

EL ROCCO: BEYOND THE MAINSTREAM

by John Clare*

*[This is an excerpt from John Clare's book *Bodgie Dada & The Cult of Cool*, published in 1995 by University of New South Wales Press. Reproduced with permission.]*

On the ledge of a red phone box in Darlinghurst in the late 1950s someone had written 'AUSTRALIA, LAND OF MEN WITHOUT WOMEN!' in thick black paint. If you walked back along Darlinghurst Road toward Sydney's Kings Cross, you would pass a number of coffee-shops that were usually filled with European men. Some of these expatriates were bearded. Many smoked pipes and there was usually a chess game in progress. Most women found the feeling of frustrated masculinity oppressive and soon asked to leave. One had the feeling that there were probably a number of formidable intellects there, with no-one to impress but each other. They were too alien to interest Australian women. Some of them ventured from these enclaves and visited El Rocco, a block away in Kings Cross itself, where their male singleness was somehow diluted.



Errol Buddle: the most daring thing you could do in the late 1950s was to listen to him at the El Rocco...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

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‘The most daring thing you could do in the late 1950s,’ Clive James once said, ‘was to listen to Errol Buddle at the El Rocco’. Daring had nothing to do with it for many listeners and musicians. By 1959, El Rocco had become the best and most famous modern jazz venue in the country and almost certainly one of the better clubs in the world. Certain factions would turn up for certain bands, but a sense that they were on to something beyond the mainstream was all that united the audiences on many nights. But there were hipsters there. Graeme Lyall said, ‘They always knew what



Graeme Lyall says there were hipsters at El Rocco... PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL AUSJAZZ.NET

were the best new records to hear. When I came up from Melbourne I remember saying that I liked Benny Golson on tenor, and immediately this guy said that I should listen to Billy Mitchell with the Dizzy Gillespie band. He knew exactly what I was looking for, and he knew where I could hear it. He was always on the ball. There were a number of these guys.’ For the newcomer it was very difficult to tell who they were. Unlike the hippies of the next decade, or the beatniks of their own era, the hipsters betrayed no obvious need to proselytise. Perhaps that would have seemed like the best way to wreck a good thing. If you asked their opinion, however, they would deliver it with a confidentiality that bordered on the secretive.

As long as you didn’t try to talk over the music, you were left entirely to your own devices at El Rocco. There was no sense that anyone was judging, or even taking any notice of you. Daring? It was a sanctuary from the Cold War ethos, from an aggressively conformist suburbia in which bronzed Anzacs invited you outside to digest a knuckle sandwich if you accidentally said ‘the magic word’ in front of a sheila.

The mother of a young Sydney musician told me that she used to go to El Rocco with some other girls from a drama class. 'We thought of ourselves as beatniks,' she said. 'We smoked cigarettes and dressed in black and tried to look pale and interesting. I found the music incredibly exciting, and I'm still interested in it.' Yet people who thought of themselves as beatniks were usually in the minority at El Rocco. Australian beatniks were more often interested in folk music (this is the scene from which Joan Baez and Bob Dylan emerged). Traditional jazz could conceivably be seen in these terms, but certainly not modern jazz. The notion that beatniks were the main audience for modern jazz stems from the belated publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Kerouac's novel was written in the 1940s. He called his protagonists



Jack Kerouac: he called his protagonists 'beats'...

'beats'. This meant, more or less, that they were beatific deadbeats who eschewed material concerns and pursued the pleasures of the moment. These pleasures included rhythm and blues and bop, the two sides of 1940s black music. Some fans of Dizzy Gillespie aped his little ziff or goatee, his beret and his glasses (if they themselves did not need glasses, as Dizzy did, they wore dark ones). Perhaps they



Some fans of Dizzy Gillespie aped his little ziff or goatee, his beret and his glasses...

looked a bit like the beatniks of the late 1950s, who had been named by a Los Angeles columnist, following the habit of putting 'nik' after everything (sputnik began orbiting in 1957). As Kerouac's novel was not published until the late 1950s, many readers have since assumed that he was writing about that era, instead of the 1940s. Many of the hipsters who went to El Rocco did resemble Kerouac's beats, in that they wore jeans and T-shirts or casual long-sleeved shirts. Few of them went in for the duffle coats and Jesus Christ mien of the beatniks.

Some of the younger musicians who began appearing at El Rocco developed a taste for Ivy League clothes and for the clothes worn by black musicians on the covers of Blue Note, Prestige, Candid and other East Coast independent record labels. In fact, the two styles were hard to distinguish. The blacks for their part liked the idea of looking like English gentlemen. Ivy League — the reference is of course to the elite American college circuit — did have some vague echoes of English country life. The button-down collars, for instance, were said to have been invented by fox hunters to stop the peaks of their collars blowing up into their faces as they cleared fence and hedge.

The big suits of the bodgies had shrunk down to these tight three-button jobs which, with small modifications, were worn by advertising executives, rock and roll singers on *Bandstand* and *Six O'Clock Rock* (where the trousers were a little tighter, the shoes longer and pointier), plus black jazz and rhythm and blues musicians. The three-button suit was probably the most versatile cultural signifier of all time. Young musicians at El Rocco rarely wore suits, however.

El Rocco proprietor Arthur James was a great fan of Ivy League clothes. He had friends in advertising and the clothing trade who often hung around with him at his desk near the bottom of the stairs, impeccable at all times. To the more anonymous hipsters, these guardians of the gate were a bit of a joke, even though one of them owned the place. They certainly did not set the tone for other regulars, although there were certain musicians among the immaculates — most notably the drummer Lennie Young, whose playing was also greatly admired.

In fact, there was no dress code. 'The crowd,' according to Bruce Johnson, 'was as heterogeneous as white middle-class Sydney could produce. There would be Cross people but also outlanders from straight society: professionals and academics, TV and film people with an interest in music as an element of visual theatre.' Nor was the audience, in fact, limited to the middle class. It is interesting that jazz is called elitist to this day, even by people who submit themselves to the style police on the doors of their favourite dance clubs. Indeed, the hipsters may have been practising a form of elitism, but not of the ostentatious kind we are familiar with in the 90s. As we shall see, there was a particular kind of elitism among some musicians, but the jazz club at its best is a temple of egalitarianism, and El Rocco was one of the very best anywhere.

Melbourne's Jazz Centre 44 was up in a sort of tower beside a fun fair by a wide bay. Its main performances took place in the daytime. The room was actually quite big. El Rocco was downstairs in a tiny room below an apartment block on the corner of Brougham and William Streets, Kings Cross, and it was very much a night place. Both became modern jazz clubs in 1957. El Rocco opened in 1955 as a coffee-shop. The original space was a boiler room. This could only be expanded by quarrying out several tons of sandstone. Those who assisted in this back-breaking task dubbed the place the Rock.

This was soon changed to El Rocco, which struck exactly the right tone for a Kings Cross coffee-shop. The Cross was in those days a very liveable environment in which an underworld (who didn't bother you so long as you didn't bother them, as the cliché goes) rubbed shoulders with an artistic and intellectual bohemia — to identify but two strands of the populace. Bassist and composer Bruce Cale, who later spent many years in America, said, 'Kings Cross was very akin to Greenwich Village then. There was a gangster element, but there was a lovely feeling of going to the Cross, to coffee-lounges, and talking about music until four or five in the morning.' One of those coffee-lounges was the Piccolo, which actually had a jazz jukebox. Knowing that musicians and chess-playing Europeans congregated here, Bumper Farrell's Vice Squad would sometimes rush in and sniff patrons' coffee to see whether they had put



Bumper Farrell: his Vice Squad would sometimes rush in and sniff patrons' coffee to see whether they had put whisky in it...

whisky in it. Rocco was a French saint. The artist Rocco Fazzari informs me that it also means a castle or fortification, but that it should be Il Rocco. 'El' is Spanish. In 1957, Arthur James — the manager of the coffee-lounge and son of the owner of the premises — installed a television. At a time when many people would stand in the street watching a TV set in a store window, this swelled custom. It might be imagined that TV was a despised symbol of materialism, but the fact is that musicians found certain shows to be very hip and came in to meet and to watch them. Steve Allen's show was popular, partly because he sometimes presented jazz musicians. Allen was probably the squarest-looking man in the world — such would-be hip touches as his

long sidelevers only emphasised his hopelessly square appearance — but he had good taste in music and played reasonable piano. On one occasion he accompanied Jack Kerouac as he read his poetry. A cartoon filler of almost subliminal brevity called ‘Tom Terrific’ was also popular. Melbourne drummer Alan Turnbull was given the name Tom Terrific and still answers to it.

The problem was that transmission finished at about 10 pm, leaving a certain vacuum. Drummer Ralph Stock suggested to Arthur James that a jazz group might be suitable on Sunday nights after the TV closed down. Stock then moved his existing combo from the Arabian Coffee Lounge to El Rocco. The Arabian was itself a most exotic place run by a flamboyant Russian woman who had come to Australia in the 1930s. It was upstairs near the El Alamein fountain. Bodgie David Perry remembers hearing two blonde women — sisters perhaps — scat-singing wildly at the Arabian in the early 1950s.

Needless to say, the jazz soon took over from the TV at El Rocco and more and more nights were thrown open to bands until the club was presenting contemporary music five nights a week. Some of the musicians who played there in the first couple of years were Don Burrows, Ron Falson, Col Nolan, David Levy, Judy Bailey, Ken Morrow, Joe Lane and Warren Leroy. Later, two distinct factions formed: the older musicians who were still largely involved with the cooler styles, and a younger group who wanted to sound hard and black. Bob Bertles said, ‘We heard what Don [Burrows] was playing as gentleman’s jazz. My idols were Sonny Stitt and Jackie



Sonny Stitt: one of Bob Bertles’ idols...

McLean — a cracking New York alto player. I liked the sound of that Jazz Messengers front line of trumpet and alto — Bill Hardman and Jackie McLean — that brittle sound, like a whip cracking, you know. It was happening. Of course we were very young. Now I draw from all areas, including Lee Konitz and Paul Desmond and try to make something of my own from it.'

Drummer Barry Woods arrived from New Zealand at the height of the hard/cool split. He began working on *Bandstand* with Don Burrows. 'Don was really helpful, until one night I said I'd been to the El Rocco and heard these guys Bertles and Keith Stirling, playing some fantastic music. Don hardly spoke to me after that.' Some older musicians — Errol Buddle and Frank Smith most notably — transcended these divisions, as did Burrows himself often enough on a purely musical level. Nor was the hot and cool split always along age lines. Dave Levy was a very young advocate of the Dave Brubeck school. 'I thought the hard bop stuff was disgusting,' he said, 'until I got stoned one day and listened to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. I wish I'd left it there as far as the pot was concerned. I remember seeing Bob Bertles leaning right forward over his saxophone, playing very hard, and I thought that was terrible. Later I began to think that East/West, Black/White division must have been created by writers.'



Don Burrows: along with Errol Buddle and Frank Smith, he transcended the divisions on a purely musical level...

While hard bop and cool jazz were mainstays at El Rocco, a great deal of experimentation went on that was not necessarily allied to either of these camps. For instance, I used to hear Errol Buddle playing very strong but elegant tenor in a band with Don Burrows and Judy Bailey. 'Yes, I started playing hard again when I came back to Australia,' said Buddle. 'I think it was my natural leaning, but it could have been a desire to let off steam after all the session work I was doing.' At certain times the rest of the band would drop out and Burrows and Buddle would play contrapuntal lines on clarinet and bassoon. A group of classical musicians, who had been rehearsing in an ABC studio near El Rocco, also took note of these duets and

remarked on how they moved spontaneously into some of the same harmonic areas that were embraced by the contemporary French music they had been rehearsing. This led to a highly successful jazz meets classical series in the cell Block Theatre of East Sydney Technical College.

Both David Levy and Bryce Rohde experimented with modal playing, and Levy was one of the first to present completely improvised or free interludes in which no element was predetermined. Rohde's band was devoted to American jazz composer George Russell's modal concept, and not only was it recognised as an important innovative unit, but its rather airborne but swinging feel and texture (with George Golla's understated electric guitar and Rohde's beautifully poised piano creating an effect somewhat reminiscent of gamelan) made it so popular that the band often

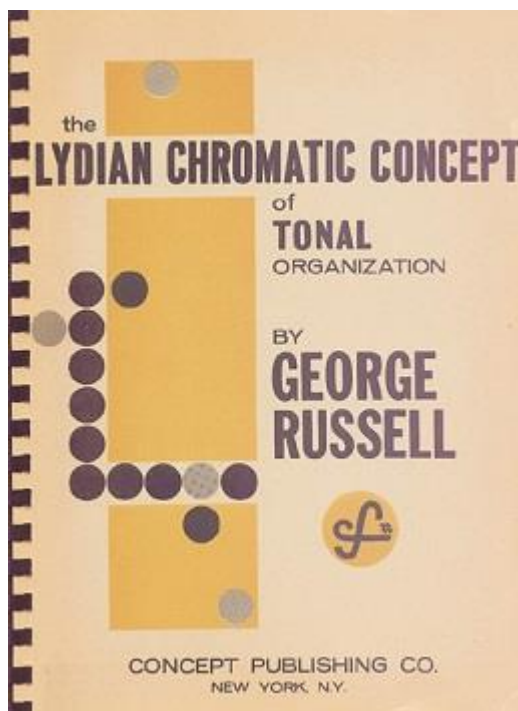


The Bryce Rohde Quartet, L-R, Ed Gaston, Colin Bailey, George Golla, Rohde...

played several nights a week at the club. The bassist and drummer in this superb band were Ed Gaston and Colin Bailey. Rohde was introduced to Russell's theories by David Buckwheat, the bass player in the folk group the Kingston Trio, for whom the Rohde quartet worked as an opener during their Australian tour. Buckwheat carried Russell's book (full title: *George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal*

Organisation) around with him, and Rohde heard him playing chords and singing scales and melodies to them in his hotel room.

I have described Rohde's music as airborne, and many others hear modal jazz generally as having a floating feel to it, but Rohde told me that it did not have to have that quality. Nor did he feel that it connected him with ancient methods of music-making. In fact, the Lydian concept did not represent a particular aesthetic to him. Rather, it was a method, and a means of organising his own thinking. 'It allowed me to write tunes I would never have written, and it allowed me to go "out" without losing my reference points, which can be very nerve-racking. I never took it to the edge of the cliff. When I heard Buckwheat singing scales with the guitar in that hotel room, it just seemed the purest thing to me.'

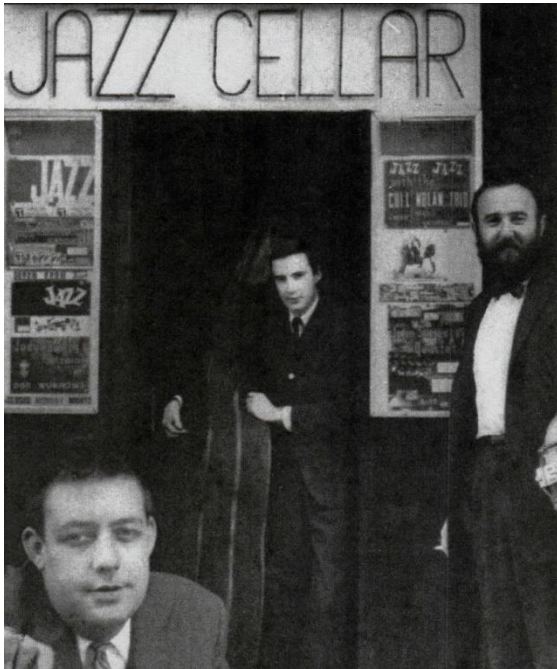


The cover of George Russell's influential book on the Lydian Chromatic Concept...

But this is not all. American alto saxophonist Bob Gillett introduced jazz and poetry and free improvisation to El Rocco. In the 1960s, John Sangster's experiments with free jazz, sometimes using accidental sounds as their starting point, were an important part of the psychedelic movement. They also packed the tiny place out.

Before we examine these developments in more detail, let us look at the ideal form that El Rocco had assumed by 1959. Above the narrow doorway a thin, condensed but rounded species of art deco lettering spelled JAZZ CELLAR in caps. This was not a neon, but raised lettering within a shallow lightbox, which was extended down a certain way on either side of the door, where current attractions were advertised in dynamic hand-lettering or elegant modern typefaces (you simply unlocked the light box and stuck the printed material in there). As a result, most likely, of the expansion of the advertising industry, this was an era that seemed very conscious of typefaces.

Reid Miles and other designers made great use of typography — which became the major design element on the covers of Blue Note albums. There was a sense that one should do as much as possible with existing fonts before breaking into the free forms of hand-lettering. Contrary to rumour, modern design and modern jazz thrived on rigorous discipline. It is difficult to know to what degree Blue Note covers influenced or drew on advertising.



Above the narrow doorway a thin, condensed but rounded species of art deco lettering spelled JAZZ CELLAR in caps...

Down in the cellar, the band played on the same level as the audience. In fact, a stage in such a tiny space would have been ludicrous. A false ceiling of hessian seemed to improve the acoustics and also to give the place a kind of sawdust-coloured ambience that aided concentration. The wooden tables were glass-topped and the chairs skeletal, with woven cloth backs. The walls were bare, except for a couple of sets of parallel wooden strips, or brackets, between which some photos of jazz musicians were fixed, giving a rudimentary Mondrian effect in black and white. The double bass could be played unamplified and, when the tiny place was packed with sound absorbing bodies, horns could be played hard and loud — and also very softly — without distortion. The sound was direct, and the performances were often very intense. I remember going down there and hearing Lyn Christie singing in unison harmony with his bass and thinking that this was the most eerie and evocative sound I had heard (of course it was a modern adaptation of a technique used by Slam Stewart in the 1930s), or reaching the bottom of the stairs with tenor saxophonist Keith Barr in full cry and thinking that it couldn't be much better than this in New York.

Arthur James made several unsuccessful applications for a liquor licence, but decided in the end that the place was probably better off without one. 'You couldn't



Bassist Lyn Christie: singing in unison harmony with his bass ... the most eerie and evocative sound...

get this to happen anywhere else,' he said. 'Once people start to drink, the main drawcard will be the drink. When you have that, they'll start to get more rowdy, and they'll listen to the music in a different way altogether. People go down there to have a drink. That'll be first, and then the music ... This is what made the whole place ... You sat in a room, all squashed up together — and they were in there like sardines — and you could hear a pin drop.'

John Sangster, who moved into a funny little penthouse on the roof (which had been vacated by drummer John Pochée) and stayed there through the life of El Rocco, puts it more bluntly: 'The coffee was undrinkable and the sandwiches were made of cardboard. There was nothing else to go there for. Just the music. It might have started to get a bit fashionable towards the end, but most of the time, people were there for one thing: the music.'

When pianist and composer Judy Bailey arrived from New Zealand, she found '...an atmosphere that I had not experienced before — or since. The coffee was awful, but the tea wasn't too bad. The diversity of people who went there was incredible. Over the years I've had many people come up to me and say they first heard me at this tiny little place. A lot of them can't remember the name, but as soon as I say it,



Judy Bailey performing at El Rocco with bassist Mike Ryan in the background: an atmosphere that she had not experienced before — or since ...PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

recognition dawns. The thing that strikes me is that these people come from all walks of life. I don't think there was any particular image, because jazz was — this is something that [Melbourne pianist] Tony Gould said — jazz was almost beyond culture. Many of us were drawn to the music before we ever got to see a photo of our heroes. I know I was. If an image came, it was later. The music came first.

'There are various brands of commercial jazz being played today, but this particular sort of modern jazz was pretty new. There was a fair amount of experimentation and people were more inclined to accept the experimentation with a certain curiosity, whereas I find that people today are more inclined to turn off when they hear something different. The music was very intense. There was a greater intensity.'

It seems to me that Judy Bailey might, understandably enough, be making a false comparison. At that time you might have had most of the people who were interested in hearing such experimentation all gathered in the one place. At the time of writing, an equally intense atmosphere can prevail on certain nights at contemporary clubs, but it can happen that the Strawberry Hill Hotel, the Basement and the Harbourside Brasserie (to use a Sydney example) can sometimes compete for such an audience on the same night, while a curious species of show business jazz can just as readily be encountered.

‘There was,’ said Bailey, ‘a certain underground element. What I might call the dark side of the underground. But in the 1960s the club became so popular that the darker side of the underworld virtually disappeared.’

Said Don Burrows, ‘I remember doing TV shows with other famous musicians like Errol Buddle, John Sangster and Graeme Lyall. If we weren’t on that night at the El Rocco we would always drive back as fast as we could to catch the last set of somebody else. It was that sort of place, which usually doesn’t apply these days, and the reason was the unpredictability.’

Pianist and composer Mike Nock, who arrived from New Zealand in 1958 and began playing in Johnny O’Keefe’s band, said that El Rocco was not all that different at that time from places in New Zealand. ‘See, it started as a coffee-shop. I mean, the TV was still there when I first saw it, and there was a coffee-shop scene in New Zealand that even sort of carried over into people’s homes.’



The 3-Out Trio in 1960, L-R, Mike Nock, Freddie Logan, Chris Karan: they caused a sensation with steaming, non-stop, bluesy, ecstatic power jazz...

Nock had left school at 14, and at 15 was on the road with a Maori band called Terry Kahi and His Royal Hawaiians. ‘We did quite a bit of starving in caravan parks, man. I’d made this incredible jump, after hearing ‘Jazz at Massey Hall’ on the Voice of

America, you know, with Parker, Gillespie, Bud Powell, and suddenly Winifred Atwell is no longer my hero, it's Bud Powell. Then these guys, after we met at a jazz session at Montega, they decided to give the Hawaiian stuff away. We got along really well and they had a great feel for jazz.'

By 1959, the TV was long gone and El Rocco was purely a jazz club. In that year Nock caused a sensation with his 3-Out Trio. With Dutch expatriate Freddy Logan on bass and Greek-born Chris Karan on drums, this trio played a steaming, non-stop, bluesy, ecstatic power jazz that was influenced by such Americans as Bobby Timmons and Oscar Peterson. At times these performances also included some 'free' improvisation without predetermined chord changes. Grimacing, his eyes screwed shut and his feet stamping, the small, wiry Nock was like a little monkey of passion. People queued around the block to get in when the trio was playing.

'That was a cathartic experience,' said Nock. 'There was a woman called Babs who used to sort of moan and keen through the music, and there were these characters who'd get up in that tiny space and dance by themselves. Dancing by yourself was very unusual in those days. Something happened there. We'd be sweating heaps and there'd be all these people going apeshit over it. The club was like a church then. It was like a black gospel church. Everything was new. We felt like an élite. You'd be stoned, walking the streets, and nobody around you knew. It was almost like the



John Olsen used to come to the El Rocco...

hashish clubs of France. Actually I was against all authority, and from an early age it was only the fear of missing out on the music that kept me straight, or I'd be in jail now. There was a whole scene around jazz. Jazz comics, like Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Ken Nordine. John Olsen used to come to the El Rocco. People like that. You know, everyone had the cool pads with the blue lights or the red lights. Cats who wouldn't come out until after dark. People who dressed immaculately. The music had a lot of

the blues in it. A lot of energy. It was the centre of most esoteric activity. Am I right in thinking that Rosaleen Norton the witch used to come down to the El Rocco?’

I told Nock that I thought not. Most people who were around in that era have a Rosaleen Norton story. A friend and I used to sit in the Kashmir coffee lounge opposite the Rex Hotel in Macleay Street while Norton painted a mural around the top of the walls from a ladder. We talked a great deal about art and music, possibly in the most excruciatingly earnest and naive terms and Norton seemed to grow older and more world-weary by the minute as this drivel floated up to her. To us she looked very old to begin with. I never saw her at El Rocco.



Rosaleen Norton the witch: did she come down to the El Rocco?...

Certain of Arthur James' friends would put whisky in their coffee, whether he was aware of it or not; joints were sometimes smoked on the roof or around the corner and the pub opposite was handy during the breaks, but El Rocco itself was not generally a place of such indulgence. The one drug raid there was a fruitless follow-up to a bust that had taken place elsewhere. Dave Levy was caught smoking a joint in his flat. Then, as a matter of form, the Vice Squad swooped again in ridiculous numbers while he was playing in the club. 'I'd just finished a tune, but there was no applause, so I thought I'd better just play the next one and hope that went over better. At that point I heard Sergeant Abbott's voice behind me, saying, "I think you'd better announce a break, David." I looked up and there were cops at intervals all around the walls. Of course, I didn't have anything on me. The whole thing was very distressing, though. They'd thrown me up against the wall at my place. In fact, one had a sledgehammer and another one had an axe and they smashed the door off its hinges. I was held in remand, sent to Goulbourn jail in a train with these two characters who seemed to be planning to shoot a warden and there was a headline in

the *Sydney Morning Herald* along the lines of “Jazz Musician on Sex Drug Charge!” That’s right, they still thought it was a sex drug. They wanted me to dob people in. All of that. I was amazed at how much information they had on people I knew. It was quite disturbing. As a result, I had a bit of a nervous breakdown.’

Heroin use was rare. Keith Barr, a truly great tenor saxophonist, arrived here from England with a heroin habit (and diabetes). He came in the band of Basil Kirchen, which was brought out by Lee Gordon to play in one of his clubs (we will have more to say about the strip clubs of the day in the next chapter). Kirchen was one of the first people busted for marijuana in Australia. Like Lester Young, with whom he had played on passenger liners in bands led by Tadd Dameron, Barr was of diverse and exotic descent — Armenian and Chinese — but spoke with a cockney accent. He took his place with Frank Smith, Errol Buddle and Bob Gillett as one of the absolute kings of the saxophone to whom all the young players looked for inspiration and guidance. Bob Gebert remembers Coleman Hawkins putting his arm around him and saying, ‘This is my man!’



Frank Smith (left), pictured here with another early stalwart at El Rocco, trumpeter Ron Falson... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

The tubby, genial, red-haired Smith had something about him of an albino Charlie Parker when he played. Perhaps it was the relaxed and centred stance. Bob Bertles said that he was, in fact, ‘...the Charlie Parker of Australia. He was so far ahead of his time. To me his playing sounded quite original. Like Charlie Munro. They were just really fine players who didn’t play like anyone.’ For all his ability, Smith was often

reduced to driving cabs. Smith was also a talented illustrator, and at one time ran a studio as a commercial venture. This was not successful. He is remembered not only for his natural musical ability and his creativity, but as a teacher. Graeme Lyall, in particular, was taken under his wing. Lennie Young was of course a big influence, musically, sartorially, and in the area of absolute coolness. Perhaps the most intriguing figure of the time, however, was the American alto saxophonist Bob Gillett.

‘That was one of the meetings of the era that you always remember,’ said Bob Bertles. ‘Like meeting Horst at the top of the stairs at Jazz Centre 44 with a bunch of records under his arm. I mean meeting Bob Gillett with a welding kit in one hand and an alto saxophone in the other, wearing long hair, sandals, a beard. Yeah, he was a welder by trade. I believe he’d had some disappointment in America. He was right into the black music scene and he was going to record with Max Roach but it didn’t come off. You might see him one day with the sandals, but then he’d be in a sharp suit. He told me once that he’d taught Art Pepper to play chord changes and I thought, “Oh yeah, Bob”, but years later I met an American musician from California and he told me that there was some truth in it. I once introduced myself to Miles Davis on a plane, and he asked about Bob Gillett*.



The New Zealand group Brew, L-R, Doug Jerebine, Bob Gillett, Tommy Ferguson, Yuk Harrison, Trix Willoughby ...

**Editor’s note: Bob Gillett died in New Zealand in 2013, aged 88. The NZ writer John Dix wrote: “It can be argued that Bob Gillett is the most influential musician whether immigrant or NZ-born, to have been domiciled in New Zealand.”*

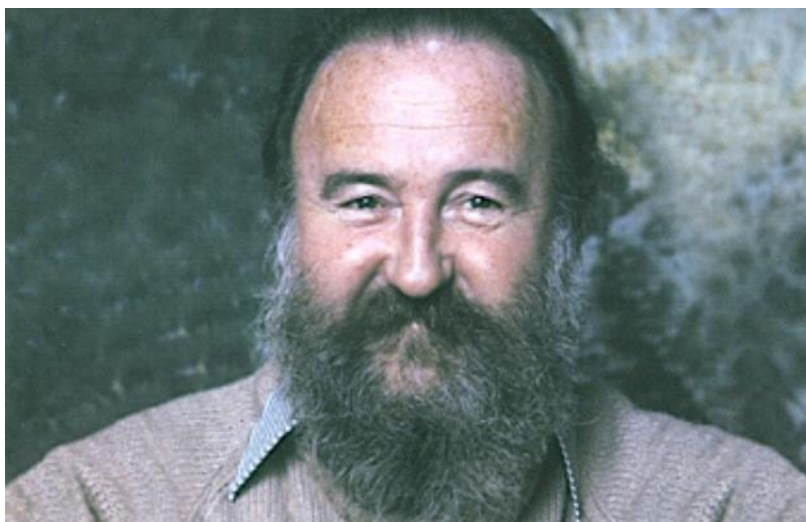
‘He got me to blow my saxophone once while he stood behind me and played the keys. Suddenly these things I didn’t think I could play flew out of the instrument and it had a very positive effect, because I knew then that it wasn’t my embouchure that was limiting me. I could actually make all those notes. The last time I saw Bob was in New Zealand in 1962. He was playing the drums in a cowboy suit with side arms and his head shaved.’

David Levy remembers Gillett as ‘...a real nomad. He travelled the world in a small leather suitcase with a bottle of whisky, two records — of musique concrete, as it happened — and an acetate of his own classical work which had come second in some competition. He was a very cryptic man who occasionally did you more harm than good when he was playing his games. But he was a phenomenal musician. He introduced us to various kinds of ethnic music and he had us improvising to poetry — in fact, I wrote some poetry myself later and, whether or not he played completely free music at the El Rocco, he inspired me to play some free music during my sets with my trio.’

Mike Nock remembers Gillett reciting poetry by the American Kenneth Patchen and ‘...wanting us to wear robes and act like religious people. He was extremely talented and probably a little bitter — otherwise, why would he have come to Australia?’

Dave Levy said, ‘I think Bob was prepared to be as outrageous as you needed to be in order to avoid driving cabs like Frank Smith — incidentally, I believe he and Frank were in awe of each other’s ability — but I think all that stuff was also his natural bent. There was quite a bit of that stuff around. Readings of Krishna Murti. Meditating before you played. I remember a musician called Barry Dillon getting me to read *The First and Last Freedom*.’

Bob Bertles agreed that there was ‘...a lot of that about — but I didn’t have anything to do with it. Saxophone was my religion.’



At one time I threatened to make a citizen’s arrest on John Sangster for excessive twinkling in public...

Almost as versatile a cultural signifier as the three-button suit was John Sangster's beard. It stamped him as the resident eccentric of the traditional jazz revival, the modern movement and the avant-garde. At one time I threatened to make a citizen's arrest on Sangster for excessive twinkling in public, but the beard-hidden incipient smile and the merry eyes now take their place among the most essential memories of the era. Perhaps a parallel could be made with Shorty Rogers. As a traditionalist, he played the drums and the cornet with considerable distinction. Most of his work as a modernist was done on the quintessentially cool vibraphone. On this instrument he was a founding member of the Don Burrows Quartet and a frequent musical partner to Judy Bailey. The vibraphone was also the main vehicle for his excursions into the avant-garde, but in some circumstances he also deployed various percussions.

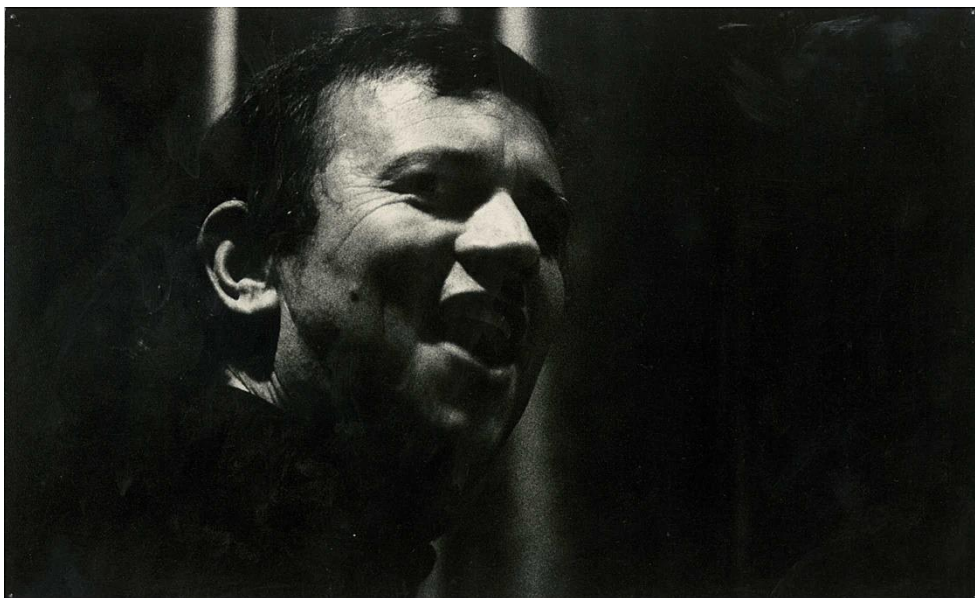


Sangster on vibes in the El Rocco: most of his work as a modernist was done on the quintessentially cool vibraphone... PHOTO CREDIT GABE CARPAY COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

In the last years of El Rocco, Sangster led a band which usually included saxophonist Graeme Lyall, pianist Judy Bailey, bassist George Thompson and drummer Alan Turnbull. Sometimes trombonist Bob Melvor was added. It should be noted that their often totally free music was far from rarified or unpopular. As with the 3-Out Trio, queues often formed outside the club. 'Not all our experiments were greeted with wild enthusiasm by our mentor Arthur James,' said Sangster. 'Sometimes we went "too far out", but the audiences loved it. I'd been to two World Expos with Don Burrows, and had brought back all kinds of fresh and new ideas and approaches to the music, which dear long-suffering Arthur sometimes went along with. Which tolerance, during those early years of their musical development, gave encouragement and impetus to such important figures as Bob Gebert, Bernie McGann — who has become an internationally known and respected composer and player, both through his recordings and his cultural tours abroad — and John Pochée.

'Arthur, far from being your average get-rich-quick entrepreneur, had more than his share of setbacks and financial difficulties. He also managed to handle our crowd of young incipient prima donnas, pour oil on troubled waters when necessary and generally keep the music coming out and the audiences coming in.'

Sangster has elsewhere attributed the explosion of creativity that has occurred in Australian jazz in the nineties to a climate of experimentation, first established at El Rocco, in which players dared to find '...a sound and style that was distinctly theirs, not carbon copies of Americans'.



Bob Gebert: Charles Munro described him as the most advanced pianist in Australia... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Bob Gebert came to Sydney in the early 1960s from Adelaide, where an important club called the Cellar had been established, possibly in emulation of El Rocco. Charles Munro described him as the most advanced pianist in Australia. He began an

association with Keith Barr and Keith Stirling that also has particular relevance to the hippie era... Bassist and trumpeter Dieter Vogt arrived from Switzerland in the late 1960s and found himself playing with and struggling to stay with the advanced rhythmic and harmonic concepts of Gebert and Barr. 'That was jumping in at the deep end,' he told me.

McGann, a working-class Catholic boy who served an apprenticeship as a metal worker as well as playing dance band drums with his father, had begun playing Paul Desmond-inspired alto saxophone with the similarly cool-minded Dave Levy and John Pochée at another important but less central and regular venue, the Mocambo in King Street, Newtown. By the time McGann got to play at El Rocco, however, he had been stricken by Charlie Parker and had already begun to develop the striking tonal, rhythmic and harmonic characteristics that would ultimately coalesce in perhaps the most original improvising style and concept to emerge in Australian jazz. McGann's memory of Arthur James' attitude is rather different to Sangster's.



Bernie McGann in 1966: perhaps the most original improvising style and concept to emerge in Australian jazz...

'He said I wasn't allowed to play there,' said McGann. 'No band leader could hire me, except Lyn Christie. But Lyn Christie was also a doctor, which made it okay. Doctors were near the top of Arthur's social scale. Musicians were at the bottom.'

For whatever reasons, Charles Munro does not seem to have played at El Rocco. In 1967, two years before the club closed, he made *Eastern Horizons*, which is still, arguably, the most striking and powerful album of Australian jazz. Nevertheless, it is almost certain that no other club in Australia, and very few in the world, allowed the range of creativity that was encouraged at El Rocco. Burrows remembers a pianist who came to town with Ella Fitzgerald, and played rather like Oscar Peterson, being invited to play in the club. Instead of the fluent inventions they expected, the American offered mostly silence, punctuated by the slamming and opening of the

piano lid and other seemingly random sounds. When asked 'What gives?' he said he was just searching for his own voice. Other sources identify the pianist as Bob James, whose voice turned out to be rather a bland one, when he found it. Before settling for blandness, however, he made a very serious and rather heavy album for the avant-garde label ESP.



Charles Munro: for whatever reasons, he does not seem to have played at El Rocco...

Such was the international reputation of El Rocco — *Down Beat* magazine cited it as one of the great jazz clubs of the world. Most jazz musicians who came to town, whether as concert artists in their own right or as accompanists to popular artists, sought the place out and usually played there. Graeme Lyall remembers hiding in the tiny kitchen because American drummer Larry Bunker was sitting in and he did not want to make a fool of himself in such exalted company.

Only three women played at El Rocco: pianists Judy Bailey and Marie Francis, and an excellent drummer, the late Molly Parkinson. Then, there was only one other female modern jazz instrumentalist playing at a high level at the time: guitarist Valda Hammock. Bailey said, 'I was not aware of any barrier, but in retrospect I think there may have been a few. Just a few particular incidents lead me to believe that I was living in blissful ignorance. Everyone was very encouraging. I was often complimented. In a way, I wish people had been a little more honest, which would have helped me with some of the problems I had.' Coming from a religious

background in New Zealand, Bailey was also quite shocked by the dope smoking. As a result, she was not invited when the men went off to have a smoke, and this made her feel excluded.



Judy Bailey at the piano in El Rocco: coming from a religious background in New Zealand, she was quite shocked by the dope smoking... PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

El Rocco finally became part of mainstream Sydney culture. Fashion parades were held there. Clive James' statement, with its implication that this was a convenient place to sight some bohemia, was true enough in the end. It was rumoured that a high society debutante had taken a job as a waitress there in order to make herself more pale and interesting, so to speak, and no doubt more newsworthy. It is to Arthur James' considerable credit that this made no difference whatsoever to the music policy. In fact, some of the most adventurous music of all was played at that time. That he did not try to 'commercialise' the place or present some Hollywood version of jazz to the tourists was some kind of a miracle, given the instincts of most club owners. What he did do in the end was close it. James had actually planned to make further extensions, possibly linking the cellar with space that was available on the first floor, but a trip overseas convinced him that big changes were coming in entertainment, so he closed down in 1969. This was the height of the hippie era and the club was as popular as ever. I can't help but think that if El Rocco had continued, the place of jazz in the great effusion of 1950s, and 1960s, creativity would now be more readily acknowledged locally.