

TED VINING: IN THE JAZZ WILDERNESS

by Neville Meyers*

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Ted Vining in 1974: striving to create an environment for change... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Talent, and high-powered creative drive, can be self-alienating qualities. Blessed — or cursed — with them, the artist stands apart, adopts a critical stance, and inevitably comes into conflict with his or her artistic environment. The conflict may out of sheer frustration cost you an ear (Van Gogh), thrust upon the artist a self-protective cloak of stark eccentricity (Monk), or in much less dramatic fashion — in the case of Ted Vining — manifest itself in striving to create an environment for change.

The desire for change — allied with a deep commitment to strenuously push jazz forward as an evolving art form — are obviously deeply embedded in the Ted Vining personality. But change, the drummer will tell you, is not what the Brisbane jazz scene — in Vining's terms, the jazz wilderness — is all about. Says Vining: "Brisbane is a jazz wilderness because many people feel lost here. The lost feeling comes from

**In 1983 when this was written, Neville Meyers was a librarian, jazz collector, part-time jazz programmer/announcer on Brisbane's 4MBS-FM, and veteran habitué of jazz clubs in Australia and the United States.*

critically looking at the musical environment, noticing a lack of professionalism, and seeing in many of its musicians on stage, lack of reason for being there."

"I really worry about Queensland because, right now, it doesn't have much to say as a jazz producer. Here, jazz has become predominantly concerned with Dixieland music, which is just a pick-up from every other Dixieland band in Australia or around the world, compromising itself to the people, playing down to the people. In effect, songs for people to go to the pub, drink beer, and talk over the music.

"There are people who have tried to change that direction years before I came here — the initial impulse has nothing to do with me — but lost. And they'd lose again, as anyone would, unless there's a fundamental change in Brisbane attitudes."

Harsh words these, but coming — indisputably — from someone who cares greatly about jazz; coming, moreover, from someone who's developed, and earned, as far as musicians are concerned, a considerable amount of respect at home and abroad in modern jazz circles.

Since coming to Brisbane two years ago Vining has also built up a reputation for saying what's on his mind calling, too often for some, a spade a "bloody shovel".

As one musical colleague noted: "With Vining it's black and white rather than shades of grey. Ted's attitudes on musical tastes and musical abilities are uncompromising. It's not too difficult to pick up what the man's saying, and those smitten with sensitive skins should not get too close. Subtlety is clearly not one of Ted's strengths."

Bob Sedergreen: "As a person Ted has many, many emotions. He's very complex. People around him see only the well-to-do sartorial dresser, the super-confident guy. Frankly, it's bewildering to ask me about Vining — I could wax on for hours."



Pianist Bob Sedergreen: it's bewildering to ask him about Vining... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

My own view, after almost a year's observation, is that Vining in his own field is as open-mouthed as Sinatra in his. He is not slow to be critical, can trample over other people's feelings, but is capable at the same time, of unbounded generosity, both musically and personally. And the man obviously, and sincerely, cares about music.

Few, if any, would detract from Vining's positive attempts to ginger up the Brisbane jazz scene. Since his arrival in Brisbane he has played a variety of gigs in both Brisbane and Melbourne; become Queensland Jazz Co-ordinator for the Music Board of the Australia Council, and highly active as musical director for the Queensland Jazz Action Society; wheeled and dealt to bring major jazz artists to Brisbane and to establish the Community Arts Centre's Jazz Spot (currently the city's only venue dedicated to bebop-and-beyond modern jazz explorations); lastly, given vital encouragement and practical assistance to younger jazz players.

If Vining were to leave town tomorrow, the Jazz Spot alone would stand as a symbol of what he is about. The club's free-wheeling environment, favouring experimentation — that any style or approach can be daringly tested — is particularly appealing to Vining. The club moreover has filled a void left by the recent demise of Mileham Hayes's Jazz Cellar. The Jazz Spot is also the birthplace of Vining's free-form jazz players Musiikki Oy: Peter Uppman (trumpet), Ian Chapman (reeds), and bassist Peter Walters, all of whom, under Vining's encouragement, have become part of the cadre of Brisbane's most promising young musicians.



Trumpeter Peter Uppman: one of Vining's free-form jazz players in the group Musiikki Oy... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Bassist Walters: "It's scary just to step up and play off the top of your head. But Vining's both encouraging, and pushing, all the time. It's the risk involved which gives it its edge and flavour. Sometimes a great rapport is felt; when that happens, all is possible."



Bassist Peter Walters: all is possible... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE

Rapport and tight feel are what Vining sees as the most important elements in group playing. "Good groups are hard to find in Brisbane, for that matter, in Sydney and Melbourne, too," he says. "There are too many changes, the groups can't sustain themselves, to develop effective rapport. You have to find the right people, get dedication from them. It's as much personality as musicality. The group should be so tight as to say: 'Hey, we're good, we're going to grab you by the balls'."

But even the best groups can let you down. Vining, recalling the LA Four's Perth concerts: "We — the Brian Brown Quintet — played the same festival. We had every opportunity to see and hear Almeida, Brown, Manne and Shank. They were boring. Four separate musicians, all top artists, but lacking that group feel. Similarly, in Brisbane and other capitals, you get plenty of competent players but few tight, really tight, groups.

"My ideal of course is the John Coltrane Quartet with McCoy, Jimmy and Elvin. But most groups, if they stayed together long enough, were dedicated enough, could develop that greater empathy."

Certainly the Ted Vining Trio, with Bob Sedergreen (piano) and Barry Buckley (bass), during its July, 1983 Brisbane gigs seemed to embody 'feel'; obviously *en rapport* as soon as they met; sounding, according to veteran jazz programmer/writer Jim Barlow, "more like one musician than three."



The Ted Vining Trio, L-R, Barry Buckley, Vining, Bob Sedergreen: more like one musician than three... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Part of the problem in Brisbane and elsewhere, Vining feels, is the lack of experienced leaders. According to Vining's dictum, the leader must be seen to be right. "At the same time, the leader simply says: this will be the general direction. Individuality must be allowed to flow towards that direction."

Vining is a leader; strong-willed; he likes to call the shots. "Yes, ego can get in the way. There is at the same time humility. Even the leader must listen, as well as be listened to. The other person's point of view must be respected if not, in the leader's view, acted on. There must however always be a legitimate leader."

If leadership is defined by length and breadth of experience — including actual playing experience with the jazz greats — then Vining is legitimate. His musical vitae is, to say the least, impressive. Name a leading Australian jazz figure, and somewhere along the way, Vining has played with him. In addition the drummer's mixed and played with several of the overseas greats — Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck, Max Roach, Freddie Hubbard, Elvin Jones, Ornette Coleman, and many more.

He's also recorded twelve LPs, the last four of his own trio. In 1977-79 Vining was director and producer of the Melbourne Moomba Jazz Festival featuring such talents as Oscar Peterson, Dizzy Gillespie, and top Australian groups. Not least important, Vining will tell you, was his participation in the growth of contemporary jazz in the Melbourne jazz scene.



Vining at the drums, pictured with the distinguished Czech-born conductor Walter Susskind and the saxophonist Brian Brown, at the Fat Black Pussycat club, Melbourne circa 1964... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE

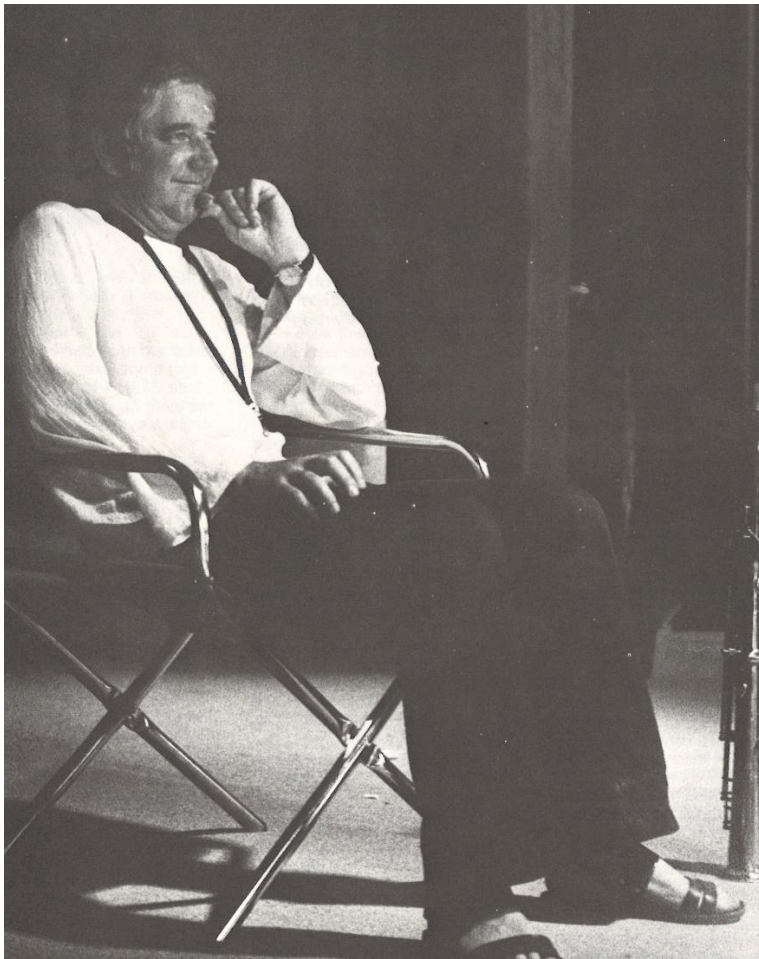
Vining: "In the early 1960s, when jazz started really to matter to me, I was able to mix and play with people I very much care for — Keith Hounslow, Brian Brown, Bob Barnard, just to name a few. In Melbourne in those days there was an environment for experimentation. For a start, we had Jazz Centre 44, Horst Liepolt's club. Love or hate Horst, he at least had the balls to do something that was different. Horst encouraged experimentation. Keith Hounslow, Brian Brown, and many others, participated. It produced something Sydney never had until Sydney got Horst."

Not least significant was the emergence, in the early 1970s, of the Ted Vining Trio. Pianist Bob Sedergreen, a stalwart of the Trio since its inception, recalls: "I remember the first time I met Ted. 'Listen, kid,' he said to me. 'There're only three drummers in the world — Elvin, Philly Joe and me!' Only people close to Ted would know what he meant. I took it seriously then, still do..."

Bassist Barry Buckley, another of the remarkable musicians associated with Vining, Brown and Sedergreen, says: "Vining's unique. No one can come up to Ted's approach to jazz and time-playing. He demonstrates so much warmth and feeling in his approach to jazz percussion. Although in some ways not a modern player — Ted plays orthodox-style drums — he's an extremely strong, solid, pulse player."

Brown himself, an acknowledged leader of the Melbourne modern jazz movement, says: "Ted's drumming, in its time-keeping, offers beautiful simplicity. He's unbending when the going gets tough. What do I like best about him? When the

mood is right Vining's capable of the most sensitive contributions to any creative performance. He's also the best-dressed drummer I know, uses the most-expensive aftershave, and plays a triangle exquisitely!"



Brian Brown: when the mood is right Vining's capable of the most sensitive contributions to any creative performance... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

But all of that, Vining will tell you, is secondary to the drummer's major goal: to play with, and encourage, anybody who tries to do something new and interesting with total energy and little compromise. In researching this article I spoke to Brisbane musicians and jazz observers most of whom acknowledge, and respect, Vining's position.

As representatively expressed by one Brisbane observer: "Ted's hallmark is his sustained enthusiasm — and, of course, his talent. No one could ever doubt his ability to lead a group. The man also has a highly ambitious streak, never lets an opportunity go by to push his barrow, or to present his group — and he'll wheel and deal to achieve those goals."

It's not all roses, and Vining has at times been on a collision course with, as one observer put it, "the laissez-faire attitude of local musicians who won't, or can't, help themselves. Vining's doing something, always pushing — some resentment must naturally flow from that."



Vining: fiercely dedicated to diversifying, and improving the standard of, Brisbane jazz... PHOTO COURTESY YOUTUBE

Vining is, in another sense, also an angry drummer: the anger is borne out of a personal frustration stemming, in turn, from some constraints of his present musical activities. And, at times, the anger comes out, sometimes injudiciously, sometimes arrogantly, to anyone within earshot, regarding what he sees as an almost total lack of innovation in the Brisbane jazz scene. He remains fiercely dedicated to diversifying, and improving the standard of, Brisbane jazz; but often the fierceness is more reminiscent of an angry Viking about to lop heads than of a friendly guru seeking converts to a new musical faith.

Vining: "Too much music in this town is foot-tapping, beer-drinking crap. It's almost monstrous that we have three or four big bands all playing, on the whole, recreated, or appropriated, [Benny] Goodman or [Glenn] Miller music. Every group — every player — should be striving for a style uniquely theirs. If you simply want to please the people, then all you have to do is join the people, drink as much slops as they do, and play exactly what they want. But where are you?"

The answer or alternative, according to Vining, is quite simple: each group should be good enough to warm people, to make them listen, to make them come across from the other side of the fence. It's a philosophy that Vining's own group Musiikki Oy has put into practice, winning, at most inter-group sessions, as much sincere applause and equally sincere plaudits as the tried and tested traditional and mainstream players.

"There's no reward, really, except in personal terms," the drummer says. "I mean fame in the end is stuff-all; so is money. The real thing is to be totally honest, totally committed to your endeavour, with the music."

Ted Vining's faith is unshakeable. He's still pushing.