

## BOB BERTLES QUINTET PREVIEW

by John Shand\*

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*After 50 years in the business, jazz legend Bob Bertles is a master of re-invention...*

**D**o optimism and enthusiasm promote a successful career, or does a successful career beget these qualities? The question leaps to mind when listening to or chatting with the ebullient Bob Bertles.

He is part of the musical folklore of Australia, and probably New Zealand and Britain as well. His saxophones have been heard with Johnny O'Keefe, Max Merritt and the Meteors, Nucleus, the Col Nolan Quartet, Ten Part Invention and his own quintet. It is a career that turns 50 next year and Bertles loves playing as much as ever, even if performance opportunities are sparser these days.

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"I don't mind the slow pace of it," he says. "The beauty of the position now is that I only do gigs that I really want to do. A lot of the work in the '70s, '80s and '90s was three or four nights in a club, and I couldn't stand doing that again. I guess I've gone back to being a professional jazz musician."

Not that he ever stopped. He formed his first quintet in 1958, but jazz has been routinely punctuated with other work, beginning with Bertles's big baritone helping O'Keefe make Oz rock'n'roll a viable alternative to the American product.



*Bob Bertles (alto saxophone) on stage at the Sydney Stadium with Johnny O'Keefe...*  
PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

"The O'Keefe thing was wonderful," he recalls. "Not musically, but it was a great experience working with Johnny ... He created the Australian pop scene. There wouldn't have been anyone recorded here. He championed all that. Regardless of what other people said of him, he was a very genuine person, dedicated to the business."

So did Bertles have a sense of how important the O'Keefe phenomenon was at the time?

"No," he says. "I was 19 or 20, you know, and I was already establishing myself in the jazz scene in Sydney. That was just a means of flying around the country, making a lot more money, and just enjoying myself. I just had great times playing in all these big venues like the [Sydney] Stadium. It was great to be part of that, but we weren't aware we were creating history."

The next crucial association was five years with the New Zealand rhythm and blues king Max Merritt. "We were aware of the importance of that band," Bertles says. "We were continually made aware of it by all the other musicians that used to come and see us."



*New Zealand rhythm and blues king Max Merritt: Bertles spent five years with The Meteors...*

In 1972, Bertles left the Meteors while in London, tired of the attitude of the band's manager. "But it all turned out fine for me," he smiles, "Because the Nucleus thing

came out of that." Four rewarding years followed in this British-based jazz-rock band led by the trumpeter and Miles Davis biographer Ian Carr.



*UK trumpeter and Miles Davis biographer Ian Carr...*

When Bertles returned to Sydney in 1976, he again landed on his feet, slotting into the Col Nolan Quartet for two years.



*Bertles (left) on tenor with the Col Nolan (right) Soul Syndicate. In the background are Laurie Bennett (drums) and Dieter Vogt (bass)...*

The same luck unfolded when he returned from his next European sojourn in 1981, being offered work in the orchestra for *Chicago* at the Sydney Opera House. Although he had never done any theatre work, and was dubious, he accepted. The upshot was not just a new line of enjoyable work but a future wife.



*Bob Bertles' wife, the Australian actress, dancer, singer choreographer and director Nancye Hayes...*

"Nancye [Hayes] was the star of the show, and that's where we actually met," he explains. "I sort of fell in love with her at first sight, really."

In 2003, the scope of his theatrical work suddenly expanded when, at the age of 64, he made his acting, singing and dancing debut in *The Threepenny Opera* at Belvoir Street. "A quadruple threat, as they say," he laughs. "I sing, dance, play an instrument and act!"



*Ten Part Invention, L-R, Ken James, James Greening, Sandy Evans, Steve Elphick (behind Evans) Miroslav Bukovsky, John Pochée, Bernie McGann, Warwick Alder, Bertles, Roger Frampton...*

Next year will not only be Bertles's 50th in the business, it will also mark 20 years of the band most associated with him these days: Ten Part Invention, the Rolls-Royce of Sydney jazz. "I like to experiment, and have dabbled in lots of stuff over the years, but I'm really a bebopper at heart," he confesses.



*Bertles on baritone sax: I like to experiment, and have dabbled in lots of stuff over the years, but I'm really a bebopper at heart... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER*

Having grown up playing clarinet, besotted with Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, Bertles then heard Charlie Parker. The earth moved and the alto saxophone beckoned. The baritone followed, and he added soprano to suit the sound of Nucleus. While he plays other horns, it is on these three that it is easiest for him to be Bob Bertles, even when he is not performing often.

"I always have one out in the corner of the room, so I can pick it up and walk around the room playing. I don't practise. I play. It's an old adage. I hate the word 'practise', because it sounds like work. Playing sounds like fun - which is what I do."