

## A GIRLIE'S GLISSANDO: WENDY SADDINGTON AND BERNIE McGANN

by John Clare

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*Wendy Saddington: in the not so halcyon 60s, she was being encouraged to suffer and give us Janis Joplin style catharsis...*

**B**ack in the not so halcyon 60s, when Wendy Saddington was being encouraged to suffer and give us Janis Joplin style catharsis, I happened to meet her and told her what was on my mind.

It seemed to me that few of the rock groups of the time gave her what she really needed. There was more to her than one level screaming. She eyed me blankly. I said I would like to hear her with a band that could respond to dynamic contrast, that did not perform the ritual of catharsis interminably in grey desperation.

She said: "I just come and get paid and I don't give a shit." Long silence. "I don't care anymore. I'm thinking of giving it up." End of conversation.

And she has given it up, or at least disappeared, several times since then, returning in different masks. Many artists are avid to yield up their inner selves, or a selective projection, to the cameras and magazine pages. I believe Wendy is very frightened of the several factions who would like to claim more than her talent, her very life, for their own sacrificial altars. She is often quite stony towards people she has not come to trust.

Someone else may get the interview of the year with Wendy Saddington. I will just say that she is singing again, often superbly, with a good band Friday and Saturday nights in a pleasant campy little place in Sydney's Reiby Place (right opposite The Basement, Circular quay).



*The great Bernie McGann, to my ears the most original jazz alto saxophonist in the country: his neck swells like a bullfrog's...*

In the band is the great Bernie McGann, to my ears the most original jazz alto saxophonist in the country. What a visual contrast they present, and what a meeting of cultures. Wendy pale and lynx eyed in black dress and black stockings; Bernie sandy and sun grizzled.

Bernie McGann is in some ways like the blokes I used to surf with through the winter. I don't know what they were like outside paradise, but in the water and talking on the rocks they were nature's gentlemen, philosophers and scholars.

I have known a number of talented artists, and the more they behave as one would expect an artist to behave, the more they disappoint me as people. Not this again: the intense gaze, the speed rave, the wild hair. Perhaps success came too soon, before they grew tired of the adolescent fantasy of being an artist. I give you Bernie McGann for whom success has never come, who pours out his heart and imagination whether he has an audience or not, whose dedication is part of him, rather than an emblem on his sleeve.

McGann's technique is not copybook. His neck swells like a bullfrog's, his back arches and whips forward; at times his whole body judders as though he is shaking the notes out and you seem to see multiple images of him, his saxophone and the pattern of golden notes, like Duchamp's *Nude descending a Staircase*. Soaring long notes will give way to jagged bursts that leap from register to register with a logic that is constantly dawning on you just as he embarks on his next flight. Unpredictable high notes tweak your ears, growling low notes make your jaw drop. I tell you he is a giant.

After all that, he steps away and squints back at the shining surf he has left, from under bushy eyebrows. He nods and smiles, craggy and rather sheepish, at a group of close-cropped ladies who are screaming in ecstasy.



*To find McGann after his round, you wander into the bush until you hear an alto saxophone wailing... PHOTO COURTESY LUCAS PRODUKTION*

McGann is by day a postman at Bundeena, where he lives. To find him after his round, you wander into the bush until you hear an alto saxophone wailing, so high at times you might mistake it for a soprano, as Don Burrows did. He loves Wendy's singing and she loves his playing. Fans of both are there, having their ears opened.



*Wendy is singing a mixture of contemporary material, old blues and even ballads from the swing era, sung rather in the spirit reminiscent of Billie Holiday (above) and Bessie Smith (below)...*



Wendy is singing a mixture of contemporary material, old blues and even ballads from the swing era, but these are not given quaint or nostalgic facsimile renditions. They are sung rather in the spirit — and sometimes with voice and phrasing - reminiscent of Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith, whom Wendy was listening to when she was 18.

Like Holiday, Wendy might be presenting if not herself then the ironic and bitter overtones of her voice as evidence of the suffering which follows adherence to society's romantic-maudlin values — but that is only one aspect of it. Musically, many of these are great songs, and she sings them very musically indeed. I read recently that in wartime the small talk of popular song assumes profundity, when partings could really be forever. Wendy sings these songs as though it was wartime. Wendy singing *Nobody knows when you're down and out* does not need my advocacy.

I have heard her off form on one night. Every other time her raking voice has been deployed with devastating effect. Her time and phrasing and her sense of both husky and hard-edged coloration are practically unmatched here. You may raise the spectre of certain singers equipped with more awesome technique, but Wendy's attack of the first phrases of *St Louis* and *Basin Street Blues* has more jazz feeling than all the four-octave acrobats. She is right there with Penny Eames, Heather Pitt and Cleo Laine.



*Saddington: she is right there with Penny Eames, Heather Pitt and Cleo Laine...*

Her singing of the modern song *Sanity* is towering, serene and frighteningly urgent at the same time. Bernie McGann, who had never heard the song before, but has contributed towering solos of his own on it, thought it was Wendy's composition, so perfectly did it suit her.

The band, which was originally formed by guitarist Mick Lieber — who has since gone to Melbourne — consists of Bernie, drummer John O'Brien, electric piano

player John Charles and electric bass player Owen Booth, They acquit themselves well in a number of idioms. Charles is particularly impressive playing Thelonious Monk tunes, which is a damn good thing to hear.

Wendy says she has not been avoiding work since her last public appearances. “I’ve been going backwards and forwards between Sydney and Melbourne. I was out of touch. I couldn’t make contact, but I *did* want to work.”

I am no good at this sort of thing. I don’t push for further explanation. For a while we sit and talk of old friends. The sweetness I have seen in rare moments is coming out. She seems happy. A large lady descends and smothers her in an embrace. The instant before she disappears, I see panic in Wendy’s eyes. Her body flinches.

The arms withdraw, but Wendy\* seems to have gone into hiding. I mumble inanities about how good it is to see and hear her again, and go in to listen to the band and wait for her to come and sing.



*\*Editor’s note: Wendy Saddington adopted Krishna Consciousness in the 1970s and took the name Gandharvika Dasi. In March 2013 she was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer, and died on 21 June, aged 63.*