking chances and pulling the thing out of shape, he gets really aggressive and plays all the harmonic things and honks at the bottom of the horn... all those things. And yet the whole thing just runs like a Swiss clock. I don’t know what you can say about that kind of excellence.”

McNamara has also been burgeoning as a composer, and a number of his compositions have been recorded on the *Bob Bertles Moontrane* LP, recorded live at the Musicians’ Club in 1980. They include *Valley Of The Tweed*, *Psychic Surgeon of Baguio* and *James Cook RN*.



*The 1980 Bob Bertles Moontrane LP: it included three of Paul McNamara's compositions, including James Cook RN (pictured below) whom McNamara regards as possibly the greatest navigator of all time...*



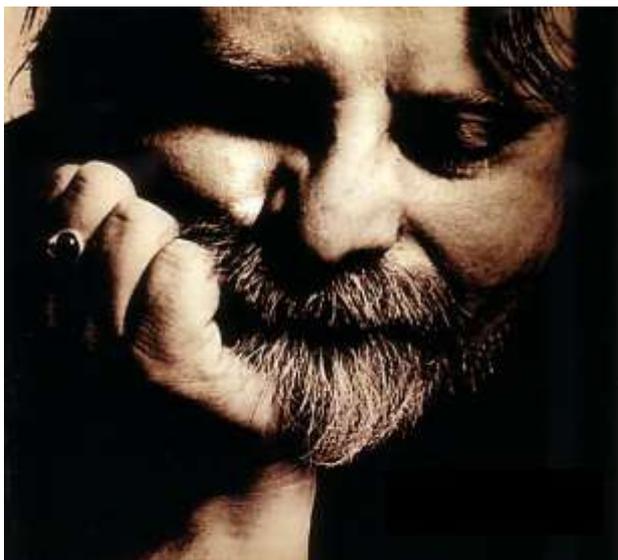
I wondered why he had named one of his compositions *James Cook RN*. “There are a few people in history I would dearly love to know”, he says. “James Cook is one of them. It seems to me that he was possibly the greatest navigator of all time. The fact that someone like him could sail all over the world and know, with a sextant and a couple of charts, where he was — that’s chops.”

“Unlike so many of those Navy captains at that particular time, he wasn’t what we might currently term a ‘wack’. From reading his diaries, he seems to have been an extremely humane sort of guy. I think, in his own way, he understood that when he

came in contact with the Aborigines on the east coast of New South Wales and the natives in New Zealand and Hawaii, he knew that he was bringing, for them, the end. That seems to underly everything he did, and anybody who is that perceptive has got to be a great man.”



*Two American pianists whom McNamara hopes to study with in New York, Barry Harris (above) and Richie Beirach (below) ...*



In June, 1982, Paul McNamara will arrive in New York for the first time. What does he expect?

“I hope to get another level of insight into music by listening to it in the clubs, talking to New York people on their own territory, and I expect to find out more about playing the piano, hopefully by studying with Richie Beirach, Hal Galper and Barry Harris — certainly those three guys for a start.”

McNamara feels that, as a recipient of the Don Banks award, there is a considerable responsibility involved. “I feel an obligation both to myself and to people who are going to subsequently apply for the grant, to do it properly. There have been a few instances in the past when people haven’t used grants properly. I want to do it firstly for myself and learn as much as I can, but I also want my track record to make it easier for others in the future.”