

## FRANK SMITH AT THE EMBERS, MELBOURNE 1960-61

by Ted Nettelbeck\*

---

*[A recollection prompted by questions from Eric Myers, November 2017.]*

### **Eric Myers: How did you meet Frank Smith?**

Ted Nettelbeck: The Oscar Peterson Trio (Ray Brown, Ed Thigpen) was booked to play at The Embers, in early June 1960. Billy Ross (drums), myself (piano) and Dicky Korf (bass) were at that time the rhythm section for Bruce Gray's All Stars, the leading Adelaide jazz band at that time. We made the trip to Melbourne to hear Peterson, driving in Billy's car. The 3-out trio was in the audience at the Embers on the night when we attended; and Mike Nock sat in during one of Frank's sets. I had already met him and Freddy Logan on my first visit to Sydney about three years



*Frank Smith (left) pictured here performing in Sydney with the trumpeter Ron Falson... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE*

---

*\*Ted Nettelbeck is a professional jazz pianist and academic. He retired as paid staff recently at the University of Adelaide, where he is now Emeritus Professor in Psychology, and relocated to Melbourne.*

earlier and Freddy had in the meantime come through Adelaide on a couple of occasions (I don't recall the reasons) and he had sat in with us at a regular gig that we had at that time in Burnside. He had already commented favourably on both my and Bill's playing and had generally been encouraging to me. (Later, when I worked in London 1962-65, when Freddy was the bass player in Tubby Hayes' quintet, he also went out of his way to help me, introducing me around the music scene and coming by my place to practice together).

Unbeknown to myself or Billy, Frank had been chatting with Freddy and had told him that he was looking for a drummer and a pianist because his drummer Alan Geddes (a cousin of Frank's) was returning to Sydney; and both Frank and Barbara Virgil did not like the current pianist's playing; (I don't remember his name but recall that he was Canadian). Freddy told Frank about us; and he came over to our table and invited us to audition the next day. Of course, we both jumped at the chance. Fortunately for both of us, because our sight-reading skills were poor and (as it subsequently proved) below the standard required to deal competently with the regular floor shows scheduled at The Embers, Frank's approach to the audition was haphazard and cavalier in the extreme. He passed out a couple of chord charts (no problems there) and then put up the music (lead line with chords) to *Almost Like Being in Love*, a tune with which we were already familiar. We were hired on the spot, with an agreed starting date a month or so hence.



*The Frank Smith Quartet with singer Barbara Virgil at The Embers 1960. From left: Ted Nettelbeck (piano), Bill Ross (drums), Ivan Videky (bass), Frank Smith (saxes).*

My subsequent impression was that Frank initially liked Billy's playing – he was an excellent swinging drummer – and I got the gig because I happened to be with Bill. It was a case of being in the right place at the right time. Following the audition, we returned to Adelaide; and Billy and I duly came back to Melbourne at the appointed time, again in Bill's car. We moved into a boarding house in Shipley Street, South Yarra a few days before we were due to start and I immediately installed an upright piano in my room. On the following Sunday we went to the club to meet Frank and Ivan; and duly reported for work the next day at around midday for a rehearsal that had been scheduled for the new floor show, to commence that night. I remained a boarder at Shipley House (an old dilapidated but charming 19th century mansion reconfigured as small flats but long torn down and replaced by an ugly early 1980s apartment block) for the entire time that I lived in Melbourne, but Bill later moved to Kew when his wife and two children joined him.

**EM: What sort of reputation did Smith enjoy before you met him?**

TN: What I knew about his reputation initially was largely hearsay. I knew that he had been recorded in Sydney as a member of a Music Maker All Star band; and, apart from the members of Don Burrows' band, Frank was one of a handful of Sydney-born (as opposed to Adelaide-born Sydney) musicians about whom the Adelaide jazz fraternity was aware. I had heard him only once before I heard him at The Embers at the time of Peterson's first booking. During my first visit to Sydney three years earlier I had gone to a jam session in a private home where I played and heard Mike Nock play. Later that evening, at Mike's suggestion, I accompanied him and Dave Levy to listen to Frank playing at El Rocco. I went because Mike had announced that he was going to listen to Frank because he was the best saxophonist in the country. This impressed me mightily because I had just spent a couple of nights running around Sydney in order to hear Don Burrows, Dave Rutledge, Terry Wilkinson, Freddy Logan and Ron Weber, a band that, to that time, I thought was the best I had ever heard. I don't remember much about the session at El Rocco, other than that, to me, Frank seemed extraordinary; on that occasion he played with such passion, and with a lot of body movement.

As I was later to realise, this movement was not characteristic of his playing at the Embers, where his playing was frequently passionate but with much more control of movement. In fact, his stance on the band stand at the Embers generally projected a very still persona. At the time when I was in Melbourne, his reputation there was huge; and he was really the main drawcard for the Sunday afternoon jazz concerts at The Embers. He had a very large following among the younger crowd that supported those sessions. It was at these sessions that I first met and became friends with people like Graham Morgan and Stewie Speer, both up-and-coming drummers at the time. (Stewie of course later became the drummer with Max Merritt and the Meteors and continued in that role even after the terrible road accident that left him badly crippled.) As Andrew Bisset has recounted in *Black Roots, White Flowers*, Oscar Peterson had been very impressed by Frank's playing and had spread the word to others back in the US, including Benny Carter who brought a quartet into The Embers while I was there and who was obviously aware that he should expect someone who might be regarded as his equal. Frank also had a huge reputation as a teacher and his saxophone students at that time included Graeme Lyall and Barry Duggan, both of whom I later worked with regularly.

**EM: Did you play with Smith before he invited you to work with him at The Embers in 1960?**

TN: No; only at that one audition.

**EM: How did your joining his group at The Embers come about?**

TN: I've covered the initial contact, above. However, the reality is that I was very fortunate to survive in the gig; and my survival was doubtless aided by Frank's reluctance to change his band personnel so soon after the last upheaval. When Bill and I fronted for the new floorshow rehearsal on that first day it quickly became apparent that our sight-reading skills were not equal to the charts brought in by the act (a stand-up comic, name forgotten). These charts required fast playing, in the circus tradition, with lots of accents synchronised to stage activities that had to be "caught". Bill and I were hopelessly lost in no time and the show's star went spare, fuming about our incompetence. Frank was the model of the calm, professional bandleader. He suggested that making a scene was not helping because we were new and extremely nervous, and suggested that the act leave his music parts with Frank, guaranteeing that all would be in order by show time. The guy duly left the club and Frank proceeded to take us through each of the charts, bar by bar, at slower tempos, ensuring that we had mastered the phrasing before moving to the next stage.

There was probably not more than about 10-15 minutes of actual music interspersed with action in the show but Frank persevered with rehearsing us for nearly four hours, after which he sent us home with the directive that when we returned to start work at 6pm, we must be able to play the parts. I spent most of that free time re-rehearsing the charts and I think that Billy would have done the same. There were two identical shows to survive and, just as Frank had promised, they went very well. At the end of the night (2am), flushed with success I confidently shared my belief with Frank that things had gone well. He smilingly agreed; but then added something like "but if you can't read the next floor show, you're fired!". It frightened the wits out of me. I spent every spare moment throughout the next month improving my sight-reading and it proved to be enough; although I have never attained anything like the very high level of sight-reading proficiency that Frank demonstrated, I was from then forward able to achieve enough skill to be able to survive future sight-reading requirements. The incident also taught me that, providing I was willing to invest the effort, I was capable of improving my skills appreciably within a relatively short time.

**EM: What sort of club was The Embers? For example, its size, capacity, lay-out etc. Did it have a grand piano?**

TN: The entrance, direct from the footpath via two huge glass doors, was just a couple of doors east from the corner of Caroline Ave and Toorak Road at #55 Toorak Road. I have been back there recently but nothing is recognisable from the street. I don't know whether the basic structure remains behind the shop fronts now there, or whether the building has since been replaced. The front doors gave directly onto a very large L-shaped room, on two levels, with the higher level towards the back and accessed by a short, wide flight of steps between two pillars that supported the roof, which was timber lined. The decor was black and red, furnished with contemporary

Swedish-style, black metal, cushioned chairs around tables designed to seat from four to eight. Tables could be pushed together to accommodate larger parties. To the right was the office of the owner Jimmy Noall and next to that the cloak room check-in. On the left-hand side but towards the back was the entrance to the kitchen. At centre-right there was a small pool, lit from beneath the water. The bandstand, with small band room behind, was a platform, set a step higher than and to the right of a generous dance floor on the upper level. This area, and the entire back area also, could be screened off by ceiling-to-floor heavy black drapes if those areas were not required. The bandstand overlooked two sides of the pool. The piano was a Steinway grand, about six feet in length and always kept in excellent condition. The stage easily accommodated the regular quartet of sax, piano, bass, drums; and could manage up to five in the front line. I don't recall how many could be seated in the club but think that it was probably 300 +. With the back screened off, the lower front area probably seated about 100.



*Interior of The Embers, 55 Toorak Rd, South Yarra circa 1960...*

The Embers was certainly a well-appointed room, and it provided a very attractive environment and atmosphere for listening to music. The acoustics were very good. It was very well managed by a young man named Garry Van. (I have wondered since whether he went on to become the celebrated Garry Van Egmond, the Australian entertainment and events promoter but I actually have no idea).

However, The Embers had a major problem; throughout the time that I was there it operated without a liquor licence. Why this was so I never knew; although the rumour was that it had something to do with the reputation of the owner Jimmy Noall. Operating hours when I started were 6pm-2am Monday-Saturday and 3pm-5pm + 6pm-midnight Sunday. Initially, therefore, the band provided music for 40 hours/week, seven nights/week. This was later reduced for all but me; I played solo



for an hour each night, with the band commencing at 7pm. It was not an exclusive jazz policy, although during my time the artists booked for the floor show appearances were predominantly jazz artists: the Oscar Peterson Trio, singer Mel Tormé, the George Shearing Quartet, the Benny Carter Quartet, Ella Fitzgerald accompanied by the Lou Levy quartet, Buddy Rich, pianist Ike Cole. All of these impressed mightily and drew full houses. Al Hibbler, who had sung with Duke Ellington, also did a show at The Embers, although his repertoire was more popular than jazz. Obviously the quartet was not involved with some of these, like Peterson, Fitzgerald, Shearing and Carter; but two, for whom the quartet played were especially memorable for me.



*Ella Fitzgerald at The Embers 1960. From left: Lou Levy (piano), Ella, Wilfred Middlebrooks (bass), Herb Ellis (guitar), Gus Johnson (drums).*

Mel Tormé was not only a superb singer; he was an incredibly gifted musician. When we attended his rehearsal, he was sitting at a table with pencil and blank pages of manuscript. He asked Frank what the instrumentation was and when told (trumpet, alto, tenor, trombone, piano, bass, drums), he literally wrote the parts required for each of his numbers, transposed, as required, handed them around maybe 15 minutes later and then ran through each tune once with the band. I have never witnessed anything like that since; Graeme Lyall became a very quick arranger but I doubt that he could have matched Tormé.

Buddy Rich was, of course, an incredible drummer and Billy was beside himself throughout Rich's stay. But at the rehearsal it became clear that Rich really fancied himself as a singer and he wanted to open each show with a song, delivered a la Sinatra in great style before climbing onto the drums and beating them to bits at a break-neck tempo for a full 30 minutes without drawing breath. We asked him what he would sing and were told *All Of You* (pause) in B major. I learned something very important at that moment. I glanced at Ivan, who held out his hand with two fingers

pointing down; which meant B Flat major. We set it up in B Flat, Rich sang it; and he never twigged the difference – which was just as well because at that time I knew that I would not manage it in B major.



*Mel Tormé at The Embers 1960. From left: Ted Nettelbeck (piano), Frank Smith (alto), Ivan Videky (bass), Mel Tormé, hidden Paddy Fitzallan (trumpet), Bill Ross (drums), Geoff Kitchen (tenor), Slush Stewart (trombone).*

Several US jazz celebrities appearing at other Melbourne venues dropped by the Embers to take in the scene while I was there. Dizzy Gillespie, who was touring with the 3-out trio, was only interested in scoring a meal but Sarah Vaughan



*The Frank Smith group with Dizzy Gillespie at The Embers 1960. From left: Slush Stewart (trombone), Frank Smith (saxes), Ivan Videky (bass; front), Ted Nettelbeck (piano), Billy Ross (drums), Dizzy Gillespie.*

and Nancy Wilson both sang a song or two. Sydney singers Joe Lane and Edwin Duff and guitarist George Golla, all of whom had worked with Frank in the past, also sat in with the band when they were passing through.

However, some of the artists booked were certainly nothing to do with jazz; Marlene Dietrich, Rolf Harris, Horrie Dargie quintet – and even a French female impersonator. Moreover, several of the shows were built around stand-up comics. Jay Lawrence and Flip Wilson were two who had successful tours; and Tommy Hanlon Jnr, who appeared at least three times during my time at the Embers, actually emigrated to Australia and later had a long-running career as a TV host and circus ringmaster. Frank was particularly taken with Tommy's humour and chuckled audibly at his jokes, even when he had heard them several times.

Essentially, Frank's band played music that could be danced to, although Frank's "book" – subsequently mine also, much of it inherited from Frank – was predominantly made up from jazz compositions available from recordings at the time: *Nica's Dream*, *Joy Spring*, *Whisper Not*, *Donna Lee*, *Round Midnight*, *Stablemates*, *Moanin'*, *A Night in Tunisia*, *Daahoud*; many Ellington compositions; and the standards comprising the Great American Songbook. Anyone familiar with today's *Real Book* series would have recognised The Embers repertoire. That said, Frank was also keen to deliver entertaining show pieces that had nothing to do with jazz. He insisted that I learn Khachaturian's *Sabre Dance*, which he then turned into



*The American comedian Flip Wilson at The Embers 1961. From Left: Alan Turnbull (drums), Frank Smith (alto), Wilson, hidden probably Slush Stewart (trombone), Ted Nettelbeck (piano), bassist not in photo probably John Frederick...*



an extravaganza for the quartet, he would occasionally perform an etude for saxophone by Marcel Mule, and he even at one time had me singing an old somewhat risqué ditty from the 1920s about *How could Miss Riding Hood have been so very good and still kept the wolf from the door?*

The Embers was really a restaurant and supper club, with genuine jazz concerts limited to Sunday afternoons. During the week the policy was to provide two shows a night interspersed with dancing and these shows were identical at around 9.30-10pm and again around 12.30-1am. How the waiting staff arranged the turnover in clientele I have no idea. The pay for the musicians was exceptionally good although the hours were long; I started at £50/week, which increased to £88 by the time I became bandleader. As a comparison, a typical club job in Adelaide (6 nights) in 1960 paid about £25/week.

**EM: How long were you there with him?**

TN: I no longer remember the exact dates. I think that Bill and I started in July 1960 and Frank left a little under a year later, in mid-1961, to join the Channel 9 *In Melbourne Tonight* orchestra. I took over the band at that time and remained until just after Christmas 1961, when I left for London.



*Another shot of the Frank Smith Quartet with singer Barbara Virgil (centre) at The Embers in 1960. L-R, Smith (saxes), Ted Nettelbeck (piano), Billy Ross (drums), Ivan Videky (bass).*

**EM: The photo in Bruce Johnson's *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz* features yourself, Billy Ross, Ivan Videky, Barbara Virgil as well as Frank Smith. Basically was this the permanent membership of the group at The Embers?**

TN: This group survived for about six months, after which Bill Ross left, persuading Frank to replace him with an Adelaide drummer named Gordon Latta. Bill left after an incident in which he was chased in his car on his way to work by gangsters who threatened to shoot him because he was Jimmy Noall's drummer. Noall, who continued to run clubs like the Playboy and the Winston Charles disco after The Embers closed some years later, was certainly something of a Melbourne racecourse personality; The Embers had survived a major fire before my time and Frank told us that Noall's home had been attacked in a drive-by shooting. On the night in question I arrived at the club to find Bill's car, with head-lights on and driver's door still ajar, driven onto the footpath in front of the entrance to The Embers and with Bill, very shaken, hiding inside the club. I never learned what was really going on but, I think that it was the next night, there were armed security staff inside the club; and it was around this time too that a bomb was exploded by persons unknown, set outside and beneath the entrance to the club. The bomb wrecked the doors, which were quickly repaired, and damaged the front of the club Maxim's, which was directly across Toorak Road, opposite The Embers.



*The Benny Carter and Frank Smith quartets at The Embers 1960. From left: Curtis Counce (bass BC), Ivan Videky (bass FS), Frank Capp (drums BC), Billy Ross (drums FS), Frank Smith (saxes), Benny Carter (alto, trumpet), Jay Lawrence (stand up comedian), Paul Muir (piano BC), Geoff Kitchen (tenor), Ted Nettelbeck (piano FS).*

The changeover to Gordon Latta was not a success; he was actually a good drummer but he lacked confidence and was quickly overwhelmed by the demands of the job. Soon after, at a Sunday afternoon concert, a cocky teenager rubbished Gordon's playing to Frank during a break and Frank challenged him to do better. He promptly climbed behind the drums; and he was a sensation. His name was Alan Turnbull and he joined the band a week later after Frank had secured his mother's permission for him to work at the club because he was under age and not yet 17. This version of the quartet was probably the best of Frank's groups during the time I played with him. It was already established by the time that the Oscar Peterson trio returned for a second booking.

Billy Ross left just after Benny Carter's group finished. Frank was very excited at the prospect because he was a fan of Carter's. However, when Carter's band first arrived Frank was actually quite distressed because, initially, they really didn't gel and our local group sounded more polished. However, although Carter's was a pick-up group and they had not played together before arriving in Melbourne, they were all seasoned jazz musicians – the drummer was Frankie Capp, whom Billy greatly admired -- and, within a few nights, they sounded fantastic.



*The American drummer Frankie Capp, whom Billy Ross greatly admired...*

Ivan Videky left The Embers soon after; I don't remember why. Frank replaced him with John Frederick, at that time a student of psychology at the University of Melbourne, who was a competent bassist, although not as experienced as Ivan. When John left, I think just before Frank went to Channel 9, Darcy Wright, then from Adelaide, joined the group and he stayed on with Alan and with Graeme Lyall replacing Frank for the time when I was bandleader. That quartet was a great band, or at least we thought so. On most Saturday nights after The Embers closed at 2am we would swan down to Ackland Street in St Kilda so that we could show off to the other musos like Brian Brown, Alan Lee, Ted Vining, Dave Martin, Keith Stirling, who played regularly at a club run by Horst Liepolt, Jazz Centre 44.

**EM: Was the group called the Frank Smith Quintet?**

TN: No, it was always the Frank Smith Quartet (later the Ted Nettelbeck Quartet) and introduced as such, although Barbara Virgil was the house singer throughout my time there. Frank brought in additional band members as required to build up the sound behind some of the floor shows. Orm “Slush” Stewart (trombone) was probably the most frequent extra during my time but Paddy Fitzallan (trumpet) and Bruce Clarke (guitar) were occasionally used; and Graeme Lyall was often alongside Frank at the Sunday afternoon jazz sessions.

**EM: Bruce Johnson’s book indicates that Smith performed at The Embers for about three or four months in 1959 in the company of Mike Nock, Chris Karan, Frank Thornton and Peter Robinson. Thornton was soon replaced by Billy Weston. This apparently transpired through August-November, 1959, before the venue was destroyed by fire. Smith came back to The Embers with the quintet which included yourself in 1960. You took over the group in 1961, so you must have spent about a year performing with Smith. Is that correct?**



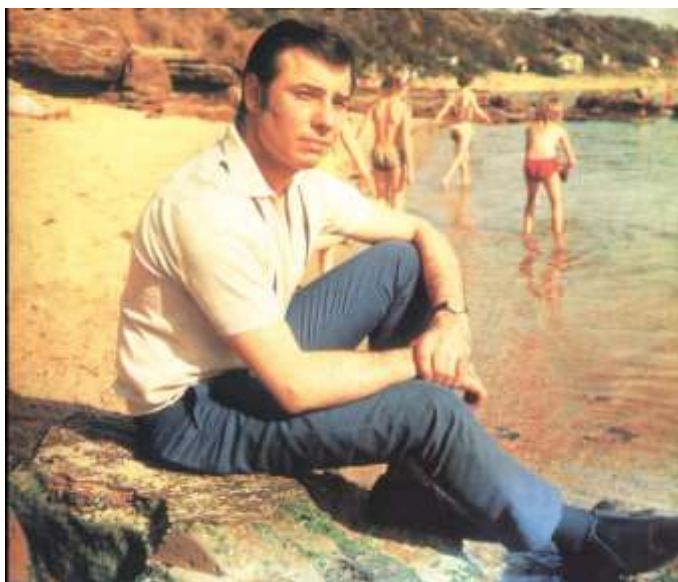
*At The Embers in 1959. In front L-R, Chris Karan, saxophonists Frank Thornton & Frank Smith. Standing at rear, vocalist Barbara Virgil and American guests bassist Carl Brown Jnr, and pianist Wilmus Reeves...PHOTO COURTESY CHRIS KARAN*

TN: Yes that is essentially correct, although Billy and I arrived later than the opening post-fire; and my time with Frank may have been more like 10-11 months.

**EM: How long did you continue at The Embers after Smith left?**



TN: Probably six-seven months. Mike Nock, Chris Karan and Freddy Logan (the 3-out trio) went to London at about this time and I was inspired to follow their lead. In addition to my wage as bandleader at The Embers, I was scoring one arrangement/week on casual rates for the Channel 9 orchestra, a gig that Geoff Kitchen (tenor, clarinet, ex-Bell band member) had got me. I had saved a lot of money and so London seemed the next logical step. When I arrived there in early 1962 Mike had already moved on to New York; and my initial experiences were quite dispiriting. I eventually started with a holiday season gig at a hotel on the Isle of Wight, followed by gigs on the continent at US military bases in the dead of winter with English entertainment bands. However, by early 1963 I had landed a regular six nights/week gig in a trio led by bassist/singer Louis (real name Sylvan) Bonett, at a club in South Kensington. (Louis has previously worked as the bassist for a Latin band in a floorshow at The Embers while I was there. Later during the 1970s he led bands in Melbourne before morphing into Matt Flinders, vocalist for the ABC big band led by Brian May). His London trio was an enjoyable gig with a good band that played a lot of Latin styles -- and was well-paid (although I never again ever came close to earning what I earned at The Embers). I stayed there until I returned to Adelaide in 1965, together with my first wife Esme (we married in London) and my first-born son Jonathan, then less than six months old.



*The singer Matt Flinders: prior to the 70s he was widely known as Louis (Sylvan) Bonett, working as a singer, bassist and bandleader in Adelaide, Melbourne and London...*

**EM: How many nights a week was the gig?**

TN: The seven nights/week at The Embers lasted for about a year, although along the way, if business was quiet, the band would be given a Sunday off. By the time that Frank left, the Sunday afternoon jazz concerts had been discontinued and the Sunday night, which had only ever been well attended for some of the bigger acts, like Peterson and Fitzgerald, had been discontinued also. I think that as bandleader I only ever played six nights/week.

**EM: What were the circumstances, as far as you know, of the 1959 fire?**

TN: I never knew anything factual about the fire. Frank would sometimes refer to it and he gave the impression that it was some kind of pay-back for Jimmy Noall's race-course activities. But whether Frank really knew anything I can't say.

**EM: What was it like playing with Frank Smith? That is, to be on the piano behind his improvisations? Was he as outstanding an improviser as his general reputation suggests?**

TN: Frank's musical skills were awe-inspiring. He was an astonishingly good sight-reader. He could accurately sight-read the most difficult part, at speed, apparently with ease. Moreover, he could make several transpositions while reading a part for the first time; thus, he could read a concert part on either a B Flat or E Flat instrument, transpose an E Flat chart to B Flat or a B Flat to E Flat. However, he wasn't infallible; I once heard him play a new part, note perfect from beginning to end but displaced by an early quaver throughout. Again, although he had a wonderful ear, and probably had perfect pitch, his choice of chords was not always correct. As an example, one night after work he taught me *The Night Has a Thousand Eyes* by arpeggiating the chords that he "heard" – or, more accurately, that I produced from his runs. The middle of this tune actually begins with a ii-V shift to the major key on the flattened third of the home key but Frank spelled out this progression in the key on the minor seventh; i.e. a fourth lower. We invariably played it that way and it wasn't until years later that Darcy Wright pointed out that we had always been wrong. I think the error arose because Frank frequently used the Lydian version of a major scale; and in this instance, being unaware of what the tune actually sounded like, I had simply fitted the conventional chord sequence to the scale that he ran.

He was an outstanding improviser; very fast technique, fluid, highly expressive dynamics and genuinely creative insofar as, although we were working from a fairly settled, albeit fairly extensive, repertoire, one seldom had the impression that he was



*Paul Hindemith: Smith sometimes spoke about being influenced by Hindemith's compositional theory...*

repeating himself. He sometimes spoke at the time about being influenced by Hindemith's compositional theory, a suggestion that Graeme Lyall took sufficiently seriously to invest effort in adapting Hindemith's ideas to his own improvisations. I am sceptical, however, about a proposal that Frank ever used Hindemith's ideas as a general model for improvisation. His style was essentially based on the bebop tradition and he sounded as if his early models were Parker, Stitt and perhaps Cannonball. He had a beautiful, rounded alto sound but, interestingly, for a tune suited to a gentler, more lyrical approach, he often sounded more like Paul Desmond. He was a "magpie", drawing inspiration from a diverse range of sources and he was forever jotting down phrases and snippets of musical ideas that he would then work into his soloing until he had assimilated them. He experimented with whole tone rows and with different time signatures and phrase lengths beyond duple conventions, like 5 notes or 7 or 11 notes. He never sounded anything other than smoothly articulate and very relaxed at any tempo, whether very slow or very fast. He could play cleanly at extremely fast tempos. Oscar Peterson used to include *Get Me To The Church On Time* from *My Fair Lady* in his sets at about 400 beats/minute and Frank thereafter rehearsed the band at this speed and even included *The Natives Are Restless Tonight* at about 400 in Buddy Rich's segment; but, apart from Rich, Frank was the only member of the band to solo at that speed. The rhythm section was eventually able to hold things together at that speed but I couldn't produce a reliable solo. Frank's advice was to play at high speed every day until you mastered it. I tried hard to achieve this; but, even almost 60 years later, I am unreliable at anything much above 300.

Frank's advice notwithstanding, during the time that I played with him I never once heard him practice anything, although he must once have practiced extensively; and I doubt that he practiced much at home because he usually left his instruments at the club. The band did, however, have more than occasional rehearsals, which he always organised. He was equally proficient on tenor, clarinet and flute but definitely sounded at his absolute best on alto. For probably about half of the time that I played with him he actually spent most time playing vibes, which he obviously found more interesting because he was teaching himself, entirely on the job, from scratch. He could certainly play the drums and would occasionally demonstrate some effect that he wanted Alan to play; and this skill doubtless helped him with the vibraphone. But, although it was obvious that he delighted in playing this instrument, I infinitely preferred it when he played alto.

Playing behind him was demanding and he was often critical, albeit kindly. He frequently accused me of "not listening", which patently was not true in a literal sense. But it was not until sometime after I'd left The Embers before I finally realised that listening extends way beyond matching one's time with the bass and drums and changing dynamics to match changes elsewhere. Most importantly one has to be able to respond rapidly to subtle nuances of phrasing elsewhere in the band. Frank disliked loud drumming, although he encouraged his drummers to really crash group accents double forte. But he was quick to bring the volume of the drums down if he thought that they were too loud for the overall balance of volume within the group; and he insisted that everyone listen for and respond to dynamic changes in the music.

**EM: He was renowned as a mentor to several young musicians. To what extent was he a mentor in your case?**

TN: He had a huge influence on me, more so than any other musician before or since. He was generous with his time and about sharing his ideas and his knowledge. He was always talking about trying out new ideas. He spoke admiringly about Charlie Munro, who at that time was working regularly with Bryce Rohde, and exploring George Russell's theories about Lydian modes. Frank's metaphors to describe what he wanted were often obscure -- bizarre even. He once asked me to play "like a waterfall". But it seemed not to matter to him what you actually did; it was sufficient that you tried to do something altogether different when he called for it.

He undoubtedly liked me, which would explain why he persisted with me at the beginning when my skills really did fall short of what was required. Of course, it did help me that I was so determined to succeed. At that time and for about eight years following I maintained an obsessional daily practice schedule that lasted five-six hours, despite the fact that I was playing fairly long hours for around six nights/week. But Garry Van told me at the time when I took over the band that they had only kept me on during the early weeks because Frank had insisted on it. (Gary meant this kindly; he was in effect acknowledging the huge strides in skill acquisition that I had made in 10-11 months). Frank also invested a lot of effort in rehearsing the rhythm section of myself, Alan and Darcy, inventing exercises that required tight phrasing, tricky accents and handling changes to time signatures. These sessions certainly paid off; that version of the quartet was a tight unit.

**EM: What musical insights, in a nutshell, did he impart to you?**

TN: Regarding personal skills, the five most valuable lessons were; how to relax when nervous by doing simple deep breathing exercises; to vary dynamics within your playing by using accents and by maintaining a rise and fall in volume when improvising; to vary the delivery of an improvised line by small shifts to retard or advance phrasing without ever losing the fundamental time; to continually practice a wide repertoire, in different keys, so that you were always prepared to cope competently with whatever was thrown at you; and to "practice what you play" but at the same time to always strive for new ways of doing things. This last aphorism was particularly profound because it covers everything that occurs on a bandstand, including sight-reading. It came about when he came into the club for a rehearsal. I'd arrived early and was practicing scales, arpeggios, velocity exercises -- standard "classical" technique training. Frank said something like "Ted, one day you will be the best pianist in Australia (long pause) at playing scales!". Then he said something like "practice what you play", and proceeded to expand on this idea, talking about how to develop a personal jazz language by starting with the germ of an idea for a solo and then expanding and developing it by joining with other phrases, and so on. He also noted the importance of being able to play any chord, in any inversion, any voicing, in an instant, to be able instantly to provide phrasing as accompaniment, to be able to set up an introduction or ending without thinking about it. And, in a somewhat contradictory way, he at the same time emphasised that practice should be directed towards those skills least well achieved. Today, these ideas are core in every jazz studies program in any tertiary institution but back in 1960 those courses did not exist and one learned one's skills on the job. It had simply not previously even occurred to me that endlessly playing scales was not necessarily the best way forward because my formal training had entirely been in the classical tradition.



There was another piece of advice that he gave, which was, when improvising, always to keep in mind the written melody of the tune – the head. His point was that, if one did not do this and was guided only by the chord structures, then anything that you played would tend to sound like everything else that you played. I tried to use this advice for many years but, eventually I began to question it, at least as a literal guideline. It became obvious to me that jazz players much superior to me used the chords of a tune as much or more than the head as the source of their improvisations and, in hindsight, I came to believe that Frank did not mean this advice to be taken too literally. Moreover, having listened to some of the rare recordings that still exist of his playing, it is obvious that, in fact, he very definitely “spelled the changes”, a term used by jazz players to denote an expectation that, with a highly skilled improviser, the underlying harmonies are clearly defined by how related scales and arpeggios are used. Frank’s style was firmly located in the bebop tradition and he routinely used passing substitute chords and introduced alternative chord arrangements when improvising. There certainly are advantages to being able to hold a composed tune in your head while improvising; but to do so too literally is very restrictive and virtually all good improvisers to whom I have listened – including Frank himself – have relied very appreciably on using harmonic structures appropriate to the piece performed.

Regarding band skills, the two most valuable lessons were: to use and control group dynamics, to balance these within the band so that you could always hear yourself and the other band members; and continually listen to all members of the band and not to focus just on one’s self or the soloist. He loved it if, while he was soloing, you responded to something that he’d played; he would pick it up immediately and let you know by some gesture that he liked it.

**EM: Personally, what sort of man was he?**

TN: He was a lovely man; charismatic, likeable and kind. He had enormous credibility because he was so far ahead in his musical skills than of any of the rest of us. He was physically imposing; tall, a little overweight and always impeccably dressed. These were the days way before the casual dress code now universal for jazz musicians and he insisted that the band wear smart clothes, with polished shoes and tidy appearance because, at that time, that was the professional standard. At the same time, he was somewhat eccentric, especially when exploring some new way of achieving change or a new approach to something. And he was notoriously bad at estimating how much time was required to complete something so that, having committed to an unrealistic goal, he frequently either failed to deliver something promised on time or, alternatively, what he delivered was incomplete. As one example, soon after I had joined the band, he persuaded Jimmy Noall that Jim should engage Frank for a fee to produce several hundreds of posters to be printed and circulated widely throughout Melbourne for a show starting in about a fortnight. His plan was to produce the posters by silk screen printing using two colours, red and green. Having built the silk screens, designed the poster and tried out the process, which required that the first colour dry before the second could be applied, he finally realised that there was not sufficient time to produce what was required. He hired the cloakroom girl at the club, Narelle Phillips, to help and together they worked for every available minute every day to produce the posters. Towards the end he had the entire band over at his flat, helping to peg up hundreds of wet posters on string lines strung between every conceivable protuberance throughout his living space; but he never did achieve the numbers required. I don't recall how that was

resolved with Jimmy Noall. Later, when he tried his hand at running a music studio business producing sound for film and television, he experienced similar problems with meeting deadlines; and I think that this may be why that venture did not succeed in the long term, even though he produced some exceptional material – notably the theme for the *Hunter* TV series. He had an exceptionally gifted, creative mind but his practical skills were not always equal to what he set out to achieve. I think that he probably had not much experience beyond playing in bands. I know that his career began at a fairly young age; and he once told me that, during leaner times in the music business, he had driven taxis in Sydney.

As far as I'm aware, he did not experiment with drugs and alcohol was seldom an issue; The Embers was in any case "dry". However, he could sometimes drink to excess. There was one occasion when, before the regular Sunday afternoon concert, we knew that he had to play elsewhere beforehand; and he had booked Graeme Lyall in case he was late. He never showed up and Graeme, Alan, Darcy and I played the concert by ourselves. After the show, when we were preparing for the Sunday night session, we heard a rustling sound in one of the curtains, which had been drawn back at the side of the bandstand. We noticed that it appeared to be rolled up, in the shape of a thick vertical roll. Unwrapping it, there was Frank, in pretty bad shape. Subsequently, he told us that he'd gotten drunk, arrived at the club before us and, feeling ashamed, decided to hide by rolling himself up in the curtain. He had stood like that for the entire two hours of the afternoon session!

**EM: In the breaks, what did he talk about?**

TN: There always was a lot of talk about music; planning the next set, what we had done well, what we had to try harder to achieve, what we should listen for if the show was a major jazz artist, like Peterson or Ella. But Frank was older than anyone in the band; nine years older than me and 17 years Alan's senior and he was more knowledgeable in terms of life's experiences and more politically aware (he was a strong unionist and a committed Labor supporter). As a consequence, conversations in the band room could be far-ranging – and continue across sets to the next break. There were seldom any quarrels or disagreements whatsoever; or at least I don't remember any at this distance. His bands were friendly; conversations were good-natured, often about books that we were currently reading. Billy always read books about real-life crime, I read mainly Penguin classics and Frank's preferences were generally contemporary history and politics. I don't remember whether Ivan talked about books; but he often talked about chord progressions and chord substitutions. He was very knowledgeable about music and helped me a lot.

**EM: Was he quiet and uncommunicative? Or, voluble and talkative?**

TN: He certainly was not uncommunicative. He was extroverted and talkative but not in a bossy way, even though he always seemed very confident about his opinions. But, of course, he was older than any of us, almost a father-figure to Alan and so it seemed natural that he would often take the lead in whatever it was that we were talking about. I know that, for myself, I was generally comfortable about deferring to his opinions.

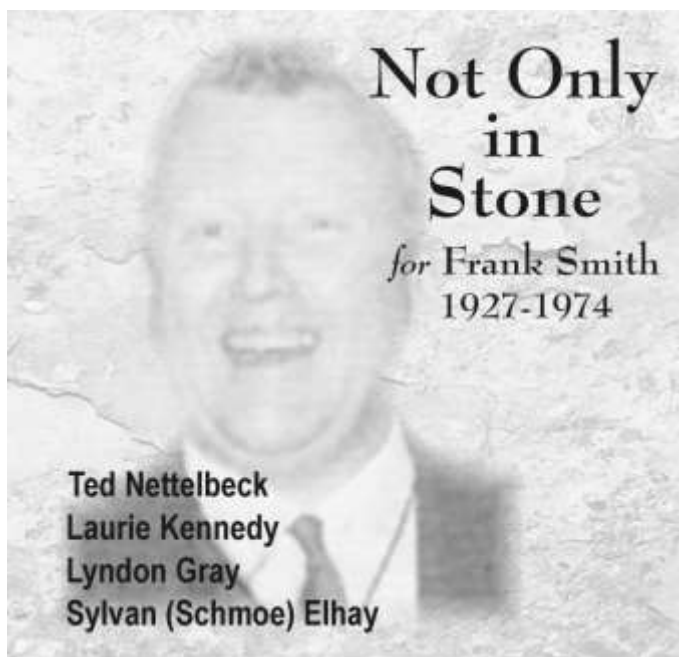
**EM: Did he have any small talk? Was he earnest (like John Coltrane) or cheerful and happy-go-lucky (like Bob Sedergreen)?**

TN: Definitely more like Bob. Frank was a jolly person; there was always a lot of laughing and joking, even though the topic might be non-frivolous. However, even when the topic was serious, I would not describe him as earnest. We used to play a lot of games during the breaks; nothing too intellectual or competitive but just good fun; pencil and paper games like Hangman or Dots and Boxes whereby joining dots creates a square box to claim territory.

**EM: Outside the gig did you have any contact with him? Did you have much knowledge of his personal life?**

TN: While I was in his band at The Embers there was not a lot of personal contact outside of the gig and the associated rehearsals. Frank, Ivan and Bill always went straight home after work. After Alan Turnbull and Darcy Wright had joined the band the three of us frequently went after work to jam at other venues and, of course, initially we always urged Frank to join us but he never did. He would laugh and say that “jazz is a young man’s music” and go straight home. Of course, he was himself only 33 years old at this time; and I eventually realised that, despite the fact that he was the most outstanding jazz musician in Melbourne at the time, he was not actually interested in jamming or playing outside of work.

Initially Frank lived alone in a flat further up Toorak Road but soon after I joined the band his wife Beverly came down from Sydney and they moved to a flat in St Kilda, where they were when Frank died in 1974 and where Beverly continued to live. I have not been in touch with her since 2002, when I sent her a copy of the *Not Only In Stone* CD, at which time we communicated briefly. It is possible that she is still there; I know that Ralph Whiteoak was in contact with Bev and their oldest son Simon, who was born while I was at The Embers before Frank left. While Frank was still there I met his Dad, who was a professional pianist and who was in Melbourne visiting



*The cover of Ted Nettelbeck’s 2002 album Not Only In Stone, dedicated to Frank Smith...*

Frank. But I never heard him speak of his mother or mention whether he had siblings.

After Frank moved to Channel 9 we frequently met. I would see him when I delivered my weekly arrangement to the afternoon rehearsal at the Channel 9 studio; and I would occasionally go over to his apartment, really just to chat. While overseas, I communicated with him regularly by letter; and sent him copies of the tunes that from 1963 I had begun to compose. One that I sent was *The Magpie*, which I wrote for him, not because (as someone once suggested) Frank was a Collingwood supporter (we never spoke about football and I've no idea if he ever supported any team; he was, after all, originally from Sydney). In fact, I so named it because Frank always struck me as being like a magpie in the way that he collected ideas that he thought might trigger his creative moments. He liked the tune and he later played it with me at a concert that I organised at the South Australian Art Gallery in about 1970 at which he was the featured artist.

After returning from London in 1965, I sometimes visited Melbourne, more frequently after my brother Colin accepted a lectureship at Monash University, around 1970. I always met with Frank on these occasions, sometimes at his studio in Richmond and, once, when he had been hospitalised for bad health (I forget the details). He always seemed pleased to see me; we always talked comfortably together and I enjoyed his company.

**EM: You say that, in 1960, you were still a full-time musician. What transpired that took you subsequently into academia?**

TN: I began playing semi-professionally in a jazz band in 1953 while in my first year of architecture at the University of Adelaide. The band members were fellow students and our models were the Oliver Chicago line up and Morton's Red Hot Peppers. My first model was Lil Hardin, later Jelly Roll. The band played mostly Friday and Saturday nights for student balls and parties. Our repertoire was Oliver, Armstrong, Morton, Bix plus a range of corny tunes suitable for common ballroom styles "ancient and modern". The band was pretty successful, scoring a number of radio broadcasts and appearing regularly in the Adelaide Tivoli "Swing & Jazz Shows" promoted by Bill Holyoake (in whose brother Alf's band Bryce Rohde began his career). Throughout 1953-4 I steadfastly ignored my studies in favour of these musical activities, eventually failing and leaving the university.

After National Service in early 1955 I was actually invited to join the Bruce Gray band, which was a major step up, the personnel being Gray (clarinet, saxophones), Bill Munro (trumpet), Mal Wilkinson (trombone), John Malpas (banjo, guitar), Brian Kelly (drums) and Bob Wright (tuba). This was a seriously good Dixieland band; and within a few years, following Bill Ross's recruitment, it had become a hybrid West Coast style modern band that could also play more trad styles. Initially I worked by day at BP (the oil company) as a clerk, but by 1957 I had left the day job and had sufficient gigs to earn my living from music. From then until 1974 I worked as a pianist on a full-time basis.

However, after returning to Adelaide from London in 1965, I quickly realised that the music scene, that had permitted the relatively secure income to which I was accustomed, was slowly but surely disappearing; and in 1966 my band at an Adelaide



night club was fired when the club closed permanently. I soon found continuing work six nights/week (solo piano dining room Monday-Thursday; quartet for dinner dance Friday-Saturday) at a fashionable suburban hotel but I began to think of an alternative and re-entered the University of Adelaide to complete a BA in Music and Psychology, with the aim of becoming a qualified music teacher. I included Psychology in my studies for no better reason than that a friend was taking it. I continued to work nights -- by this time I had a family with three children to support – but as the years passed I realised that I did not truly enjoy the experience of providing popular background music for diners. I had only ever been interested in trying to improve my jazz playing.

By 1974 I had completed my BA (honours in Psychology) and a PhD and I was offered a continuing, tenured position as a lecturer in Psychology at the University of Adelaide. I left the hotel and thereafter my music interests were confined to jazz-related activities. With the establishment of formal jazz studies in Adelaide, initially at the Adelaide College of Advanced Education and subsequently the University of Adelaide, I was able to become involved in jazz education; but my primary appointment was in Psychology where I eventually became a Professor (Emeritus since my retirement in 2014).



*A latter-day shot of Ted Nettelbeck: Emeritus Professor of Psychology since his retirement in 2014...*

The late 1970s through the 80s were unquestionably my “golden years” for jazz gigs. I rehearsed and played regularly with Barry Duggan and Jimmy Shaw, Carl Orr, Schmoie (Elhay) and Laurie Kennedy and I appeared at jazz festivals and venues in Wangaratta, Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Adelaide. A very active Jazz Action Society in Adelaide, driven principally by Pam Swanson, took advantage of regular, frequent visits to Australia from many American jazz musicians and, together with

Laurie or Billy Ross and Geoff Kluge, I accompanied several major jazz artists from the US and UK, including the legendary Phil Woods, Mark Murphy, Milt Jackson, Red Rodney, Red Holloway, Richie Cole, Warren Vaché, Al Cohn, Urbie Green, Herb Ellis, Joe Newman, Plas Johnson, Junior Cook, Johnny Griffin, Scott Hamilton, Emily Remler, Pete Christlieb, Bobby Shew, Peter Leitch, Sheila Jordan, Danny Moss, David O'Higgins and Lee Konitz.



*Ted Nettelbeck Band, Glenelg, 2003: L-R, Nettelbeck (piano), Sylvan (Schmue) Elhay (tenor sax), Bob Jeffery (alto sax), Lyndon Gray (double bass), Laurie Kennedy (drums)... PHOTO COURTESY TED NETTELBECK*

I also played for a long list of Australian musicians visiting Adelaide: Graeme Lyall, Keith Stirling, Don Burrows, George Golla, Ed Gaston, Errol Buddle, James Morrison, Dale Barlow, Andrew Speight, Allan Browne, Bernie McGann, Ted Vining and Brian Brown. Laurie, Schmue and I rehearsed weekly for some 35 years, supported by a list of bass players that has included some really excellent players: Steve Elphick, David Seidel, Michael Pank, Rod Cornish, Sandy Klose, John Collins, James Sked, Dave Stratton, Wayne Elliott, Ross McHenry, Frank DiSario, David Chatterton, Lyndon Gray, Les Millar, Sam Zerna, Peter Dowdall and Matthew Newland. In 1991 I was a member of the judging panel (chaired by Tony Gould and including also Mike Nock, Bob Sedergreen and Barry Harris) for the AMP National Jazz Piano Awards at the Wangaratta Festival when Jann Rutherford won.

All of this activity did help me to establish something of a local jazz profile, which resulted in gigs like opening at concerts for Nina Simone and for Dizzy Gillespie; and in 1992 I scored the piano chair in the performance of *Nexus*, by Don Banks, presented by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra under the conductor David Porcelijn. And as you would be aware, I was involved in the jazz co-ordination programme at state and national levels for many years, including a term as Chairperson of your National Jazz Co-ordination Advisory Committee.



*Frank Smith: he did not look after his instruments...*

**EM: Ralph Whiteoak refers to Smith’s “notoriously dishevelled and mistreated saxophone”. Did you have any experience of this?**

TN: Frank did not look after his instruments. He left them at the club, just sitting on the bandstand and he frequently immersed and swirled the saxophones in the pool at the edge of the bandstand. What this accomplished I have no idea. I have heard the story about him leaning forward while playing just to ensure that the keys dropped open by gravity but I can’t confirm it. It is true, however, that both his alto and his tenor looked dreadful; very worn, no lacquer, dents.

**EM: What do you know of Smith’s life after he left Melbourne? Did you stay in touch with him? For example, were you aware of his stint in Tasmania (which I understand was not a happy one).**

TN: I was not in direct contact with Frank when he left Melbourne but knew that he had taken a job at the Wrest Point Casino in Hobart. We did hear something of his time there because an Adelaide saxophonist Knobby Clarke was working there at the same time and corresponding with friends and family back home. Knobby was thrilled to be working with Frank in the same sax section. But I was not aware that Frank was critically ill; and I was dreadfully shocked when Billy Ross rang to tell me that he had died. It was terrible, deeply distressing news.

**EM: I think what you have said serves two very important purposes. You've not only provided invaluable information on Frank Smith, which certainly rounds out what we already know of him, but also documented to a great extent your own musical career.**

TN: I have found it difficult to recall a lot of this stuff but I have tried to be as accurate as possible. The reality is, as I know as an academic in psychology, that memory is a reconstruction and not to be trusted as factual. However, I have done my best.

---

*[Ted Nettelbeck's review of the book edited by Bruce Johnson, "Australasian Riffs: Essays on Australasian Jazz", appears on this website at <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/book-reviews-6>. That book includes the essay by Ralph Whiteoak, "Examining the Legend and Music of Australasian Saxophonist Frank Smith." In 2002, Nettelbeck and his quartet, including himself (piano), Sylvan (Schmoe) Elhay (tenor saxophone), Lyndon Gray (bass) and Laurie Kennedy (drums), released an album "Not Only in Stone" which was dedicated to Frank Smith, 1927-1974.]*