

## HOW DALE BARLOW BECAME A JAZZ MESSENGER

by Eric Myers

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Most students of Australian jazz can point to their favourite milestones, which had momentous implications for key musicians. In terms of the impact of Australian jazz in the international arena, one might note the invitation issued by Harry Stein in Melbourne in early 1946 to Graeme Bell, asking him whether he'd like to take his band to Prague for the World Youth Festival. Or the invitation issued in 1954 by the owner of Klein's jazz club in Detroit to Errol Buddle to take over the resident band (which included the pianist Tommy Flanagan). Or, perhaps more significantly, the subsequent invitation from another Detroit club owner Ed Sarkesian to Errol to provide a band of Australians for the Rouge Lounge (that band became the Australian Jazz Quartet).



*Errol Buddle (centre) at Klein's, Detroit in 1953. Pepper Adams (baritone) is to the left. Barry Harris (piano) can just be seen to the right. Obscured behind Buddle is Elvin Jones (drums). Buddle's invitation to take over the band at Klein's led to a significant milestone in Australian jazz: the advent of the Australian Jazz Quartet.*

In this league is the invitation issued in 1989 by the drummer Art Blakey in New York to Dale Barlow to become a fulltime member of the Jazz Messengers. How did this come about? How was it that an Australian saxophonist - a white musician - was able to join a band which, for 35 years, had virtually defined hard-bop, and represented one of the pinnacles of achievement in black American jazz?

In 1989 Dale Barlow had returned to New York on a whim. He had lived there for some years in the early 1980s but had returned to Australia in 1986, where he'd formed the Wizards of

Oz quartet with Paul Grabowsky, and picked up an Australia Council grant to take the Wizards to Europe in 1988. But by 1989 he was dying to get back to the city that still provided the fastest learning curve in jazz.

Dale had a lot of contacts in New York, as well as a track record. He'd worked with the Gil Evans Orchestra and many leading musicians; he was best known for touring in Europe and recording with the Cedar Walton Quartet. Now back in New York in 1989, two of his good friends were the bassist Essiet Okun Essiet, and the pianist Benny Green, who were with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers at the time. It was known that Blakey was looking for a new tenor saxophonist: Dale believes that a number of people, including Cedar Walton, and Charles Fambrough (who had been the bassist with the Messengers when the group included Wynton Marsalis) had recommended him to Art.



*Cedar Walton: Before 1989, Dale Barlow was best-known for touring in Europe and recording with Walton's quartet...*

One afternoon Dale was at Fambrough's house, and Fambrough took him around to Art Blakey's loft. When they arrived, Art asked Dale where his saxophone was, and asked him to go and get it. Dale took a cab uptown and collected his tenor. When he got back he played solo for Art, for about an hour. It was all very relaxed; Art served some food, and spent time in the bathroom while Dale played. Then Art asked him if he composed: Dale said yes, so Art asked him to play some of his compositions on the piano. The visit stretched for some hours. An ex-Messenger Walter Davis arrived, and he played some piano, accompanying Dale on the tenor.

Following this visit, Dale got into the habit of attending the Messengers' gigs, and Art would always ask him to join the band for the last set. Dale felt that Art was checking him out. Art would call all sorts of tunes, and Dale would be expected to know them. Meanwhile, during the day, Dale would be listening to the classic Messengers albums, and learning the tunes, so he'd sound as good as possible when he sat in. It wasn't easy, says Dale. "Art would call the most difficult things, and the craziest tunes, hoping that I wouldn't know them. All of that would go on. The other guys in the band would be nasty as hell on the bandstand; I had to

cope with all kinds of harsh realities. No-one's helping you out at all. No-one's easy on you; no-one gives a damn. The worse you sound, the better it is for the other musicians. I had to learn a lot of things the hard way. Australian musicians have no idea what this is like. Art Blakey's band was the 'old school of hard knocks' in the old bebop tradition."

One Sunday night, following a week's engagement in New York - Dale remembers he'd sat in every night - Art offered Dale a trip to Europe with the Messengers. They were leaving the next day.



*Art Blakey: he wanted a tenor player who could play the Messengers repertoire...*

As an Australian, Dale couldn't get a work permit for England, and missed the group's first week at Ronnie Scott's in London. But he subsequently joined the band in Germany, where a cavalcade of players was celebrating Art's 70th birthday. For his first paying gig with the Messengers, Dale was surrounded by some of the greatest musicians in jazz. "I jumped onstage and right next to me were Jackie McLean, Benny Golson, Freddie Hubbard, Curtis Fuller, Johnny Griffin, Buster Williams, Wynton Marsalis, Walter Davis Jr, Wayne Shorter..."

The core players with the Messengers when Dale joined were, however, Brian Lynch (trumpet), Frank Lacey (trombone), Geoff Keezer (piano), Essiet Okun Essiet (bass) and Blakey.

Dale is proud of the fact that he went back to New York to make his way simply on the basis of his ability. He didn't elevate his own status by hiring eminent American musicians to record with him; he didn't have that sort of money available anyway. He was chosen by Blakey out of the available talent pool in New York. "The way I got the gig is the same way anybody ever got the gig in the Jazz Messengers," says Dale, "by having the right amount of talent, having done the right amount of practice, and being around a scene that's very fertile - where you can develop to the level you're expected to play at. It's also about immersing yourself in that culture, and loving the music for the right reasons.

"When I joined the Messengers, Art didn't want me for the individual way I sounded; he wanted a tenor player who could play the Messengers repertoire. That's all he was looking for, and I had to know the material. Not once did we rehearse; not once did anyone read a chart on the bandstand. I was expected to know the repertoire going back to the 50s, off by heart - the changes, and all of the arrangements. If I didn't there were a hundred musicians out there who did. The Messengers' repertoire was classic material, and a lot of the young American players grow up listening to that stuff.

“Sometimes we’d play tunes I’d never heard of before, and I totally faked it: the next day I’d go out and buy the CD and learn the thing. I had to learn an enormous amount of music. I’m lucky I’ve always been a fast learner, and can pick things off the records by listening to them. But still, it was tough; it was a hard call. A lot of eyes were on me because I wasn’t American, and I wasn’t black. People were wondering what I was doing in the Messengers. I think I had to be better than a lot of guys in New York, because I was under scrutiny.



*Dale Barlow: Art Blakey’s band was the ‘old school of hard knocks’ in the old bebop tradition. No-one’s helping you out at all. No-one’s easy on you; no-one gives a damn...  
PHOTO CREDIT ROMAN CERNY*

“The Messengers was the finishing school for jazz musicians”, says Dale. “Everyone wanted to play with the Messengers. It was an American institution, like Miles Davis’s band, or Horace Silver’s or Cedar Walton’s.” Dale says that many musicians preferred Blakey’s band to that of Miles Davis. The pianist Geoff Keezer actually turned down an offer to join Miles in order to stay with the Messengers. “With Miles’s band, you wouldn’t be playing much,”

says Dale, “maybe one gig a week and you wouldn’t be learning the jazz repertoire; whereas the Messengers was the hardest-working band in jazz. They would play every night of the week, and really play hard. What you learn in a band like Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers are things you cannot learn any other way; you cannot learn them from books, or from institutions. The books and institutions are hopefully based on what you can learn from a live situation like that.”



*The American pianist Geoff Keezer: he turned down an offer to join Miles Davis in order to stay with the Messengers...*

Dale says that Art Blakey’s house was a real meeting point for musicians in New York. Sometimes Art would ring Dale at 2am and say ‘come on over’. Dale would arrive, and hang out there, talk, listen to some sides; others would drop in. Art would tell stories about the great musicians, and the jazz scene. Dale saw this as an education process - as he describes it, “an amazing experience”.

“Art was like a sage of the entire jazz scene in New York. If anyone had a problem they’d bring it to Art, and he’d set you straight. I used to spend days around there sometimes and within that time I might meet Freddie Hubbard, McCoy Tyner, Curtis Fuller, Herbie Hancock, Dizzy Gillespie. A lot of the ex-Messengers would come by: Terence Blanchard, Donald Harrison, Wynton Marsalis. The Messengers might have been five or six musicians at one time, but the real band was an extended family. People would drop in any time of the day or night, even at four in the morning. Even if Art was in bed, there would always be a group of guys sitting around, talking, listening to music, and they’d let people in. It’s a totally different culture to ours.

“Art was the original indestructible jazz hero”, says Dale. “His health wasn’t good, but he survived for years: no-one thought he would. When he was on, even if he was old, he was an incredible drummer. On a good night, he was still Art Blakey, as good as he ever was.”

Dale Barlow served with Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers for about two years, and was with the band when Blakey died in 1991.