
APPENDIX

PLAYING AROUND WITH ORGANISED NOISE

*(The following ramble is a more detailed look at the role played by music in my life. In **To Specialise is to Brush One Tooth** above I also dip into some of these matters in the latter bit of Part 2 and later on again in Part 3. I've tried not to duplicate much.)*

The family moved to Drummoyne from Birchgrove when I was about 3 or 4. I have no recollection of 4 South Street without there being a piano in the lounge room. It was a big, old, black-lacquered almost-in-tune upright whose brand eludes me. I'm sure Mum must have told me how they came to have a piano when they couldn't afford carpets, but I don't remember how it came about, and nor does sister Christine. Early in his career Australian historian Humphrey McQueen wrote about the Australian phenomenon of poor families who went to extraordinary lengths to grace their dwellings with the presence of a piano. To have a piano in the home somehow connoted sophistication and good taste, even though there would be little evidence of either in most working class homes. Our house in Drummoyne was the epitome of what McQueen was on about. I don't think you could say that either Mum or Dad was sophisticated by a long stretch, and as for musical taste, Dad liked Mrs Mills and *I belong to Glasgow* (when he was in his cups), and anything by Bing Crosby was Mum's cup of tea.

Mum didn't play, but occasionally Dad would pick out a tune with one finger and add a "stride piano" bass accompaniment with his left hand. The only drawback with this was that Dad never changed the left hand chord that he vamped with. It was a total bitzer of a chord that he had made up, and it was because of its harmonic indeterminacy that he almost got by with it because it almost fitted sometimes, and when it didn't fit it wasn't exactly way off. I used to describe it as a "floongy" chord. It was something like C, Fsharp, Gsharp and B natural. In a different, more harmonically advanced context, it was the sort of handful of notes that you might find under the fingers of Thelonius Monk, (but not repeated *ad nauseum*). Dad had no idea whatsoever about harmony or music theory – couldn't read it or write it, but he managed to swing (a bit) sometimes. Not that he played the piano very often, and once I'd started to learn he pretty well gave it away.

Around the corner from us lived a woman named Mrs Gowans. Her son played saxophone with the Les Welch band, a Sydney dance band of the time, and Mrs Gowans offered Mum her son's B flat school flute for me to play. Ten shillings changed hands, and I was now eligible to play in the Drummoyne Primary School Fife Band.

The fife bands that had been set up in many state primary schools in those days (the forties) were the brainchild of Victor McMahan. (It was in one of McMahan's school fife bands that Don Burrows began his stellar career). McMahan spent his time going around all the schools that had fife bands, and when he came to our school his arrival was awaited with breathless anticipation. How it came about I don't remember, but on one of his visits I found myself playing the *William Tell Overture* for him – something that I had worked out for myself by ear. He must have been somewhat impressed, because he asked me if I would join a special group of students who met on Saturday mornings somewhere near Wynyard Station. I can remember playing Colonel Bogey there along with about twenty other school flautists. I had been given the third part to play, and I found it, if anything, a bit boring. I felt nothing of the feeling I came to know later when you get carried away by being one of many playing together and it's all sounding right. I wasn't a particularly self-confident kid, and I went along to several of these gatherings of other students I didn't know, but it was all too strange and unfamiliar. I wasn't exactly enjoying

myself and I didn't really get to know anyone, so I chucked in the towel after about half a dozen goes. Not long after this I graduated from B flat flute to the lower-pitched E flat, which I continued to play till I left primary school. It had a warmer sound, I used to think. I have no idea what happened to it.

Next door to our place at Drummoyne lived a young woman in her twenties who played piano quite reasonably, in an amateur sort of way. Occasionally I would hear her playing when I passed their living room. I used to yearn to be able to play like her. And Mum had a friend a few blocks away who used to play what I now know as the Shefte method of piano playing. Their expertise seemed miles ahead of anything I could aspire to, and it served as a spur to my practice routine.

It was while I was in high school that I decided to buy some more piano lessons with the pocket money I had been earning delivering medicines for one of the local chemists. (I used to get 8/6d a week). I began taking legit AMEB-type piano lessons from a suburban music teacher/elocution teacher/ Eistedfodd buff, who was, to put it mildly, a hopelessly blinkered musical snob and I left after about six months.

My next move was to enroll with a different suburban teacher, but this time I went to her because she taught the Shefte method of piano playing mentioned earlier. This was a fairly basic tonic/chord left hand with the melody played by the right hand, and was looked down upon from a great height by people such as my previous blue-rinsed and blinkered teacher. For me, the best thing about it was that I learned to recognize chord symbols and play them, and it enabled me to move away from the canon of Dead White European Males and experiment with popular songs and make some tentative forays into jazz. One of the first songs I played using the Shefte method was *Are You Lonesome Tonight*. God knows why I remember that. When I began to get a bit proficient with this new style both Mum and Dad thought I was showing remarkable progress, mainly because they had little time for "classical" music and could actually recognize what I was playing. I was beginning to get interested in Trad jazz about this time, and would try to pick up by ear the chart-topping swing tunes of the day. To give you an idea of how naïve my tastes were, I was also practicing like hell to be able to play like Winifred Atwell. (I used to thread tissue paper through the strings in the piano to give it that "other piano" sound that Winifred used to exploit).

I think I would have been in 2nd or 3rd year at high school when *The Amateur Hour* held a talent quest at the Drummoyne Odeon picture theatre, looking for acts to use for their popular radio show. *The Amateur Hour* was the then equivalent of *Australia's Got Talent*, but, being on radio, it had nothing like the razzmatazz and fancy production values of the television spectacular we know today.

I was chasing the girls in the Drummoyne Presbyterian Fellowship at this stage, and I enlisted a gawky young teenager from the church group named Peter Hutchinson who played passable clarinet to join me in a musical trio with another, even younger drummer, whose name was Johnny Bolton. (Johnny lived on the waterfront at Drummoyne and sailed small boats, but, though a nice enough bloke, was generally considered to be a bit dim. The last I heard of him he was living the life of Reilly in Florida, looking after luxury yachts and making a fortune. He obviously wasn't as dim as we thought!)

Anyway, the three of us put our names down for the talent quest as a trio called *The Three Notes*. (Creative, eh?). I decorated the front of Johnny's bass drum with a big stylized quaver, and we met regularly to rehearse the songs we would play. I don't remember what we played, but we came second in the Quest at the Odeon (behind a sister act called the Taylor Sisters, who went on to minor teen success).

Coming second in the local Quest meant that we had to go into town and do another audition in the studios of 2UW (I think it was). We showed up and played our songs again, and when we had finished the producer came up to me and gently pointed out that when playing with others, the pianist should play some sort of accompaniment to

the solo voice, and not just play the same melody line along with him. That'll give you an idea of how much I knew about what! Chastened by this experience, I began to listen more closely to jazz players, and spent a lot of time trying to learn to do just that.

In those days (the 1950s) playing music was not a particularly cool thing for adolescent boys to indulge in, but it turned out that another student who lived in Gladesville played the cornet, but, like so many other things at my time of life his name had disappeared into the mists. I was pretty well into Traditional Jazz by this, and for a while we'd get together to play piano and cornet duets. You'd need to be much better musicians than we were to make much of such an instrumental combination, and I think our enthusiasm waned when we couldn't manage to make anything sound much good.

When I left high school, one of the first purchases I spent some of my newfound independent income on was a secondhand trumpet. I mentioned in *To Specialise...* that I began to take weekly lessons in my lunchtime from Gerry Goodwin, a big band trumpet player in Sydney at the time. Gerry was an odd bloke and very much a homophobe. At the start of every lesson I'd have to endure a diatribe about poofers that I didn't quite know how to respond to. In those days things were a lot harder for gay people than they are today – they were still widely despised – and I'd have to listen to his rants and just shut up and wait till he had finished and we could start the lesson. He was so regularly in rant mode on this topic that I began to wonder if he wasn't protesting too much.

Gerry was also a proselytizer of the “non-pressure” method of playing the trumpet. Instead of jamming the mouthpiece harder against your embouchure to get high notes, the non-pressure method encouraged you to be able to reach high notes just by the tightening of the multitude of little muscles that make up your embouchure. To achieve this end Gerry used to hang my trumpet mouthpiece from a string just in front of my lips, and I had to try to get a sound out of it without touching it with my hands. In fact, for the first six weeks' tuition I never got to put the mouthpiece into the trumpet, and had to practice making these farty sounds through the mouthpiece alone.

The trumpet is a harsh musical mistress. The muscles that make up your embouchure seem to quickly and easily lose their tone, and if you stop practicing for a while it can take you days or even weeks to get those little muscles fit again. I only stayed with Gerry for a couple of terms. The main reason for leaving was that, as far as I was concerned, there just wasn't enough actual trumpet playing going on in my lessons. In retrospect, I suspect that he wasn't exactly a shit-hot teacher. Gerry's rooms were in a musty rabbit-warren of upper floors over retail shops in King Street, and while I was having lessons with him I discovered that other musos rented other rooms in the warren as well. One of them was a student of harmony at the Con with jazz sympathies, and when I left Gerry I had a couple of terms of tuition in harmony from this young bloke. He would have been late twenties and again, his name has long gone. John Something, I think it was.

But the important thing that John introduced me to was an understanding of the rudiments of harmonic principles. It is still a vivid memory for me when the penny dropped about the Cycle of Fifths, and an understanding of why the Clavier had to be well-tempered around the time of Bach. I was somewhat in awe of the mathematical elegance of it all. Still am, actually.

Though I still couldn't play the piano all that well at that time, I could make more music on its keyboard than I could on the trumpet, and I began to put John's harmonic insights to good use on the goanna (as Dad used to call it). I was getting much more satisfaction out of my pianistic experiments than I was from the trumpet, but I realised that my playing technique on piano was pretty sadly lacking. John the harmony teacher told me of a long-toothed teacher at the Conservatorium who was patronized by some of Sydney's jazz piano players because he was prepared to teach piano technique skills only – divorced from the rest of the legit Con syllabus. His name was Ramsay Pennycuick, and I can remember thinking when I met him that his appearance and demeanour were quite Dickensian.

Mr Pennycuick (as I always addressed him -- it was obviously not a goer to call such an august old gentleman "Ramsay") was happy to take me on as a student, and he sent me home to practice Dohnanyi finger exercises and all sorts of other stuff to fast track my playing technique. We were sitting at the piano in his room at the Con one day when he asked me if I knew what an *appoggiatura* was. Then he asked me about *mordents*. I wasn't sure about either, given my unorthodox and eclectic musical education. The spottiness of my education became apparent when he said to me something like: "That's interesting. You answered a theoretical question about harmony last week that required an understanding of material that we don't teach until Harmony III, yet you didn't know material that we cover in Theory I." The lacunae in my musical education would follow me forever.

I'm having a bit of trouble remembering what happened when in my earlier life -- how various stages fitted together and in the right sequence. I think that when I started to focus on the piano again was about the time that Bob Anderson introduced me to Bill Pownall (See *To Specialise...*) and I began playing jazz piano with them and a drummer named Al Harrison we picked up from somewhere. It was when Bob and Bill and I began to play together regularly that my jazz playing took off -- not in terms of a spectacular career or anything, but in terms of my becoming quite the jazz *aficionado*. We met weekly, and I learned a helluva lot from them. What's more, it was through Bill and Bob that I met alto player Norm Weiner (who later became the principal oboist with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra), and Dick Letts, who was then one of Sydney's most accomplished young jazz players, and who later became Director of The Music Trust, founder and former Executive Director of the Music Council of Australia and Past President of the International Music Council. Many years later Telford brought Dick and his opera-singer wife up to *Wirrimbirra* a few times, and I was desolated to hear that he didn't play piano much any more as his life was so full of his work in the Australian musical administrative bureaucracy that he couldn't find time to.

Norm Weiner tells the story of doing a job with Dick at the St James Hotel, kitty corner to David Jones' store in Elizabeth Street. The St James is long gone now, of course. Anyway, the piano was so out of tune that Norm couldn't tune his alto to it, so they tuned up to B flat instead of A, which meant that Dick had to play everything a semitone up from the written key. This meant that a B flat blues had to be played in B natural, a song in F had to be played in F sharp, and so on. This is fiendishly hard to do unless you're an absolutely top rate musician, and Dick played the whole night that way without turning a hair.

Dick lived in Bellevue Hill at the time, and he agreed to give me some one-on-one tuition in jazz piano. The first time I arrived at his house I could hear him playing as I walked up to the door. I stood outside and listened. He was playing *Christopher Robin is Saying his Prayers*, and what he did with that tune blew me away. For reasons I don't remember (again) I met weekly with Dick for only a few months, but he taught me much.

I used to play squash with Norm Weiner once a week at Bondi, near where he lived. Norm was a funny sort of bloke -- I remember he had an aversion to people telling jokes, for some reason. He was learning oboe at the time and supplementing his income with paid gigs. He used to practise oboe 8 hours a day, and I can remember thinking that such monomaniacal dedication seemed like a big price to pay for his art, because his everyday existence was all but monastic. Still, it set him on the track to where he wanted to go musically. Last I heard I think he was with one of the big European orchestras.

Occasionally Dick, Norm and Bill Pownall would put on an afternoon of music for invited friends, and I used to go along and lap it all up. I thought it was terribly cool -- all these sophisticated music lovers, and I was somehow among their number! It was all very new and exciting for me, and a mile away from my suburban Drummoyne existence. I was still living at home (I was in my very early twenties by this), and one day Norm approached me with a proposition that I was entirely unprepared for. Norm and Dick and another muso I new slightly were going to all live together in a share house in the

eastern suburbs, and they wondered if I would like to move in with them and make up the fourth. I was almost in awe of these people. They were such bloody good musos that to move in and live with them and have music as the dominant activity, as practised by such proficient instrumentalists, was a very exciting project for me. By this stage I was playing piano well beyond the level of my childhood role models – the girl next door and Mum’s friend Jean – but I wasn’t a musician’s bootlace compared to these guys.

But, after a good deal of thought, I knocked back the opportunity.

The dreadful truth behind my decision was that I wasn’t ready to leave home. I think I was a bit afraid of making such a precipitous step – and I wasn’t all that well-endowed with self-confidence. I was a bit like those “family freeloaders” of today who are loath to give up all the perks that came with living with your parents. Whatever, I just wasn’t ready. I often wonder how different my life might have been had I accepted the offer and I still have severe misgivings about being too wussy to grab such an opportunity with both hands and get on with the business of growing up.

Bill Pownall was Print Production Manager with the George Patterson advertising agency (huge), and I was Print Production Manager at Nicholls-Cumming (tiny). We used to meet at the pub on the corner of Bridge and George Streets, where Bill introduced me to drinking rum and gingers. Then we’d saunter down George St a little to where the Andronicus Coffee outlet was (people used to stand outside on the footpath six deep drinking their proper coffee, such was the dearth of real coffee in Sydney in those days). Quite near the Andronicus shop was a rather quaint little record store, and Bill introduced me to a coterie of earnest jazz enthusiasts who used to gather at lunchtime every week to listen reverently to the latest modern jazz releases that the record store had brought in from America. Not a word was said while the music was playing, but when it stopped there was much recondite discussion, usually at a level that was too abstruse for me. But I felt part of the “In” crowd, I suppose.

After I’d built up some confidence playing a few gigs with Bob Anderson and Bill Pownall, I was soon gigging quite often with Norm Weiner, with Bill joining us sometimes as well. I signed up with an agent, Wally Norman, who used to be a trombone player in his own Big Band before he set up his agency. I’d ring Wally on a Thursday, and he’d tell me where he’d booked me for the following Saturday. Every so often the gig would specify formal attire, and when this happened I used to borrow my mate Brian Thackeray’s powder grey tuxedo and bow tie.

Working through Wally Norman also meant that quite often I wouldn’t know who I was going to be playing with until we were on the job. This was the case with a gig I did at the Narrabeen Surf Club, where the drummer who turned up was a very young John Pochee (now a star of some magnitude in the local jazz scene). Of course I had no idea how his musical career was going to turn out – to me he was just an over-enthusiastic youngster who was OK as a drummer, but who played much too loud. It is with some embarrassment that I have to admit to giving him a bit of advice that night about his playing, which, of course, was not taken with any sort of gracious acceptance.

I remember another job that Bill P and I did at the palatial home of David Crystal, a plutocratic shirt manufacturer who lived south of Sydney at Kangaroo Point. It was some sort of gathering he’d organized, and Bill and I were required to play quiet, tasteful cocktail music in the background, which we did. We played through the dinner period, and when that was over we were taken out to the kitchen and given the most sumptuous meal I think I’d ever eaten, with good wine, lobster and all sorts of fancy stuff. Being of impeccable working class credentials and Drummoyne background, I was more than a little taken aback by the scale of the whole thing. We even got paid over the award, and we drove home jubilant.

At that time I had bought my first car – a Singer 9 4-seater convertible. It had mechanical brakes and a 4-cylinder engine and a three speed gearbox. Like all Singers, there was a structural design fault in the aluminium body and, like all Singers, the

bodywork behind the back bumper was, as I used to joke, held together with Bostick and string. It was not a roomy car inside, and the contortions required to load Bill's big five-string bass into it were a sight to behold. We covered many miles to and from gigs together with the bass taking up the passenger seat (leant forward) with Bill crouched beside it in the back seat.

I was still in the Presbyterian Fellowship for a fair bit of my teens, and for two years running we put on two Revues in the church hall. Don McDonald (who went on to be the CEO of the Australian Opera and Chairman of the ABC) and I were the prime movers behind these productions. The music for the whole show was provided by me on piano and Bill Pownall on bass. I'd love to hear a recording of these shows, as I'm curious as to just how bad we were.

By this I was playing piano for money regularly, and one day Dick Letts rang me up and asked me if I could do a gig at the Eastwood Rugby Union Club, as he had had a better offer. I didn't know the other three members of the group at all, but we got through the night OK – until the club treasurer came and told us (at the end of the evening) that they hadn't booked us and we weren't going to be paid. For some reason I ended up being the main spokesperson, and I lost my block with the treasurer and threatened to go to the Musicians' Union about it (not that any of us were actually in the Union). I finally prevailed and they reluctantly handed over the moolah, but ever since I've had a sour attitude to the Eastwood RU football club. The thing that stuck in my craw most was that they waited till we'd played all night before telling us that we hadn't been booked.

Round about this time I began to play a few jobs with Frank Fordham, who was, among other things a wind instrument repairer and technician. Frank put a bug on my flute so I could amplify my flute sound, which made it much easier to play and be heard in noisy contexts. After a while we became the house band at the Locomotive Hotel in Lidcombe. We played there every Saturday night for about six months. In those days the standard of musicianship was pretty low (after all, even I was getting work), and it wasn't uncommon for bass players to pluck away with very little musical knowledge – just playing anything that fell beneath their fingers. If they happened to be in the right key it was a fluke.

One night when Bob A, Bill P and I were having a jam at Bob's place in Dundas, Bob brought out some old photos of when he used to rehearse in the back room of a Campsie milkbar with a big band whose name I have forgotten. They were the house band at *The Trocadero* for decades. Was it Frank Coughlan and his Cottonpickers? Anyway, Bob was a regular alto player with the band, and among the photos that Bob brought out was one of pianist Terry Wilkinson, (I used to go to the Ling Nam restaurant in King Street to hear him play). What floored me was that in the photo Terry was still wearing short pants, and it transpired that at the time he was only 14! And I was flat out distinguishing his playing from that of Teddy Wilson when Wilson was playing with Benny Goodman. The precociousness of this teenager knocked me right out, and it discouraged me mightily. I didn't touch the piano for weeks.

Fast forward a few years and I was still working at Lintas in Wynyard House as an Account Supervisor. We used to meet at lunchtimes in the Projection Room where the clients were shown TV commercials and listen to jazz records that people would bring in to share. I still remember the day that John Canny brought in Nina Simone's first album. It was the first time I had heard her and I couldn't get over her driving, masculine style. Shame she succumbed to the drug dangers lurking in the music biz.

The Creative Director of Lintas at the time was Bruce Harris. He is Rolf's elder brother. I was working late one night when Bruce came through the offices with Rolf in tow. There was a gauche young guitarist working in the art department of Lintas then. His name was Doug Richards, younger brother of the pop idol Dig Richards. Doug and I were playing flute and guitar duets in one of the commercial artists' office when Bruce and Rolf hove on the scene, (I told you I was working late) and it wasn't very long before Rolf went and got his didge and joined in with us.

[I had another experience playing with a digeridoo. I was at the inaugural Aquarius Festival that Graeme Dunstan and others had set up at Nimbin. Philippe Petit was walking a slack wire fastened between the pub and a building across the lane, and there were crowds of people watching on. Then Charlie McMahon came along with his didge (do you remember him? He used to have a hook for a hand), and in no time Charlie and I were playing flute and didge improvisations.]

My then wife Gill and I migrated to Canada soon after we were married. We lived there for the best part of two years. On the way over I bought a C concert flute while we were in London and practiced it pretty regularly while we lived in Montreal. We spent some six weeks in Toronto before one of my job applications took us to Montreal, and I felt like I was in heaven to find that for the price of a beer I could go down to the Brown Derby tavern and listen to luminaries like Bobby Hackett and Oscar Peterson all night.

We had arrived in Canada in the autumn, which was not the most propitious time to be looking for a job, as the severe winters caused unemployment rates to soar over winter (I can remember smiling at the double entendre on signs that the authorities had put up all over town: "Do it now, while men are available"). While waiting to strike paydirt on the job front, I saw an ad for a summer school for jazz pianists down in Niagara Falls that was being run by none other than Oscar Peterson. The fees seemed reasonable to me at the time, and I was in an agony of indecision about whether I should eat into our dwindling funds and grab this opportunity. Unfortunately, as so often happens with great opportunities, economic sanity prevailed and I decided against enrolling in the course. What an opportunity lost! I think, had I been able to afford it, that I would have paid the cost of the course just to meet Oscar!

When we came back to Australia I was delighted to find that the musty old Conservatorium of Music in Sydney had begun a Jazz Studies course. Don Burrows and George Golla were involved with setting it up, and a little later the Con brought out Howie Smith, an American sax player, to oversee and consolidate the course. It didn't take me long to decide to enroll in a group improvisation class of about a dozen musos which was run primarily by Don, and where George used to come along every so often.

The classes were run in the early evening, and one night Don was talking about perfect pitch, and how to be more adept at hearing intervals. He went behind the piano, which was facing the class, so we couldn't see his hands. "OK. Have a stab at this," said Don as he played a chord. "What is the root note?" There were some guesses, and it turned out to be a B flat. Then he made anarchic jangling sounds on the piano to blot out what had just gone before. Another chord. "What's the root of that one, then?" I had been concentrating on trying to carry the previous chord in my head, and when I heard the new chord I simply counted up the semitones between. I raised my hand and said: "Is it D?" (I can still remember the actual notes in question). I turned out to be correct, but I felt that I should admit how I came to the answer, so I told the class what I had done. "That's fine," said Don, "it doesn't matter how you get there as long as you get there. It's still a par on the card even if it goes into the hole off a tree."

One night I had arrived a bit early for the lesson, so I dropped into a coffee shop across Macquarie St from the Con for a caffeine hit. Don was sitting in a cubicle doing the same thing, and he invited me to join him, which I was happy to do. Don is a really nice bloke – what you see is what you get -- and he is every bit as affable and friendly as he appears. In the course of our chat Don mentioned that he had noticed a minor fingering bad habit I had developed, and suggested that I might like to take a few private lessons from him at his home in Sydney's south. I had about half a dozen lessons, but I had to curtail them because I was due to go to Europe on sabbatical leave. I was impressed to find that Don still practiced daily, and at that time he was playing exercises that entailed him playing bottom C, then straight up to E above the stave, then back to C up

to high E, F and G – and done very softly. God he had control of his instruments!

Having been studying with Don and being given his tick of approval as it were I felt that I was probably playing as well as I had ever done, and it was on my stopover in Singapore on my way to England that I was emboldened enough to go to the jam session of international musicians at the Apollo Hotel that I mention in *To Specialise...*

When I returned from my sabbatical I re-enrolled at the Con. This time I signed up with a quartet that was mentored by the late Roger Frampton. I was on flute, and we had piano, drums and bass played by blokes who were considerably younger than I was. I think we played some fairly reasonable stuff when we met as a group at the Con with Roger. It demanded all of whatever flute competence I'd developed, and probably a bit more, but during the classes I was happy to be up there pushing the edge.

At the end of the year the Jazz Studies Program had organized a rather large concert in the Joe Post Hall for the jazz students to show off their stuff. The substantial audience was almost entirely made up of musicians, and I wasn't exactly relaxed when we walked onstage. We played three pieces, and I can remember two of them – *Crystal Silence* by Chick Corea and *Con Alma* by Dizzy Gillespie. The first tune of the set must have gone alright because I don't remember anything about it. *Crystal Silence* is a slow ballad, and we did OK with that, too I thought. But I can't say the same for *Con Alma*. It's a much more up tempo tune, granted, but when the very young drummer broke into his eight bar intro he did so at a cripplingly fast pace. I simply wasn't up to it. I had no hope of playing the theme that fast, let alone improvising on it. Starting again wasn't an option (though, in retrospect it might have been better than continuing with the almighty fuck up that resulted). I think it would be safe to say that, especially given the venue and the audience, this was probably my most embarrassing public performance ever. (It was even worse than the time many years earlier when I was in a group playing dance music for an anachronistic Debutante Presentation at a decrepit hall somewhere in North Sydney. We were required to play the national anthem at some stage, and I had never played it "from the dots" – indeed I didn't even have a copy of the dots with me. In the end the geriatric saxophone player sat down at the piano and played it for me. Yet another example of a spotty musical education I guess).

Fast forward a few years and I'm living at *Wirrimbirra*. I'd been out of the university racket for a few years by this, when I happened to run into one of my colleagues from UNSW who had since moved to Newcastle Uni. He mentioned to me that there was a sociology lecturer at the Ourimbah Campus of Newcastle Uni who played trumpet and was an enthusiastic jazz buff. His name was Mike Goddard and I gave him a ring at the uni. Mike is quietly-spoken, astonishingly well-read on matters jazz, and a trumpet and flugel horn player of roughly the same musical proficiency as I was. He has a collection of jazz CDs that takes up an entire wall of his living room. Mike came to *Wirrimbirra* for lunch one day, and we played some trumpet/keyboard duos (which I am pleased to remember were considerably better than the cornet/piano trad stuff I had tried all those years ago). Then Mike met a bass-playing mathematician, Andrew Kepert, and soon we had become a trio. We used to rehearse in a lecture room on the Ourimbah campus once a week. We called ourselves *Miss Jones*.

When a student called Alfredo Zotti joined the group on piano, I switched to flute. Alfredo's father was a musician who had done all sorts of top-drawer stuff in Italy, and Alfredo was a better piano player than I was. It turned out that Alfredo had a troubled relationship with his old man, and was a few cogs along the bipolar spectrum. We played as a quartet for a year or two, and played the odd gig at the Uni, until one night when we were rehearsing on campus Alfredo chucked a wobbly for some reason and stormed out, never to return. I continued to play with Miss Jones until the osteoarthritis in my hands got so bad that I had to stop. Although the remaining three of us continued meeting weekly for some years, we never actually got around to recording anything.

(After the breakup with the group I continued to meet with Alfredo at his house, where we used to play and record stuff that Alfredo had written. A handful of these recordings are accessible on my website in the Music Drawer under *Abacus*).

Looking back as I write this, I've realised that, taken all up, I didn't have all that many lessons in my explorations of music. For one reason or another I didn't stay with any teacher for all that long. No wonder my grasp of things musical was so spotty! But once the jazz bug had bitten me I was reading everything I could get my hands on. I read everything from autobiographies of famous jazz artists from the early days of new orleans trad jazz through to contemporary players and treatises on jazz itself.

In those pre-digital days you used to have to pay around 85 bucks for one of several Fake Books, which would give you the melody line, the chords and the lyrics for about 100 songs, many of which you wouldn't be interested in. It was quite an expensive business to get hold of charts and sheet music in those days. Fast forward to the Internet era, and now you can get chords, melody, lyrics and even arcane exegeses about any song you can think of -- for nothing! What a difference that would have made to my bumbling explorations! I could nut out the chord structure of most songs, but there were some lulus that weren't within my reach, like Billy Strayhorn's *Chelsea Bridge*, or his *Lush Life* (and many others, of course). And of course once the Internet got into full swing you could spend hours on it just browsing for just about anything. I spent a long time trying to emulate some of Oscar Peterson's licks when I was younger, mostly to little avail, but these days you can find answers to abstruse things like that in dozens of free sites that let you into the secrets of jazz playing.

It was when I became involved in a relationship with Isabelle Fogarty that music began to really feature at *Wirrimbirra*. Isabelle herself played guitar and bass, and her eldest daughter Sarah played very proficient guitar and sang wonderfully. Through them I met guitarist and vocalist Wal Carslaw and the late Hicksie, who was Wal's favourite drummer. Is and her three girls also sang group stuff when called upon.

Is was a member of a folk group called the *New York Public Library*, which also featured John Flanagan. Flano used to write much of the stuff for the TV show *Hey Dad* and is the father of comedian Kitty. All these musos and more used to find their way to *Wirrimbirra* and usually stay overnight. There were many bleary-eyed breakfasts of bacon and eggs and beer on the barbecue the next morning.

There was an old bloke down the valley who was a local character – dead now, unfortunately, though he did make it to 93. His name was Ron LeSeuer, and he was a legend in the district. He and his wife Betty were given to marking Big Birthdays with rip-roaring parties, always with plenty of good music. For one of these bashes (which were held in an old church hall that Ron had relocated from further down the road) they hired Wal Carslaw, Sarah, and a really good piano player who I am ashamed to be unable to remember. It was a great night. I even played a bit of flute. But about one thirty it began to rain in torrents, and soon the creeks were running bankers and the dirt roads were a mush. There were quite a few cars at the gathering, and it was a bit touch and go for the non-4WD drivers to get out up the slippery road, with 4WD owners waiting near the worst bits in case somebody needed a tow. They were the sort of great times you look back on when you're in your anecdotage – which is exactly what I am doing right now, I suppose.

Isabelle's eldest daughter Sarah and Kevin Hunt, a then-young piano player of prodigious talent, were an item for a time when *Wirrimbirra* was in it's heyday, and I used to stand and watch, mouth agape, as he made magic on my decrepit piano. He was a very generous bloke, and he was always happy to sit down and play. And boy! Could he play!

My preference for jazz did not obliterate my appreciation of DWEM (Dead White European Males) music. I used to get quite a bit of pleasure playing duets “from the dots”. I mean, it’s hard not to be swept away by a Bach Fugue, or soaring on a flute version of *Pavanne for a Dead Princess*, or getting it right when playing a Mozart concerto. But that’s the thing about playing from the dots – you’re playing what somebody else has composed. Every time you play a specific “classical” tune there is only one collection of notes which are acceptable. There is very little room for your own interpretation (though there is some, of course).

By this time I was into my sixties, and I couldn’t do as much as I used to be able to. My fine motor skills seemed to be disappearing and it was getting frustratingly harder to swing when I was playing. Claude Aliotti had organized a party for his daughter Gilly, who was visiting home from her base in Los Angeles, where she has carved out a successful musical and entrepreneurial career for herself as Gilly Moon. As at all Aliotti parties, live music was the go, and the night was a succession of pick-up groups chosen from the musos attending. Sometime during the night I sat at the piano with a motley collection of guitars, rhythm and occasional vocals. We did about three numbers. I think.

The next time I saw him Claude handed me a CD onto which he had burned the portion of the party music that I had taken part in. I took it home and listened to it, and I was absolutely appalled! I hadn’t realized how much my playing had deteriorated – to the point that you’d have to say it was just plain Bad. I was ashamed of it

For a while after that occasionally I’d sit at the keyboard at home with the Record button on, dial up an accompaniment, and try to play something, but whenever I listened to it back, the results were so riddled with passages that didn’t work that eventually I got so discouraged that I just gave up altogether. To have known the thrill of really swinging with a group, and then to find that you could no longer do it was a uniquely dispiriting experience.

But I did get into music deep enough to have experienced feelings and understandings that are like nothing else – that I have found in no other experiential category. That’s the great thing about music – it’s like nothing else. It’s a bit like a lot of things, of course, (it’s mathematical in some ways, it’s sort of poetic, it’s abstract, and so on) but taken all in all it is unique. It touches parts that other stuff can’t reach. Where else can you get that feeling when you are in a group, of being really in a groove and cooking like hell? For me it’s got a touch to it of what it would be like white-water rafting – sort of being hurtled along at a thrilling rate. And when the group musical effort also involves improvisation, and it’s all going along well, for me it feels like you’re on the lip of a breaking wave that is exhilarating because you’re not entirely in control of what’s going to happen.

I’m grateful that I’ve had these experiences, and if it was so great for someone at my level of musicianship, I can’t begin to get my head around what the experience of improvising must be like for the Really Greats – where I presume the stakes are that much more challenging.

When Lorraine began weaving, she started off with a conventional loom and would weave beautiful patterns that she followed from a set of instructions like in a knitting pattern book. The analogy with “playing from the dots” was obvious. And it was even more obvious when Lorraine moved on to the Japanese Saori loom which is a much more intuitive way of weaving, where you make up the pattern as you go and don’t follow written instructions. As soon as I saw what she was doing on the new loom I exclaimed: “You know, compared to the earlier stuff you were doing, I reckon that when you use the Saori loom you are doing the weaving equivalent of playing the blues!”. I still think this is so.

During my childhood in Sydney suburbia in the ‘40s and ‘50s “classical” music was

“proper” music. All the rest was lowbrow and, by definition insignificant. Although there was plenty of jazz around, it was still tainted by its much earlier associations with brothels and low-life joints and ‘serious’ musicians were dismissive of the idiom (like the ‘legit’ teacher I had in my teen years). Nobody had heard of World Music. I don’t think I ever heard an Indian raga in my childhood. I certainly had never heard any of the musicians from Mali, or anything from Africa for that matter. You could say that, up until a few decades or so ago, Europe dominated the music of the world the way it dominated the colonized countries of the world. “Classical” music more or less colonized the planet, musically. And it held sway until the emergence of jazz in the ‘20s (and its subsequent musical manifestations) and the slowly growing awareness late in the 20th century of exciting and different sounds that had continued to simmer away in the colonized countries and burst forth as the world shrunk and was forced to confront its previous musical small-mindedness.

The fact that we, as a species, managed over many centuries to devise a way of making marks on paper that enabled us to communicate via written instructions precisely what to play, is to me a splendid achievement. Of course it has been overshadowed of late by the miracles we can bring to music using digital technology, but working out a written code to stand for what was happening musically was, I suppose, one of the principal reasons that DWEM music was so influential for so long.

Music is another language. The congruences are irresistible. Like speech, we’ve worked out a way to write it down. Like speech, it has rules, but in both speech and music the rules are often broken. Improvised music I find to be very like a conversation -- for it to work well everyone has to listen to what the others are saying before they decide what to contribute. So for me a flamboyant solo where dazzling technique is the dominant theme is like a loudmouthed bore at a social gathering. I suppose that’s why there are some jazz idioms that I don’t enjoy as much as others. I don’t much go for the waterfalls of hemidemisemiquavers that you get with Coltrane’s “wall of sound”, but I’ve quite liked some of the more pensive and more lyrical stuff from other times in his career. Similarly, with one of my heroes of the keyboard and significant influence on my own paltry efforts at improvisation, Oscar Peterson: I was not pleased to hear him, in the latter part of his career, emulating the florid and bombastic and ostentatiously prodigious keyboard technique of Art Tatum. It was like listening to a different Peterson. (Tatum is known as the “piano player’s piano player”, but I have to admit that his style has never appealed to me).

So much of what I appreciate about a really good jazz performance stems from a personal understanding (however amateurish) of what the player is trying to do. To know how difficult it is to play really high notes on a wind instrument – I’ve tried (and so often failed) to do this with both a trumpet and a flute – I can’t help feeling that having some conception of how hard it is to do must colour my appreciation, heighten it, when I listen to James Morrison, say, compared to what someone might feel if they have absolutely no idea about the degrees of difficulty posed by much of what they hear. It’s the same with instrumental virtuosity in general. If you can hear (and understand) Bill Evans when he is playing alternative harmonies behind a song, surely you’re going to appreciate it in a different and more complex way to the musically-naïve person who likes what he hears. There’s an obvious analogy here with “I don’t know anything about art, but I know what I like.”

And now that I’ve played neither instrument for some fifteen years now, when I look back at the amount of my life time that I used up on practicing, how much self-denial and self-discipline it took to do that, it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that I must have been a bit of plodder of merely some talent, (but not a lot). Because after all that rigorous effort I reckon I should have been a much better musician that I turned out to be. But although I may look back with dismay at the time I’ve spent practicing trying to play music of various sorts, and rueing the relatively sparse outcome, I am glad to have got into music enough to have, I think, some understanding of what’s going on musically -- to a degree that enhances my appreciation of good stuff when I hear it. I get it, even though I could never do it all that well.