

## TIM HOPKINS

Interviewed by Peter Smetana\*

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*[This interview appeared in the magazine Australian Jazz & Blues, Volume 1, No 3, 1994]*

**T**im Hopkins is making an impression. Fresh from his first place win in the Wangaratta saxophone competition, and recordings with top bands like Paul Grabowsky, The Umbrellas, Vince Jones, and many more, he is riding the crest of a wave. With the release of his first album, this seemed like an opportune time to find out what makes him tick.



*Tim Hopkins, in the process of winning the Wangaratta saxophone competition in 1993... PHOTO CREDIT VALERIE MARTIN*

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*\*In 1994 when this was published, Peter Smetana was a broadcaster on community radio stations, a sub-editor at Australian Jazz and Blues, and the magazine's chief reviewer of jazz albums.*

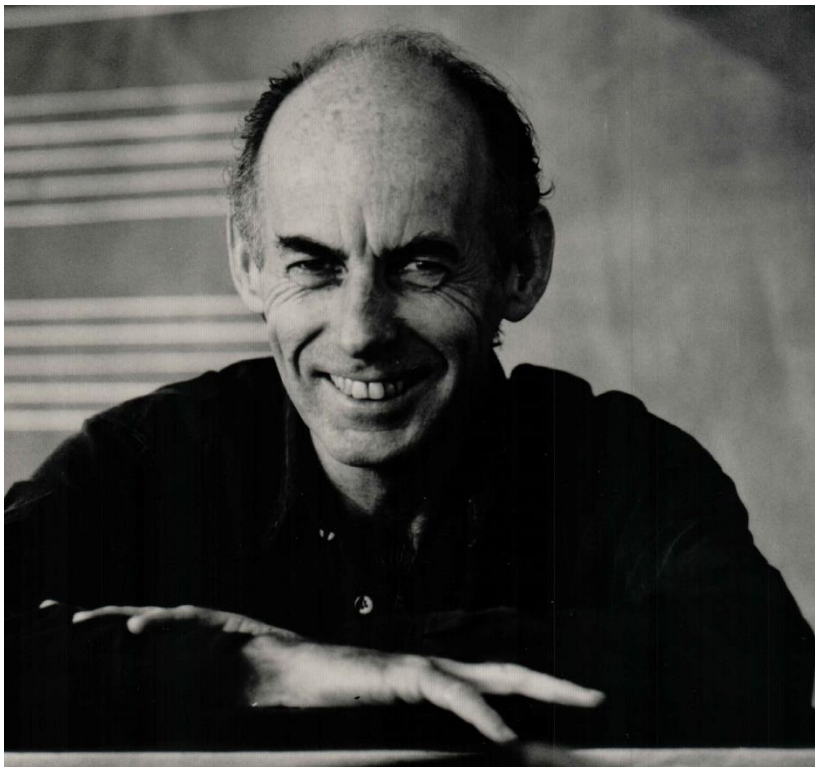
Two things revealed themselves during the course of the interview: (1) He is incredibly focussed. He rarely commented on anything that didn't bear a direct relationship to his present direction. (2) His listening reflected a fairly tight time period. The interview was constantly interrupted by the sound of women ringing his mobile phone to ask him out, which he didn't seem to mind. The interview consists basically of his comments on music that I played him.

*RECORD: Charlie Haden Orchestra "Ballad of the Fallen" ECM*

**TH:** It's really good! I like it because it's got a real folk element, which is something that's always interested me - European music of the 'common' people.

**PS:** Why are you attracted to the folk element?

**TH:** Because it's not elitist. I find jazz is elitist. I don't think that ultimately that's the true essence of jazz. I was talking to Mike Nock about that the other day and Mike was saying that jazz is an attitude -a statement about life and other people, which is ultimately a statement about yourself. It's not so much about the notes. It's funny because beboppers see themselves as traditionalists!



*Mike Nock: jazz is an attitude -a statement about life and other people...*

*PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

**PS:** Haden's music is a reflection of social change. Is yours?

**TH:** It's difficult to separate music from politics. My music is a reflection of my beliefs. I really don't think much about the big issues. My motivation is really personal relationships.

**PS:** What did Haden say to you?

**TH:** There's a real sense of humour and at the same time, a basic sadness that is a reflection of the tragedy being played out. I don't like the music to be too heavy, unless it's Trane of course, and he can do anything he wants to, as far as I'm concerned! I like the irony in Haden. Most of the time I feel quite depressed anyway, so I tend to write music that way [he wouldn't elaborate]. I try to write with parody and irony, otherwise it'd just be too heavy.

*RECORD: Sonny Rollins w. Henry Grimes and Billy Higgins "Oleo" RCA*

**TH:** Sonny! He gets the same sound on *The Bridge*. What a sense of humour. Sonny always makes me laugh. Trane NEVER makes me laugh - he makes me think about how much work I have to do! There's a lot of pain in Trane's playing.

**PS:** Is it just a technical thing?

**TH:** Today's sax players, like Bill Evans and Michael Brecker are more virtuosic than Trane, but Trane was the great innovator, with things like harmonic development, which was such an original way of playing the changes. And the sound!...



*John Coltrane: the great innovator, with things like harmonic development...*  
*PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

**PS:** Does the instrument have a bearing on the sound you get?

**TH:** Not really. Bird played on a plastic alto and still got his sound. It's what you have in your head. It's a matter of adapting your embouchure to get the sound you hear in your head.

**PS:** How did you get your sound?

**TH:** Oh man! I'm still developing my sound. I can only talk in terms of influences [better still, buy his album and find out for yourself!] Trane represents study to me. Rollins sounds like he's having so much fun that it doesn't represent study - he's totally impulsive. Whenever I feel lazy I put on Trane or Keith Jarrett - he's another

guy who really inspires me. Whenever I'm feeling down, I put on Sonny Rollins and he always puts things back in perspective.

**PS:** Have you been influenced by players earlier than Trane and Rollins?

**TH:** Not really. Maybe subconsciously.

*RECORD: Lester Young "Gigantic Blues" Verve.*

**TH:** I love that shit! Swinging! It's the first word that comes to mind. So much music doesn't do that these days. Makes me want to dance.

**PS:** How did you pick Lester if, as you said, you don't listen to music earlier than Trane?

**TH:** Well, I do know Lester's sound. A musician's sound is an easy way to identify them. It's more to do with sound than anything else. I've got a few of his records.



*Lester Young: Swinging! It's the first word that comes to mind... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

*RECORD: Billy Harper w. Malcolm Pinson drums "Knowledge of Self" - Denon , Rec: 1978*

**TH:** It was burning! I could tell it was a recent recording because of the way the drummer was breaking up the time. Technically, the drummer was amazing - how he responded to the sax player. I couldn't pick the tenor player, I don't know the current New York players. He reminds me of that tenor player that was out here recently, Billy Harper. Is that him?



*Billy Harper: he's not saying anything that hasn't been said before...  
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

**PS:** Yeah. Keep going. You don't win a prize.

**TH:** Oh, really? (Laughter) Trane's influence is really obvious. His technique isn't clean and precise like Trane's - it's muddier. Not very good articulation. There's a whole lot of players I'd listen to before Harper. I like his time but I don't think he's saying anything that hasn't been said before. I know that sounds strange considering the sound of my album.

*RECORD: Roland Kirk "The Monkey Thing" w. Sonny Boy Williamson - harmonica - Mercury.*

**TH:** Lots of energy. Before, when I said that Harper wasn't saying anything that Trane hadn't said, this one points out that it's more important to be good than to be original. I thought it could be Yusef (Lateef), when he was humming into the flute. Once again, a really strong element of humour. I love the use of the harmonica, which once again brings the folk element back into the music. I loved it.



*Roland Kirk: lots of energy...PHOTO COURTESY THE BBC*

*RECORD: David Murray - ts, bass clarinet "Home" and "Mr PC" - DIW*

**TH:** I enjoyed the bass clarinet thing. Quite an old sound. The wide vibrato dates it immediately - then Trane was playing with some pretty wide vibrato towards the end. It was nice. Was it David Murray? I remember his wide vibrato from when he was in Sydney with The World Saxophone Quartet. It's different to Trane and Rollins. Rollins is really part of the tradition that follows a line back to Bird and further back to the blues. Trane seems to come out of nowhere! Murray comes out of that older tradition - that Ben Webster thing with the wide, legato phrasing. The composition on the first track is very modern.

**PS:** Is that what you think?



*David Murray: the wide vibrato dates him immediately... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

*RECORD: Albert Ayler "Bells" HatHut Rec: 1966*

**TH:** It all sounds the same - that squealing thing.

**PS:** What about the comparison with Murray?

**TH:** But that was really good modern music. This stuff didn't have a huge range. When I was in Canada with Mike (Nock), I remember hearing these two German musicians exploring their instruments to the nth. It was quite beautiful. I find that for the most part, free music is quite self-indulgent and I can't relate to it.

**PS:** Ayler was one of Murray's big influences.

**TH:** Well, it's easy to see why. The reason I haven't heard much free music is that I think it's really important that I absorb the earlier styles like bebop, structurally and idiomatically. It's like a training ground where you learn how to play your instrument. See, when you're playing 'free', you can bluff your way through, a lot of the time. It's not that I didn't like it, it's just that I don't listen to much music past '63



- especially Trane. It's more important for me to listen to earlier music. I like that way of playing melody and harmony. I don't mind going 'outside', but it must be within a structure, like chord substitutions, etc.



*Albert Ayler: he was one of Murray's big influences.... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

**PS:** That was Albert Ayler in the early 1960s.

**TH:** I still didn't like it! It's important to be original, which I've tried to do on my album by introducing other types of sound, like the piano accordion, or using an interesting composition or arrangement. In the sixties, there was an obsession to find something new but now the focus is on playing your instrument as well as you can and putting it in a form that people can understand and enjoy.

**PS:** Isn't that the new conservatism?

**TH:** It's not a matter of conservatism. It's important that the tradition is constantly re-evaluated and re-defined. Appropriation is valid. Jazz lost its audience in the sixties because it failed to communicate.

**PS:** So you're influenced by what you think the audience wants?

**TH:** My generation's musicians are sick of having no money and only a few people at gigs, so if we can please the audience and at the same time make some progress in the music, everyone wins.

**PS:** If this was the best of all worlds and you could play anything you liked, what would you be playing?

**TH:** What I'm doing now is where my heart is. Accessibility isn't a crime. I like getting a good audience reaction. It's important to connect with the audience.

*RECORD: Jerry Gonzalez, Steve Berrios - pen / Carter Jefferson -ts Composition: "Jackie-ing" (Thelonious Monk).*

**TH:** It's not very coherent. The sax is too far back in the mix. I liked the percussion. Is that a Monk composition? It's basically boring. I haven't listened to much Latin music.

*RECORD: Charles Mingus - "Cocktails for Two" - Charles McPherson - as / Lonnie Hillyer -t / Jackie Byard -p / Dannie Richmond -d / Mingus -b LP: "My Favourite Quintet" - OJC.*

**TH:** Mingus was one of the few bass players with a sense of humour. I know this is a parody on bad 'trad' bands, but I really don't like taking the piss out of other people's music. Mike (Nock) taught me that there's something good in all music. He's my musical father.



*Hopkins: I really don't like taking the piss out of other people's music. Mike (Nock) taught me that there's something good in all music.... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

*RECORD: Chuck Brown and the Organisers - (heavy funk dance music)*

**TH:** Dancing - I love it! Last night I was out dancing 'till five o'clock! This music serves a function. It's not where I'm at - I'm into writing and playing music for listening.

**PS:** What about Steve Coleman and the M-base thing?

**TH:** I find Coleman's sound to be very cold and hard. I'm aiming at a much warmer sound.