

## BOBBY GEBERT: SCULPTING A CAREER

by John Shand\*

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[This article appeared in the magazine *Australian Jazz & Blues*, Volume 1, No 5, 1994.]

Life paths and career moves have a funny habit of happening as much by accident as design. Take Bobby Gebert. One of the country's leading pianists for many years, Bobby has become typecast as Sydney's accompanist par excellence. This may have led to much work backing many fine artists, but the lack of opportunities for his trio to strut its stuff has Gebert concerned that the typecasting might be assuming the mantle of a straightjacket. Add to this the fact that Bobby also feels he has been falsely branded strictly a bebop player, and it is no wonder he was keen to use our talk to set the record straight about a thing or two.



*Bobby Gebert: this scene here is so small that we all need each other...*

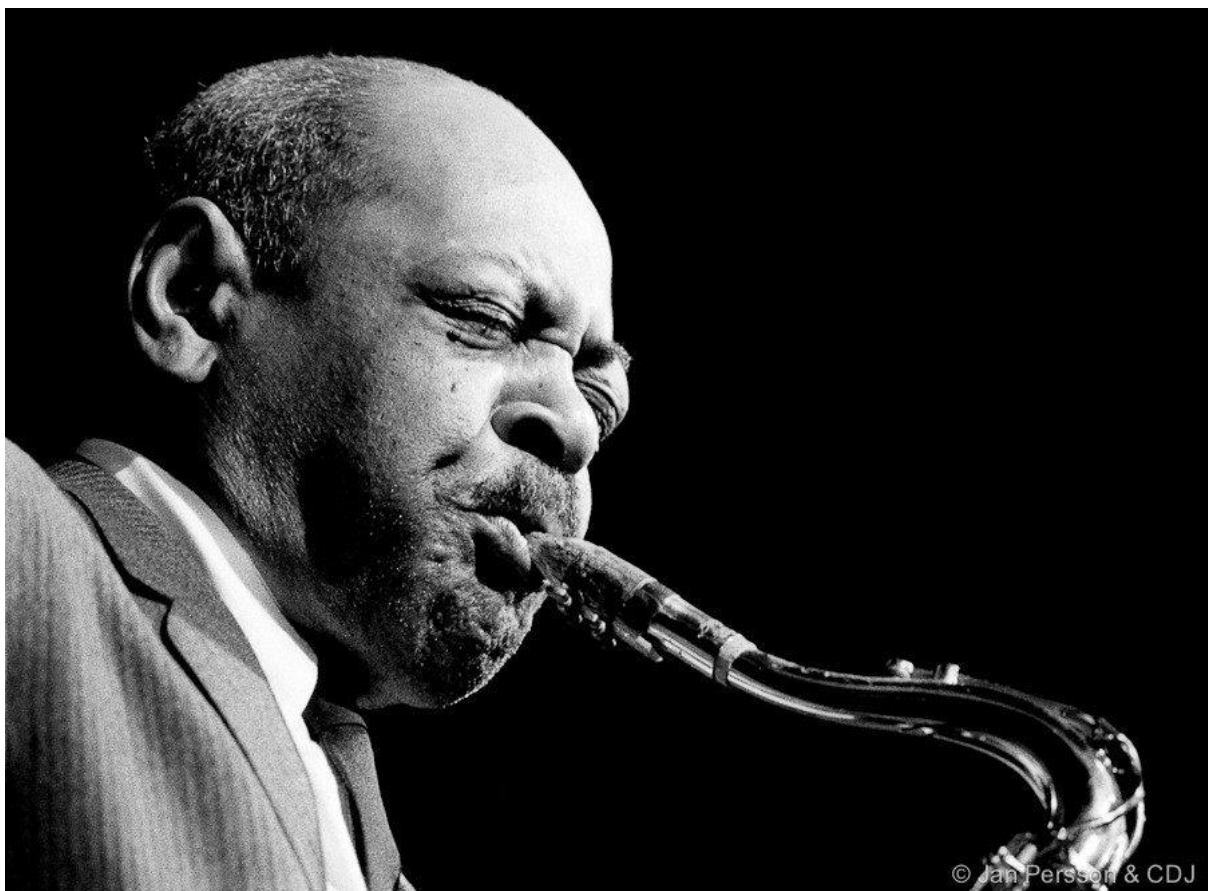
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\*In 2019 John Shand is a playwright, librettist, author, journalist, drummer and critic. He has written about music and theatre for *The Sydney Morning Herald* since 1993. His books include *Don't Shoot The Best Boy! – The Film Crew At Work* (Currency), *Jazz – The Australian Accent* (UNSW Press) and *The Phantom Of The Soap Opera* (Wizard). In 2017 he won the inaugural Arts Journalism Award at the Walkleys, the nation's pre-eminent awards for journalism. He lives in Katoomba (NSW) with she who is called The Mouse. He enjoys wine, and wishes he could say in moderation. His website is [www.johnshand.com.au](http://www.johnshand.com.au).

"I was a member of the avant-garde when I was 17," he declared. "It just happens that to make a living out of gigs, you have to play everything. I'd love to do a night of free music somewhere, but people wouldn't believe that I could do it. They'd think I was joking, or would go in and play bossa novas all night. I would love to do some free things with someone like Sandy Evans, or with a percussionist, maybe, to expose one of the other sides of my work. I write very freely. I write that way more than in a bebop style, but I don't get a chance to play my music."

Warming to his subject, Gebert explained how his own typecasting was symptomatic of what he sees as the single biggest threat to the wellbeing of Australian jazz. "This little scene that we've got here is so small that we all need each other. It's self-destructive to polarize things. You've got this guy saying that's too old-fashioned; that's in that slot - when it all should just be music.

"I've got a record of Coleman Hawkins where he played solo saxophone, and it's free. It's not a thing that only belongs to the new people. They used to do that in the '40s: get in a room and all just play, and out of that would come something. How would those great guys have found what they did if they didn't first explore everything?"

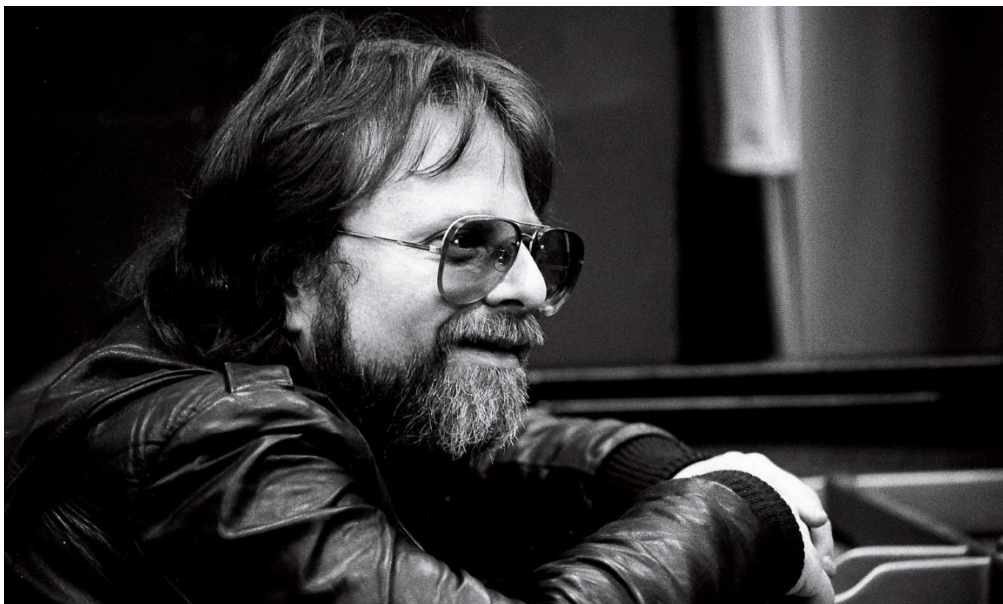


*Coleman Hawkins: he played solo saxophone, and it's free. It's not a thing that only belongs to the new people... PHOTO CREDIT JAN PERSSON COURTESY TWITTER*

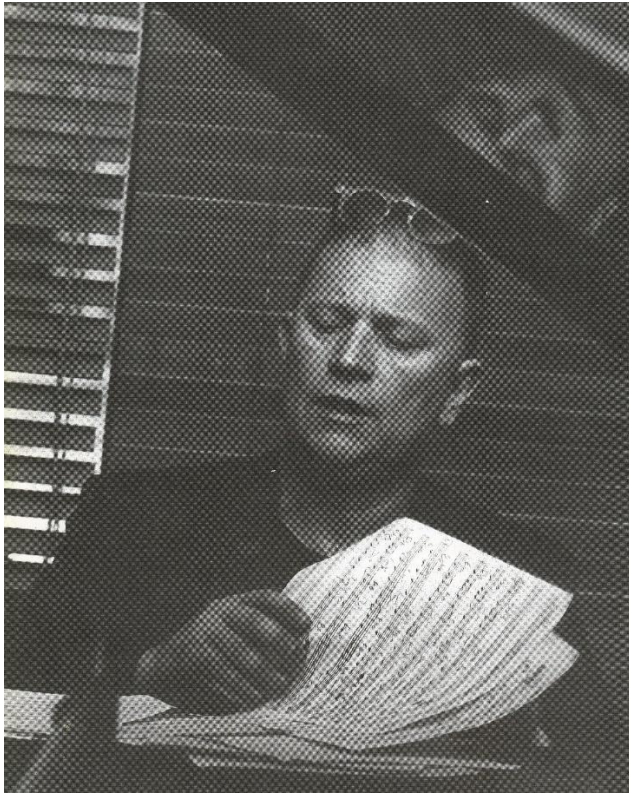
"One night in the early '80s, I went to hear Hank Jones at the Village Vanguard, and it was quite a shock to see people like Keith Jarrett and Richie Beirach there - guys that have their own individual style - just in awe of this 65-year-old master. It's something we don't pay enough attention to. There are a lot of good piano players out there who have been ignored. We don't have a 'statesman' category like America: people like Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan and Cecil Taylor, who are all between 60 and 75. Here, there's this huge gap between about 35 and 60, and people get put down for being too old-fashioned. All that's happening is people are missing out on something."



*People like Keith Jarrett (above) and Richie Beirach (below) were in the Village Vanguard to hear Hank Jones... JARRETT PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST BEIRACH PHOTO CREDIT STUART NICHOLSON*



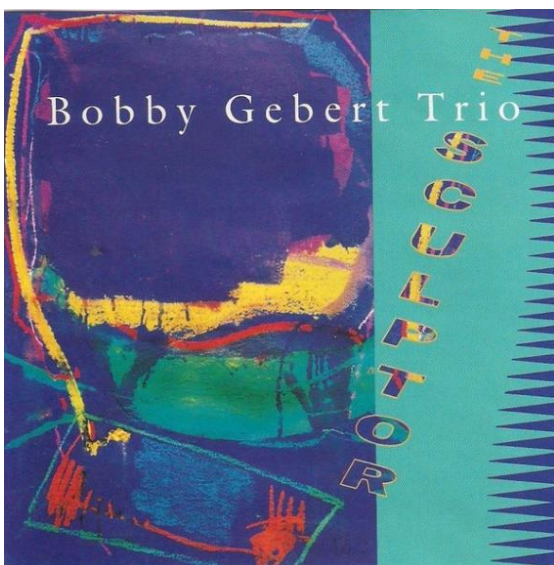




*Gebert: he was named the Jazz Performer of the Year, and his trio was Jazz Group of the Year... PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL JAZZ CO-ORDINATION OFFICE*

Gebert is also tired of what he finds to be a prevailing disposition among local players to take musical criticism as personal criticism. "It's just a thing that seems to be in our culture: we're so paranoid of being exposed. I think that goes right through Australian sport, everything."

Lest this give the impression that Bobby had more axes to grind than flags to wave, there were other matters to bring out his own brand of placid ebullience. First of all, no fewer than two "Mo" awards had recently fallen from the heavens: Gebert was named the Jazz Performer of the Year, and the trio was Jazz Group of the Year. More



used to rubbing shoulders with the might-have-beens and should-have-beens of show-biz, I asked to see the trophies. Prefaced by a quip to the effect that such things were hardly pre-eminent in the Gebert scheme of things, he took me through to where the two golden statuettes adorned a mantelpiece near his baby grand.

Hopelessly naive in such matters, I asked if they were gold. Gebert looked at me askance. "Yeah, sure," he said. "I'd be in New York by now..." Another reason for optimism was the fact that an album of trio music, called *The Sculptor* (on ABC records), should be released about the time you read this. Since the recording, the band's line-up has changed, with Ashley Turner replacing Jonathan Zwartz on bass, while Andrew Dickeson continues his crisp work behind the drums.

In addition to the regular work - a steady four gigs a week at the time of the interview - the trio rehearses twice a week for four or five hours. When they are to back a visiting performer, Gebert endeavours to get the charts in advance, and have the band as well prepared as possible before the artist's arrival. This was the case with both Johnny Griffin and Claire Martin, for instance.



*Johnny Griffin: he wanted the piano to be almost non-existent... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE*

"You're not there to show what you can do. You're there to make the guy sound as great as he can. Johnny Griffin wanted the piano to be almost non-existent. When he was working with Monk, he used to love it when Monk went to the bar, because he reckoned Monk fucked him up... He didn't want to know about me pushing or shoving. He just wanted the sounds and the rhythm.

"Everyone wants something different. It seems like it's in vogue in England not to have the hi-hat on ' 2' and ' 4' in ballads, for some reason. It's not the way I would do it, but that's what Claire Martin liked. Though she's very talented, and her material is great."



*UK singer Claire Martin: it's in vogue in England not to have the hi-hat on '2' and '4' in ballads, for some reason....*



*L-R, Gebert (piano), Warwick Alder (trumpet), David Seidel (bass), Andrew Dickeson (drums) in 1987...*

"I like accompanying singers, but I would much prefer to play instrumentally more. With the trio, I look for important traditional things that work, and then try and work them over. I don't take someone's personal thing; I just take the essence of what works, and then try and put it into our form."

With *The Sculptor* out, and plans for a piano "choir" afoot, perhaps Bobby Gebert will find a way to shake off the straight-jacket, without shaking off all the work.



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***In the following edition of Australian Jazz & Blues, Volume 1, No 6, 1994, a letter to the editor appeared from the writer & jazz enthusiast Trevor Graham, as follows:***

Dear Australian Jazz & Blues,

Many thanks to John Shand for his interview with pianist Bobby Gebert. This article motivated me to reinvestigate Bobby's material from my El Rocco and ABC tapes. The "El Rocco" tapes clearly place David Levy as the first pianist to publicly perform 'free' jazz in Sydney. Bobby and several developing young Australian stylists, including Bernie McGann, were also becoming involved in this creative extension of the jazz idiom, without the retentionism of embedded swing style mannerisms being heard amongst most established musicians attempting to perform this new style.



*David Levy in 1975: the first pianist to publicly perform 'free' jazz in Sydney...*  
PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER

John Sangster's ABC Studio 226 recording (produced by Joe Cramey), *Collective Improvisation for Jazz Trio*, definitively places Bobby as an early protagonist in this area of jazz. His only available work on record from the era appears to have been in John Sangster's section of the long out-of-print collector's items, *Jazz Australia*.

A later duo recording of standards with bassist Bruce Cale at this same Surry Hills studio was indicative of what the buying public would have to wait three decades to

add to their CD collection. Yet, even now, do we have the opportunity to hear this "master" pianist in solo, duo or trio format at interstate clubs and festivals?



*Gebert later recorded standards in the same Surry Hills studio with bassist Bruce Cale (pictured above)... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CALE*

A tape that is long lost from my collection is the original Studio 226 superbly recorded Charlie Munro Quartet's *Eastern Horizons Suite*. ABC radio, hopefully, still has all of producer Joe Cramey's tapes in storage. A grant from the Australia Council should be made for a "mosaic" style remastered box set of The Joe Cramey Years as it would make a remarkable documented compilation of two exciting decades; a "pandora's box" of all that was positive in Australian jazz from an era when, being rarely accepted as part of our cultural heritage, jazz was totally self-supporting.

An equally important milestone in our jazz history was the Craig Benjamin Big Band, with interactive narration by Gail Brennan, in a remarkable two-night-stand at Sydney's Basement. These two nights - probably in the late '70s - showed the band had been welded into an explosive world-class unit worthy of Monday nights at the Village Vanguard in NYC, by this young reed player/composer, whose arranging for those Basement nights breathed texture, intensity and fire and equal of the great painters.





*Craig Benjamin in 1974: arrangements by this young reed player/composer breathed texture, intensity and fire, equal to that of the great painters....*

Jazz has always been an interactive art form; a combination of player and listener, and we are now witnessing an attempt to extend that fact. Do not let any of us with dedicated involvement in jazz as an art form doubt the media and recorded performance direction over the next decade. Already it is possible, with the correct domestic 486 hardware and software equipment (did I forget money?) to pull up America On Line (free) through Internet (pay), and with the relevant entry code, access the entire Washington Smithsonian Institute collection of original Duke Ellington manuscripts.



*Vincent Herring: his CD ROM release is forthcoming...*

The forthcoming Vincent Herring CD ROM release (Digital Domain) will not only play on our normal home compact player, but also have a limited interactive component for listeners with personal computers. We must all take the time and discipline to understand, if not operate, this technology. Most important of all, let us not forget the well-spring of our chosen art form: the musician and the club owner. Let our moral and financial support start with them.

***Trevor Graham***