

CHUCK YATES AT 75: A GIANT OF AUSTRALIAN JAZZ

Interviewed by Phil Sandford

[Chuck Yates is a jazz pianist, accompanist and teacher whose career spans over 50 years. He has played at every major jazz venue in Australia, including a 14-year residency at the Bald Faced Stag Hotel in Sydney. His numerous live performances across Australia have bought him wide respect by musicians and fans. Solidly rooted in the bop tradition, his playing is muscular and direct, with logical melodic lines and an impeccable rhythmic feel. He celebrated his 75th birthday in 2012 and soon afterwards spoke to Phil Sandford about his career.]

Phil Sandford: How did you get started as a pianist?

Chuck Yates: I was born in Bendigo and my father got me started on the piano. He didn't play well but when he was young he would play for hours at a time. He'd be in a trance. He taught me how to play a song with one finger and I thought, 'Oh, that's cool.' Then I took some classical lessons and met a friend, Alan Shuttleworth, who was a drummer and I got interested in something musically that was outside of what I was doing with scales. So then I started learning off the hot-shot jazz piano player in Bendigo. We used to jam with a Dixieland band at the trombone player's house and he came in with a record one day and said, 'Listen to this funny music.' It was the original Australian Jazz Quartet with Errol Buddle on saxophone, Johnny Mason on bass, Jack Brockensha on vibes and Ron Loughhead, an amazing piano player from Adelaide. Edwin Duff used to sing with them too.



Errol Buddle on saxophone: listen to this funny music...

I just loved it and took to that music immediately. I couldn't believe that people could play like that only 100 miles away from where I was. So me and my mate, who was by now playing tenor – he was a good player and had a very good ear – left to go down to Melbourne on the day I turned 17. I used to go down to Earl's Court, the dance place opposite the Palais, and Freddie Thomas, a very good trumpet player, had a big band there. Loughhead was playing the piano in there sometimes. I ended up getting about half a dozen lessons from him and then he sent me to a classical teacher and I did a couple of years with her up to Fifth Grade. But I wished I'd done a lot more and got more chops.

I did a lot of transcribing solos and I still do it. That's how I got to learn, by listening to people playing and listening to records. Then I just started playing jobs around Melbourne.

PS: Where did you play in Melbourne?

CY: I managed to get the phone put on and I couldn't believe how much work I was getting. There was dance work and lots of little clubs, mainly run by people who had migrated to Australia after World War II from places like Italy and Greece. The first big gig of my own was in around 1958 at the Tarantella, a night club in St Kilda, opposite the Victory Theatre. I worked there for some time. When I started Chris Karan was playing drums but when he left to go to the Embers in 1959 I got Roger Sellers in. We had a South African singer, Beryl Lawson, and worked six nights a week. Later I got a jazz gig with Roger and Rudy van Egmond on bass playing jazz six nights a week at the Birdland in St Kilda. A lot of gigs round Melbourne were six nights a week at that time.

In 1962 I was planning to go to the Oscar Peterson School of Music in Canada, though I never made it, and had two jobs and was saving like mad. I was working at the Riverside Inn in South Yarra with Freddie Wilson and his wife, Marie Wilson, the singer who had just arrived from India. Barry Edwards was on bass. I had another



Drummer Roger Sellers: working with Chuck Yates in Melbourne...

job at the Red Tulip night club in Richmond. That was fantastic and the boss really dug me. I left three or four times but he always said, 'Any time you want to come

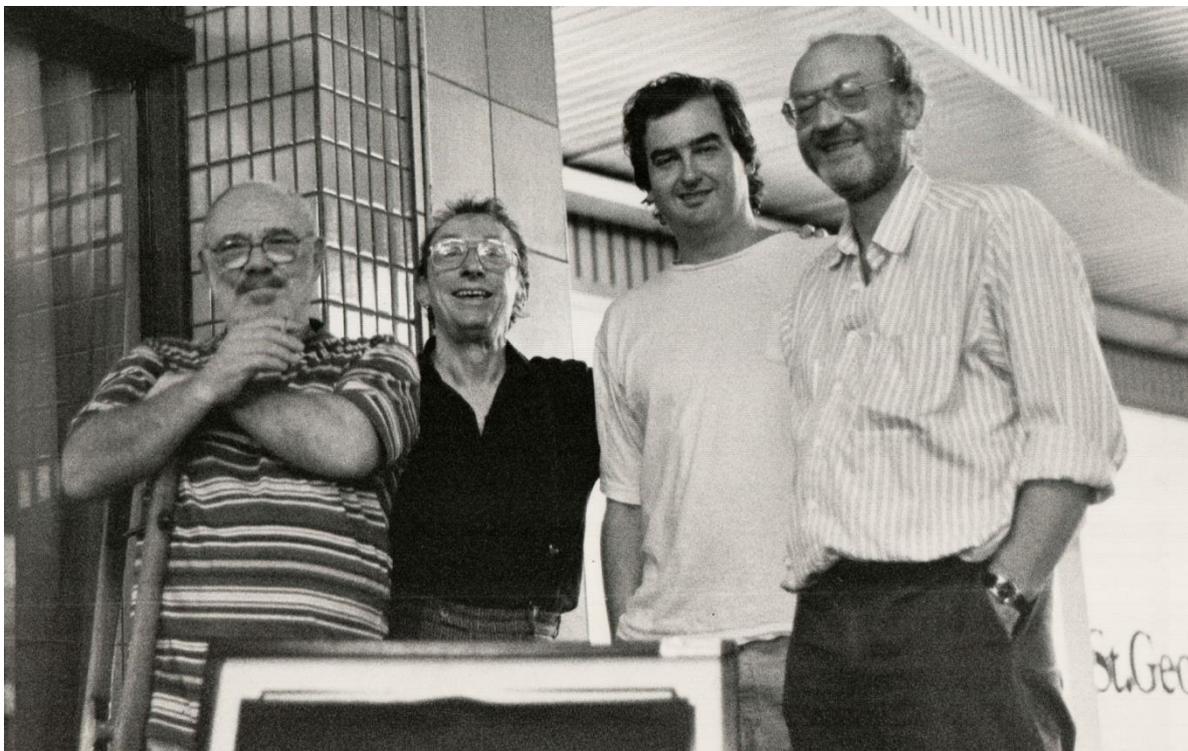
back just call me.' It was great and went on for a long time. That was a tough place but we had a good time there. There'd be all sorts of wild things happening but I just ignored them and kept on playing.

Not long after this I worked in Sydney at Easts Leagues Club and then I got a call to play at the Fat Black Pussy Cat back in Melbourne with Barry Woods on drums and Barry Edwards on bass. I jammed at the Pendulum in Canberra on my way back to Melbourne to take up the gig.

The club was run by Ali Sugaman, who was later shot dead in New York. He was an incredible cat though. He was the first person I knew who would say any word in front of anybody. At that time in Melbourne nobody swore in front of women. I worked at the Pussy Cat for maybe a year and then went straight across the road to the Playboy Club with Roger Sellers and Barry Edwards. That was a great gig with a good piano.

I went to Adelaide for a job with Billy Ross on drums and Darcy Wright on bass at the Paprika night club. The night I arrived I went up to see where I was staying and when I came down to the car I'd been robbed and all my clothes and everything was stolen so I said, 'That's enough of Adelaide for me, I'm out of here' and I drove back to Melbourne the next day.

Then I got a gig with Barry Duggan on saxophone, Alan Turnbull on drums and David Tolley on bass in the Ritz in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda. That was a strip joint but we could play whatever we wanted to in between the strippers.



Barry Canham Quartet, L-R, Yates, Canham, Warwick Alder, Ron Philpott...

PS: When did you move to Sydney?

CY: In 1965 I got a call from John Pochée to do the Mandarin Club in Sydney. I'd been in Sydney maybe three times before that for varying lengths of time and always went back to Melbourne but I was glad to go there, particularly working with Pochée. We had a complete ball and there was no going back then. We had Mike Ross, an English bass player. I ran into Turnbull soon after and asked what he was doing in Sydney. He said, 'If you're going to Sydney I'm going to Sydney.'



Chuck Yates performing in Canberra in 2010, with bassist Ron Philpott in the background... PHOTO CREDIT BRIAN STEWART

After the Mandarin Club I went across the road to Chequers with tenor player Dave Owens, who'd moved here from the US. I'll never forget that first show. I got there on a Monday afternoon for rehearsals with a new band. I walked through the club and drummer Laurie Bennett came up to me and said that Liza Minnelli was the first show. He said, 'I think you and I better go home now – I've seen the music and it's ridiculous.' And to this day it's the hardest music I've ever had to play for that kind of thing. I was out of my depth.

The Musical Director was a beautiful man and a fabulous MD, a guy called Jack French. It was through his good graces that we got through the gig. We rehearsed for days and one time he said, 'Chuck, at the opening there's a big fanfare and then Liza

comes out and there's a trill on the piano.' And he leant over and said, 'Chuck, that goes on for a real long time.' So I said, 'OK Jack, thank you.' And he said, 'Look at me, look at me, a real long time.' I said, 'That's OK.' He kept saying it me for a few days and I started to get a bit annoyed.



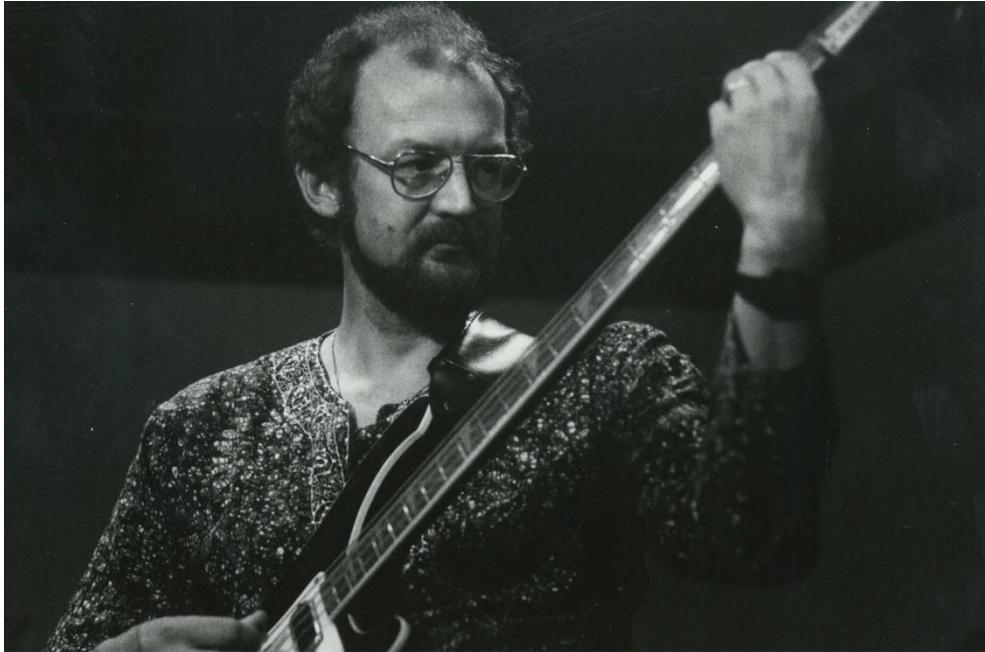
Liza Minnelli: she hated Chuck forever after...

So on the opening night there's a big fanfare. The room is in darkness and there's a spotlight on Liza and she's doing a long monologue while I do the trill. She's going on and on and I'm getting a bit tired with this long trill when suddenly she dramatically yells out loud, 'Stop!' so I stopped – but it was part of the monologue. Jack French yelled: 'Keep going' so I started again and the audience fell apart laughing. She hated me forever after. I learnt in a big way that you only obey the musical director, don't take any notice of the act.



Singer Marie Wilson: two albums with her...

I left Chequers to go to Easts again and played with Carmen McRae for six weeks in the late 60s. I also worked at the El Rocco with Pochée and Andy Brown on bass and had a long gig at the Regent. I also worked a lot with Marie Wilson and recorded two albums with her and an album with singer/guitarist Johnny Nicol.



*Bassist Ron Philpott: he knows everything I do and harmonically he's wonderful...
PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY*

Bassist Ron Philpott and I did a weekly gig at the Bald Faced Stag in Sydney between 1994 and 2008. Ron Philpott is someone I've played with a lot over the years and still do. We were in Kindred Spirits with Bernie McGann. He knows everything I do and harmonically he's wonderful. We originally had Barry Canham on drums and later Timmy Firth, who is a wonderful drummer. I heard a lot of players at the Stag. That was a great period for me. It was fantastic hanging out with those young cats. And the gig was great for that because it was a four-hour gig and you'd do three sets so there was plenty of time.

I loved working there with saxophonist Mark Simmonds – he was wonderful. I was a bit doubtful about him because I thought he was a bit 'out there' but he blew us away when he first played at the Stag and we booked him for a year. Later we played gigs with him at the Strawberry Hills and the Side On.

PS: What was your experience of New York In 1980?

CY: I got a grant to study in New York for six months. It's an incredible place and my only regret in life is that I didn't go and live there when I was about 18. I had a couple of lessons from Norman Simmons, Carmen McRae's accompanist, and lessons from Dave Liebman and Roland Hanna. I had private and group lessons with Barry Harris. In the group lessons between eight and twelve cats with varying degrees of capability would stand around the piano and he would show us things. After a small break horn players and all sorts of instrumentalists would come in and he would get them to play things.

Harris was living in Baroness Nica's* house, along with Thelonious Monk. I just happened to say to him during a lesson that I'd always had trouble playing the whole tone scale and he said, 'Monk is the master of that scale and he's in that room over there. Would you like to meet him?' So we knocked on the door and went in and Monk is lying in bed. It's a bare room with a small narrow bed and an old wardrobe. Harris said, 'Monk, this is Chuck Yates, a piano player from Australia' and Monk shook hands but I couldn't think of a thing to say so I said, 'Very pleased to meet you Mr Monk'. I just wished I'd managed to say something like, 'I love your music and your playing' but I was speechless and forgot all about the whole tone scale. After an awkward silence Harris grabbed me by the arm and said, 'Let's go.' That was it, my only meeting with one of my idols.



The pianist Barry Harris: private and group lessons with him in New York...

Another idol is Tommy Flanagan and I heard him a number of times. Just before I came back to Sydney we get in the Rolls with Harris, the Baroness and her daughter and go downtown to the Village to a small room where Tommy Flanagan is playing on a grand piano with George Mraz on bass. During a break Tommy came over and said, 'I haven't been playing much jazz lately, I've been playing with a singer.' He didn't say it was Ella Fitzgerald. I've still got an autographed sketch of him from that night.

I used to go and listen to Hank Jones playing solo piano just about every night on my way to other gigs. I was so fortunate to hear him. He was playing six nights a week in a restaurant with a grand piano. He would play things like *Satin Doll* with all those beautiful harmonies.

**Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter (1913-1988) was a jazz patron who supported many great musicians such as Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. Several jazz compositions are dedicated to her including Gigi Gryce's 'Nica's Tempo', Thelonious Monk's 'Pannonica', Tommy Flanagan's 'Thelonica' and Horace's Silver's 'Nica's Dream'.*

PS: You are known as a very good teacher of jazz piano. How did get started as a teacher?

CY: I've done a lot of teaching. I first got into it when I was working at Easts Leagues Club in Sydney in the early 1960s. I used to notice this guy come in and stare at me and he finally plucked up the courage and after a few weeks he introduced himself as Paul McNamara and asked if he could have some piano lessons. I said that I didn't know anything about teaching but he said, 'That's OK', and I taught him for a few weeks before I got the call to go back to the Pussy Cat in Melbourne. When I came back to Sydney he got in touch with me and had some more lessons. After that it was just word of mouth. I've taught a lot of people such as Kevin Hunt. I taught myself how to teach and I also taught myself by teaching.

PS: What are your major influences on piano?

CY: Oscar Peterson was probably my first major influence. I couldn't believe it when I heard him at the Embers in Melbourne in the early 1960s. He would play Benny Golson's *I Remember Clifford* as a ballad, then double the time and then double it again. Bud Powell is another influence and Barry Harris is a great cat and a wonderful player. As for Hank Jones I can't tell you how good I think he was. He was amazing. I've got recordings of him way back playing with Sonny Rollins and the comping is sensational, the voicings. I've also got him playing at Carnegie Hall with a magnificent trio led by Gene Krupa. Willie Smith is wonderful on alto and it swings like crazy.



Hank Jones: I can't tell you how good I think he was...

PS: What do you think of the current crop of younger players in Australia?

CY: The scene is very healthy around town with so many good young musicians. There are a lot of good musicians around everywhere, not just in Sydney. Education has done an incredible thing for music. Unfortunately, I've never seen the work so bad. I love all the young piano players around Sydney. I think they're wonderful. Matt McMahon is a wonderful player. Greg Coffin is another one – beautiful. Hugh



Pianist Matt McMahon: described by Yates as a wonderful player...

Barrett is sensational and Aaron Blakey is a lovely player, he can play really well. What I look for in other musicians I play with is that they know the music. I play with a young drummer, James Waples – he's fantastic. There are three Waples brothers and they are unbelievable musicians. Ben is astounding. I wouldn't have to say to him what I was going to play. If he didn't know the tune he'd know it by the second chorus. Astounding. And Danny is a beautiful alto player. Saxophonist James Ryan comes around to my place to jam. He's another wonderful player.



Saxophonist James Ryan: he comes around to Chuck's house to jam... PHOTO CREDIT BRIAN STEWART

PS: How do you sum up your career so far?

CY: The night of my 75th birthday party I had a corporate gig and then rushed across town to the 505 club. The place was packed and when I walked in they all started singing *Happy Birthday* – it was absolutely beautiful. Lots of my friends were there and Jex Saarelaht came up from Melbourne, which I thought was wonderful. I've got no regrets, I've had a fantastic life being a musician. I love musicians. It's been a great career, marvellous.