

TOM BAKER: APOSTLE OF SWING

by Eric Myers

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For many years there have been two major schools of jazz in Sydney: known loosely as the traditional and the modern. The traditional school has chiefly been concerned with classic jazz of the 1920s, which has been the main inspiration for the pre-eminent trumpet/trombone/clarinet line-up in Australian jazz since the 1940s. The modern school has chiefly been concerned with bebop and post-bebop jazz since around 1945.

One of the more interesting recent developments, however, has been the apparent emergence of a strong third school — what might be called a ‘swing’ movement — which appears to exist midway between the other two. Many of the more progressive and adventurous traditional players are involved in this music, as well as some of the modernists, but there is no more influential representative of this new school than the multi-instrumentalist Tom Baker.



Tom Baker on alto sax: swing is a music that is just more understandable to him than bebop...

Recently Tom Baker spoke with *Jazz Magazine* about the music that is his main inspiration: small-band swing of the 1930s and early 1940s — the kind of music that kept jazz alive in the pre-bebop years, at a time when the big bands of the swing era minimised creative improvisation, and lapsed increasingly into clichés and schmaltz.

“There’s a period in jazz history from about 1930, I suppose, to 1945, where the big bands were in, and then were starting to go out. The small bands that came out of the big bands were still playing swing. That music is just more understandable to me than bebop; it was swing music, but with more advanced lines. I can understand bebop almost completely, but it is often too fast and too deliberately convoluted; simplicity almost went down the drain in the bebop era, and hot playing wasn’t really considered.

“The guys who were playing hot music went out of favour. [Coleman] Hawkins was an example. He went with the flow, and played what bebop he could, and was very successful, but it wasn’t real bebop; it wasn’t what Charlie Parker was doing. I’m getting less and less interested in trying to play like Parker. I wanted to be Charlie the second when I first took up the alto. Now that I understand what he’s doing I can see that the music that was going on just before that is more my style, more what I want to do.



Coleman Hawkins (above left) went with the flow, but it wasn’t real bebop; it wasn’t what Charlie Parker (above right) was doing... PHOTO CURTESY PINTEREST

“I think there is a definite trend amongst the working musicians that I know and play with, to playing swing. It’s largely due to guys like Marty Mooney and Paul Furniss. Also, there’s more of an acceptance in the eye of bebop. Basically mainstream and modern bands are going into the pubs now, not so much New Orleans and Dixieland stuff anymore — though that sort of music still has a big following with bands like Mike Hallam, Noel Crow and Graeme Bell.”



Baker says that the trend amongst working musicians to playing swing, is largely due to guys like Marty Mooney (above left on tenor) and Paul Furniss (above right on alto). Baker is in the centre on trumpet...

Tom Baker is perturbed that many younger musicians now out playing jazz are generally unaware of swing; they have usually been educated in bebop and the more modern movements. But, there is little doubt that, as he has increasingly established himself as one of the most impressive saxophone players in town, people are starting to take a real interest in the music he stands for.

“A lot of the musicians who have come out of the Con have expressed interest in swing. I know when I joined the Morrison Bros Big Band, most of the guys were basically unaware of the swing traditions; some of them wanted to know what I was listening to, and now they are listening to Coleman Hawkins and Chu Berry and Lester Young, and being influenced by them, whereas before they were listening to Coltrane, the Breckers, the modernists . . .

“I don’t agree with the Con policy now, so far as I know. I see musicians coming out who don’t have much of an idea of jazz history, which I think is important, just for playing your horn right. You’ve got to know where you came from. If you go back to [Charlie] Parker and start, that’s not enough, because Parker was influenced by a whole lot of guys. He was basically a big band musician when he started, as was Dizzy, as was Coltrane. At the Con they should have a proper jazz history course related to small band swing, if they don’t already. I know Don Burrows is aware of it, but whether they teach it or not, I’m not sure.

“James Morrison is a good influence at the Con, because he’s well aware of some of the swing traditions anyway. It’s most evident in his piano playing. He’s an Erroll Garner man — very much so — which is great, because Garner covered all the bases; he could play with anybody, and he did. Through James, I think a lot of the students are becoming aware of the older styles.



James Morrison, says Baker, is an Erroll Garner man... Garner (centre) is pictured above with Art Tatum (left) and Count Basie (right)... PHOTO CURTESY PINTEREST

“I have guys ringing me up wanting to come for lessons to find out, not so much about playing, but what I’m listening to, what my influences are. I guess I’m a bit of a white elephant, or a dark horse in the Morrison big band. I really don’t fit in with them. I can — a bit like Hawkins in the bop thing, I guess — with them, but not of them.”

When Tom Baker took part in The Super Saxes evening at the Regent in January, he took the stage with two of the most accomplished modern saxophonists in Australian

jazz: Errol Buddle and Bob Bertles. Yet Baker held his own well, and no-one could say that he was outplayed by either men — even by Buddle, who was at his mellifluous best on the night. It was astonishing to reflect that, at that time, while the other two men had spent most of their lives on the saxophone, Baker had been playing the instrument for less than five years.



Super Saxes evening at the Regent in Sydney in January, 1984, L-R, Errol Buddle, Bob Bertles and Tom Baker: no-one could say that Baker was outplayed by either men... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

In fact, Baker had been a trumpet player until late 1979, and switched to the saxophone only because he was physically unable, for a short time, to play the trumpet. But, he had an interesting career in jazz before then. What is his background?

Tom Baker was born in California on September 14, 1952. His parents were not particularly musical, but they liked music and had a record player. His father had played cornet for a short time, and there was a piano in the house. Tom would fiddle on the piano and, at around the age of 5 or 6, he began taking piano lessons with a local classical teacher.

“I just played by ear; I couldn’t read much,” says Tom. “I’d memorise the pieces, and the teacher wouldn’t like it.” He didn’t hear jazz until well into high school, where there was a Dixieland band that played for parades on the back of a truck. He liked the music but, at that stage, felt no compelling need to get into jazz.

For someone who is now a central figure in Australian jazz, Tom Baker was a late developer. At age 15, he wanted to play drums in the beginners’ school band, but arrived late on the inaugural day to find that the drums were already taken. So he asked for what was left: the trumpet.

“I got straight into it,” he says. “My parents bought me some Tijuana Brass records and an Al Hirt record, and that was it. It was good grounding playing along, because my stereo was a bit fast, so I got into all the sharp keys; I learnt to play in all the weird keys first.”



Baker's parents bought him an Al Hirt (pictured above) record, which was good grounding for playing along... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Like many fine jazz players, Baker learnt to play by ear. The musical director of the band showed him the basic fingering on the first day, then he was on his own. He did well enough to graduate later to the school's concert band, which did concerts and played sousa marches at football matches. Still, there was some distance between Baker and a career in jazz.

The first jazz that really turned him on came to him in college by way of a radio program called *Dixieland Is My Beat*. At that stage, he was oriented towards playing Dixieland trumpet, but had made no serious effort to pursue that interest. Then, he and his parents and younger brother came to Australia, arriving in Sydney on Australia Day, January 26, 1972.

“The place was closed, I remember”, says Tom. They had come to fulfil one of his father's lifelong dreams: to build a boat and sail it back to the US. It was a 55-foot steel ketch, and they almost completed it at Lavender Bay, near Luna Park, when increasing costs forced them to abandon the project.

Tom was soon into the Sydney jazz scene. In late 1972 he went to Boosey & Hawkes to buy a trumpet and met Pat Reilly, who suggested he contact the Northside Jazzmen, a band which played every Saturday night at the North Star Hotel (now the Rag & Famish) in North Sydney. They needed a trumpet player.

“I fronted up the first time”, says Tom. “I wasn’t sure what ‘having a blow with them’ meant. I didn’t know you were supposed to ask. I just walked in and took the trumpet out. It was a spirited, rough-as-guts pub band, but they liked me, and hired me. I remember the pay was \$7 from 7 to 10 on Saturday night. A middy was 18 cents, and a schooner 27 cents. That was my first gig.”



Tom Baker (far right) on tour in regional New South Wales with the Ray Price Quintet. Others are L-R, Graham Spedding, Len Barnard, Pat Qua (seated) and Price (in doorway of the bus)...

So, Tom Baker was off and running as a jazz player. He stayed with the Northside Jazzmen for a year and a half and studied at the Conservatorium. He then went into a club job at Wentworthville Leagues for a year. Meanwhile, he had been playing in the jazz scene and had met Paul Furniss, who suggested him to Ray Price as a replacement for the trumpeter Mike Hallam. He was with the Ray Price Quintet* for about two and a half years.

“During that time I’d learnt to play the tuba, and made three or four LPs with Nick Boston’s band,” says Tom. “That was good grounding; I found out what it was like to be in the rhythm section, to see the band from another angle. “With Ray Price we did mainly schools during the day, sometimes two and three, just a one-hour jazz lecture, and country tours. We hardly played around Sydney. I don’t ever remember playing in Sydney, apart from balls or private functions. We never did a jazz gig in Sydney, but we’d do tours in the country for up to five weeks or two months: Queensland, as far north as Thursday Island, toured New Zealand, Tasmania — everywhere. It was good experience.

** The spelling of ‘quintet’ became ‘qintet’ for a time. According to jazz historian Bill Haesler, it was a typo on publicity material and Price decided to keep it that way for a while. Accordingly it was used on the two Dixie LP and CBS covers and labels. In referring to these LPs some discographers (including Jack Mitchell) use Qintet [sic]. Others ignore it.*

“We’d always end the show with *American Patrol*, *In The Mood* and *The Saints*. It was a long blow. Most of the gigs were four hours and we’d usually done one or two school shows during the day, so my trumpet lip was really spot on. No technique much, but I could play all night.”

That took Tom Baker up to 1975, when he formed the San Francisco Jazz Band. He had met the trumpeter Eric Holroyd and discovered a mutual interest in the Lu Watters - Turk Murphy style of Dixieland music. They decided to form a band to play at the Australian Jazz Convention which, in 1975, was to be held at Balmain, Sydney. The group originally included Chris Qua (bass), Len Barnard (drums), Dave Robison (banjo), Hans Karssemeyer (piano), John Bates (trombone), Paul Furniss (reeds), with Holroyd on second trumpet and Baker himself on first trumpet.



Tom Baker’s original San Francisco Jazz Band, which was formed in August 1975 and debuted at the 20th Australian Jazz Convention in December 1975. Standing, L-R, Len Barnard, Eric Holroyd, Baker. Seated, L-R, John Bates, Hans Karssemeyer, Paul Furniss, Chris Qua, Dave Robison...

“We were quite successful — the hit of the Convention, so far as I can understand. We scored a good spot just after Bud Freeman. We made a big splash, but then we didn’t have any gigs for six months, so we recorded at The Basement and got our publicity together for an American tour. In 1976 I went over to the Sacramento Dixieland Jubilee and was able to talk them into having us in 1978, two years later, and I spent all of 1977 preparing the way.”

In 1978, the San Francisco Jazz Band, along with a Japanese group, was the first overseas band to appear at the Sacramento Jubilee. Meanwhile, they had been appearing in Sydney at various venues: the City of Sydney RSL, the Old Push, Red

Ned's, and Moby Dick's at Whale Beach. Although the band was originally designed to play the Watters-Murphy two-beat style, Tom found that the music was evolving.

“After a while the two-beat stuff sounded a bit the same to me, and a few swing things were creeping in”, he says. “I started enjoying those. The career of the San Francisco Jazz Band* culminated in the American tour which amounted to a month in California, a visit to New Orleans, then Los Angeles and home.”

Back from America in 1978, Baker then got an offer from the bassist John Callaghan to tour with a group called the Australian All-Stars, working out of England. So, he was soon in England with Callaghan, plus Paul Finnerty (banjo), Roger Bird (clarinet) and Norman Simmons (drums). The group made two excursions into Europe but, as Tom explains, “we didn't get much international acclaim. The band was alright, but it was badly organised. Our band photo consisted of a snapshot taken outside a pub with most of our heads cut off, and our demo tape was done in a lounge-room on a little recorder. We made just enough to pay for our food and we had 25 pounds left over. It cost 25 pounds to cross the Channel, so we came home with nothing. But it was good experience.”



Pianist Pat Qua: Baker visited New York with her in 1978...

After leaving the Australian All-Stars, Baker visited New York with the pianist Pat Qua. He was back in Australia by the end of '78. In early '79 he had an offer from an American bandleader Rex Allen, who was involved in a re-creation of the Dorsey era. The band was called The Fabulous Forties Orchestra, and Baker played in the trumpet section; the group toured through various areas of the US for two months.

**Editor's Note: The San Francisco Jazz Band still exists and plays in Sydney under the leadership of Paul Furniss.*



Rex Allen (right), pictured with another US trombonist Mike Pittsley: Baker played in Allen's trumpet section...

“This got me more interested in swing music”, says Tom. Then, in late 1979, some Californian friends suggested that he go to Holland for the Breda Festival. He went first in May, 1980, and has attended every year since. Meanwhile, there had been an event which turned out to be a significant turning-point in Tom Baker's life. In England, while practising trumpet, he felt a twinge of pain, which turned out to be a hernia. The result: an operation back in Australia, and he was unable to play the trumpet for two months.



Graham Spedding in 1959: he was going to live in Turkey, so Baker asked him to leave his saxophone with him... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

“I had to play something, and couldn’t play the trumpet”, says Tom. So, he asked Graham Spedding, who was going to live in Turkey, to leave his saxophone with him. “Paul Furniss showed me the fingering, and I sat in the back room and woodshedded, until the squeaks were ironed out.” Highly motivated, he did eight hours practice every day for some months. In this way, Baker managed what can only be regarded as an extraordinary feat: within six months he was able to play the saxophone at a professional standard — so well that he played alto at the Breda Festival in May, 1980.

“I’d built up such strong chops on the trumpet, playing sax used quite a few of the same muscles, and a few different ones”, he says, “but it was that much easier than the trumpet — dead easy, comparatively.”

Tom Baker’s hernia and consequent adoption of the saxophone was therefore somewhat fortuitous. He had always admired the playing of the Sydney saxophonists Paul Furniss and Marty Mooney, whom he describes as his initial influences. “Marty has good time, good phrasing, a powerful way of playing, completely different from the other guys in town, which is good — I think the Coltrane thing is too much in evidence. Marty has a loose, swing style, basically a black style. I think his favourite player is [Sonny] Rollins, and I can hear a bit of that in him. But, he’s very much his own man.”



Marty Mooney on tenor: a loose, swing style, basically a black style...

Once into the saxophone, Baker went out of his way to take something from all the great American saxophonists: Benny Carter, Coltrane, Pete Brown, Johnny Hodges ... “I set out to get records by everybody. I wanted to find out the lineage, so I went right back to [Coleman] Hawkins in the ‘20s. I’d known about Frankie Trumbauer on C Melody for a long time; back to the roots, and through the lineage, right up to the ‘50s and ‘60s, where I basically lost interest.

“The public generally don’t know about Gene Ammons, but all tenor players do. He’s great, the best one for tone.” Allan Eager, Brew Moore and Serge Chaloff are other fine but obscure saxophonists whose styles Tom Baker has studied closely.



Gene Ammons: the public generally don’t know about him, says Baker, but all tenor players do...

In 1980, Baker formed a band called Groove City, which played at Trappers, Westmead, for about a year. Other than Baker it included Marty Mooney (tenor saxophone), Bill Saragih (piano), John Ryan (bass) and Lachie Jamieson (drums). It was a good, swinging bebop-style band which was the support group for Oscar Peterson and Anita O’Day when they performed in Sydney.

The career of this band was interrupted in 1982 when Baker made his regular trip to the Breda festival. In late 1982, he was back on the scene with a band that was, for a short time, one of the most exciting and popular bands in Australian jazz: the Swing Street Orchestra. Along with Baker on trumpet and saxophones, it included Marty Mooney and Paul Furniss (saxophones), Grahame Conlon (guitar), George Hermann (piano), John Ryan (bass) and Alan Geddes (drums).

The band gave a number of splendid performances in Sydney, including one that was the highlight of the Manly Jazz Carnival in October 1982. Later, the group did a successful tour of NSW and Victoria, then disbanded just before Christmas, 1982. Shortly after they disbanded, the pianist George Hermann died of a heart attack.



The Swing Street Orchestra, L-R, Alan Geddes (drums), Marty Mooney (saxophones), John Ryan (bass), Baker (trumpet and saxophones), Grahame Conlon (guitar), George Hermann (piano), Paul Furniss (saxophones)...

When the Swing Street Orchestra broke up, Baker swore he would never run another band. For the last year or so, he has been playing around Sydney in various combinations, but principally at Soup Plus on Monday and Wednesday nights with James Morrison.

“I’ve played a fair bit of bebop with the guys around town,” he says. “It’s not really my favourite sort of music, but I can play it. I like jumping in and having a go, and jumping out. I can’t play bebop as a steady diet all the time. I suppose my biggest influences at the moment are guys like Don Byas, Lucky Thompson, Hawkins in his ‘40s period; not so much Lester Young any more. I listened to nothing but Lester Young for two years, and I’ve absorbed him.

“I think it’s got a lot to do with the rhythm section. The earlier bands often used rhythm guitar, which was out in the bebop era, when piano, bass and drums became the standard. More complicated, almost bebop lines with a Basie rhythm section — that’d be my favourite sort of stuff.

“One of the differences between bop and swing is that the swing rhythm section would basically float along and swing. The horn player was expected to ride on top of it and keep things going, keep the element of heat there, and transfer it to the next

soloist, and things would get bigger and bigger until the finish. Bop is probably more of a collective effort in a way. It's more like a band of individuals, all playing to create a whole. It's harder to get going with a bop band. If everything's right it's great, but the rhythm sections are coming from a different place. It's hard for them to just cook, like the Basie rhythm section could cook. That's one thing Geoff Bull pointed out to me once: that, in the older bands, the rhythm section tended to drive the horns, whereas nowadays the horns have to get hot before everybody gets the message."



Geoff Bull (left, on trumpet) pictured here with L-R, Geoff Holden (banjo) and Adrian Ford (piano): Bull pointed out to Baker that, in the older bands, the rhythm section tended to drive the horns...

"Really I'd like to get a band with a Count Basie-style rhythm section, with rhythm guitar — basically like the Swing Street band, but with a more loose feel. But again, it's finding guys who can play in that style. For instance, there are very few bass players in town that I think play so much in the swing style that they actually could fit in with my concepts of how I want the band to sound. There are lots of great bass players here, but they don't play with the time and tone that I want. Bass players now tend to play more electrically; their notes connect, and they don't bounce anymore. As long as bass players are playing their horns like rubber bands, it doesn't swing to me. The only bass player in town who doesn't use a pick-up is Don Heap; he just plays acoustic bass."

In fact, Baker has formed a new Swing Street Orchestra (Vol II) with Ian Date (guitar), Pat Qua (piano), Don Heap (bass) and Pat Wade (rhythm guitar). It has already done a tour of Victorian provincial centres, and Baker has high hopes of taking the group to the Montreux Jazz Festival and other European festivals. Once again, he will attend the Breda Festival, Holland, in May.



Tom Baker's new Swing Street Orchestra, L-R, Pat Qua (piano), Ian Date (guitar), Baker (at back, trumpet & saxophones), Pat Wade (guitar), Don Heap (bass)...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

When he returns from Breda, he'll be playing at Sydney's Soup Plus on Wednesday nights with James Morrison, and will be putting together a special swing night every Thursday night, replacing the pianist Dick Hughes, who has been at the Soup on Thursdays from some years.

So, Tom Baker now enjoys an eminent position in Sydney jazz. He is convinced that the jazz scene here is the most vital he has experienced, outside of New York: "In Sydney there seems to be some attitude low down on the entertainment scale — which is the pubs — that when they want a band, they get a jazz band. I don't see that in the States or anywhere else, except maybe London. In San Francisco, there are really only about a dozen spots where anything is happening, and only one or two places going six nights a week: Turk Murphy's club Earthquake McGoon's, which I hear is closing for good, and the Fairmont Hotel. We have The Basement, Soup Plus, the Brasserie, the Push, Red Ned's, and all the pubs, that have things all the time. You'll never find any jazz on Monday nights in San Francisco; LA is much the same — if there's anything on, you have to travel miles and miles to find it.

"I've always said that Sydney is second only to New York in the amount of jazz that goes on, and the number of guys making a living out of it. New York is that much bigger, and it's the home of the best players. But I've been through Chicago, New Orleans; I've lived in LA and San Francisco, in Paris for a little while; got to know Amsterdam, Hamburg, Munich, Auckland . . . I haven't found anything like Sydney, outside of New York. A lot of guys in the States know that, and they want to come out here and live."

For Tom Baker Discography, see following page.

TOM BAKER DISCOGRAPHY

On tuba —

Australian Jazz Of The Seventies, Vol 6 (Jazznote) with Nick Boston's Colonial Jazz Band; Nick Boston's Colonial Jazz Band, (Festival), Fred Starkey Foundation.



On trumpet —

Tom Baker's San Francisco Jazz Band, Vol 1 (Jazz & Jazz); Cakewalkin' Babies, San Francisco Jazz Band, Vol. 2 (Jazz & Jazz); Jazz Party No 1, with Ray Price Quintet (Dixie); Jazz Party No 2, with Ray Price Quintet (Dixie); Tom Baker's San Francisco Jazz Band in Hobart 1977 (Anteater Records) cassette only.



On saxophone —

Tom Baker Quartet: Crazeology, (Anteater Records) cassette only.