

## TEN YEARS OF THE BASEMENT

by Phil Tripp\*

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**H**ow does one appropriately describe a venue that has struggled through ten years of changes — not all of them voluntary, survived in spite of a limited appeal to the mainstream lounge lizard crowd, and still has that undefined ambience that lures one time and time again to leave cares at the door and partake, mingle, enjoy?

It's tough to describe The Basement and the environment that it has evolved into after its most recent changes. As a recent emigre to these shores, it has provided me with the relief and sense of 'home' that few clubs, cabarets, nightspots, venues, pubs, restaurants, or dives could yield. I've only had two years' acquaintance with The Basement but perhaps by sharing the initial experiences that I had might help put the place in perspective.

After a month on the Oriana escaping the Reagan regime, the thrill of floating through the Heads and landing beside the Sydney Opera House were sensory stimulation galore, but there was still a feeling of being a stranger in a strange land. Knowing no-one here and landing at a lonely time, Christmas week, I took the advice of my muso mates on board and headed for that quayside nightspot that so many of them had talked about as we approached Oz.



*Fears of alienation vanished as I surveyed the crowd gathered to pay homage to Kerrie Biddell...PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN*

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*\*Phil Tripp is an American refugee who escaped the Reagan regime circa 1980, became resident in Australia, and built a long and diverse career in the music industry.*

Maybe it was the descent underground that set me at ease at first but in the first few minutes while waiting for that first Fosters I realised that I was HOME! Fears of alienation vanished as I surveyed the crowd gathered to pay homage to Kerrie Biddell and realised that the club and patrons could just as well be in the Big Apple or SF or LA as in Sydney. And as the band pumped out the first few bars and Kerrie leapt to centre stage, a laid-back feeling returned, the drink took its effect, and the music put me in that universal place of togetherness with my surroundings.

And in the last two years, I have become a regular — put down my roots, y'see. People need a place to go to that approximates their fantasy of what they would like their living room to be if they could have it as a club. And as a city boy, I have that need to have a home away from home that gives me the comfort and connection of music and mateship and The Basement has been the place.

Oh there have been some magic moments there. Hubbard, Guitar Night, many doses of Kerrie and the Duck — in all maybe 50 trips for Tripp. It's odd because never has there been an unpleasant moment, no rowdies, no hassles, even single women seem at ease there, not defensive nor stiff in anticipation of being hit on.

There is a unique quality to The Basement and that is probably its key to survival. The timeless quality, the consistency of it in entertainment, food and drink is somewhat like McDonalds — you may not admit to liking it but you keep going because there is always that same standard of service and product.

One of the main reasons for its survival has to be the food. Having travelled the world with jazz musicians, most clubs that feature jazz seem to think that they have the right to gouge the patron due to their featuring upmarket music. Not so here.



*Tom Hare: when he and Bruce Viles first decided to open a jazz venue, they were drawn to this eerie abandoned print shop that was in need of being pumped out, shored up, and outfitted....*

One of the most pleasant experiences of dining at The Basement is getting the tab . . . seldom surprising, it is amazingly low for the quality of food served. And again, it has been consistent through the past couple of years. And the menu changes often enough to not get bogged with the same choices.

But the real secret is the music. Through the years, the club has been setting trends rather than following them and at the same time has presented music that doesn't stray so far from general public tastes that it alienates the audience. Over the years, The Basement has served as a launching pad for many burgeoning jazz artists as well as being a 'home' for some of the best exponents of funk, fusion, and farther reaches of the genre.



*Galapagos Duck at The Basement, L-R, Col Nolan (piano), Chris Qua (bass), Greg Foster (trombone), Len Barnard (drums), Tom Hare (flute)...*

After all, it started with musicians and for musicians. When Bruce Viles and Tom Hare first decided to open a jazz venue, they were drawn to this eerie abandoned print shop that was in need of being pumped out, shored up, and outfitted. Through the diligent sweat of the original members of Galapagos Duck and friends, the black hole soon evolved into a reasonable facsimile of a jazz club and the opening was as low-key as the location.

As they built the place with their hands and hammers, the Duck soon built a following, playing every night for little more than pocket change and food. A narrow doorway and slim stairway was the first taste of a smallish, minimalist subterranean hot spot that soon built a reputation for its musical and culinary fare.

Seating 120 and with 60 standees, it was always crowded on the weekends and soon the necessity for expansion seemed imminent. But it was not a choice to expand but the prodding of the local lawmakers that forced changes. The regulations governing clubs, fire laws, and hours evolved into a stricter code that soon saw The Basement in violation of the rules. There were no real hazards, but the law forced the first

improvements rather radically. As Chris Richards, manager for the past eight years recalls, "With the water problem we've had, our patrons stood a better chance of drowning than perishing in a fire." Chris outlined the changes as making a new entrance, moving the bar and stage, knocking a large hole in the floor for the expanded dining area and bar upstairs and conforming to the new array of regulations that had to be adhered to.



*Two Galapagos Duck originals: Tom Hare (left) and Marty Mooney...*

Five years later, the rules changed again, forcing the present renovations that have altered the appearance of the club at the same time as preserving the environment. But the recent upgrading has taken its toll in the finances of the club since it could not charge admission without obtaining two new licenses. Over the past six months, The Basement has had to rely on food and drink to pay the bills, but in the tradition of the club, it hasn't skimped on the entertainment. Rather, it has expanded a few areas with a view to bringing in more overseas and interstate performers in the future as the licensing problem becomes past history.



*The British R & B musician Georgie Fame: a regular favourite at The Basement...*

Although overseas artists have been at best a break-even proposition for The Basement in the past, Chris Richards says that they are considering several possibilities for next year. "There are very few jazz promoters who have survived here and we can't bring in overseas artists on our own but through partnering tours with other venues or going with a promoter who is already bringing an act in, we may be able to expand that part of our programming." Georgie Fame is scheduled for a return visit, having been a popular attraction for the past three years.

Other artists featured in the past include Freddie Hubbard, MJQ, Herb Ellis and Barney Kessel, John Scofield, Les McCann, Steve Erquiaga, Charlie Byrd and Art Pepper. The Basement has been careful not to stray too far beyond the bounds of average taste at the same time having little to choose from other than artists brought in for the Sydney Jazz Festival and through other promoters.



*The Melbourne singer/trumpeter Vince Jones: one interstate jazz artist likely to return when the licensing situation is resolved... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

One area that they intend to make up for this is by expanding the number of frequency of visits by interstate jazz artists. Vince Jones has played The Basement previously and is likely to return when the licensing situation is resolved allowing a return to paid admission. Chris has been considering artists from Melbourne, Brisbane and even Perth noting, "We think there is a place for them but they don't make the circuit touring unless there are venues that will book them and to a degree, that has been our problem in the past. But I think we'll have more in the next year in addition to our regular talent."

The main stable of talent for The Basement has consisted of Galapagos Duck, Kerrie Biddell, Errol Buddle, Crossfire, and others including Rivers and Co, Nebula, and assorted one-off nights with John Hoffman's Big Band and other concept specials.

But it has been Galapagos Duck who have remained the mainstay at the club. Starting out ten years ago at six nights a week then down to four and now regularly performing Thursday to Saturday, The Duck has seen many incarnations and has



always managed to stay in touch with a changing audience and fluctuating tastes in music. Chris states, “If it wasn’t for the Duck and Tom Hare, there wouldn’t be a Basement. They truly made the club.”

The history of Galapagos Duck would make another article but suffice it to say that they, more than any other performing band, have managed to expose more people to various forms of jazz than any other group in Sydney and possibly Australia. And their regular appearances at the Basement helped keep it afloat as well as giving them the freedom to experiment with new music on a regular and sophisticated audience.



*The singer Renee Geyer: her recent shows were a variance from their traditional music policy but they were extremely well received...*

The Basement is experimenting too. Recent shows by Renee Geyer were a variance from their traditional music policy but they were extremely well received, leading to thoughts of expanding the musical styles offered there. As Chris projects, “We’d like to try some cabaret style performers in the room and arrange more special concept nights centering around individual instruments, artists or groups of artists even including reunions of groups that have disbanded.”

The major visible change in The Basement is the interior. The bar downstairs has been relocated to the centre of the back wall facing the stage giving better sightlines for patrons at the bar as well as giving the rear part of the room more space. Another entrance/exit has been added to conform to the new licensing regulations, and a general upgrading of furnishings, seats and odds and ends has been incorporated into the renovation.

What hasn’t changed is the atmosphere ... the otherworldly quality that is unique to the room. The posters are still in place, the stage when empty gives an air of eager anticipation and when the place is in high gear with music and performers bouncing around the room, it is still the same ol’ comfort station — an oasis in the heart of the city.