

JOHN SANGSTER

by Eric Myers*

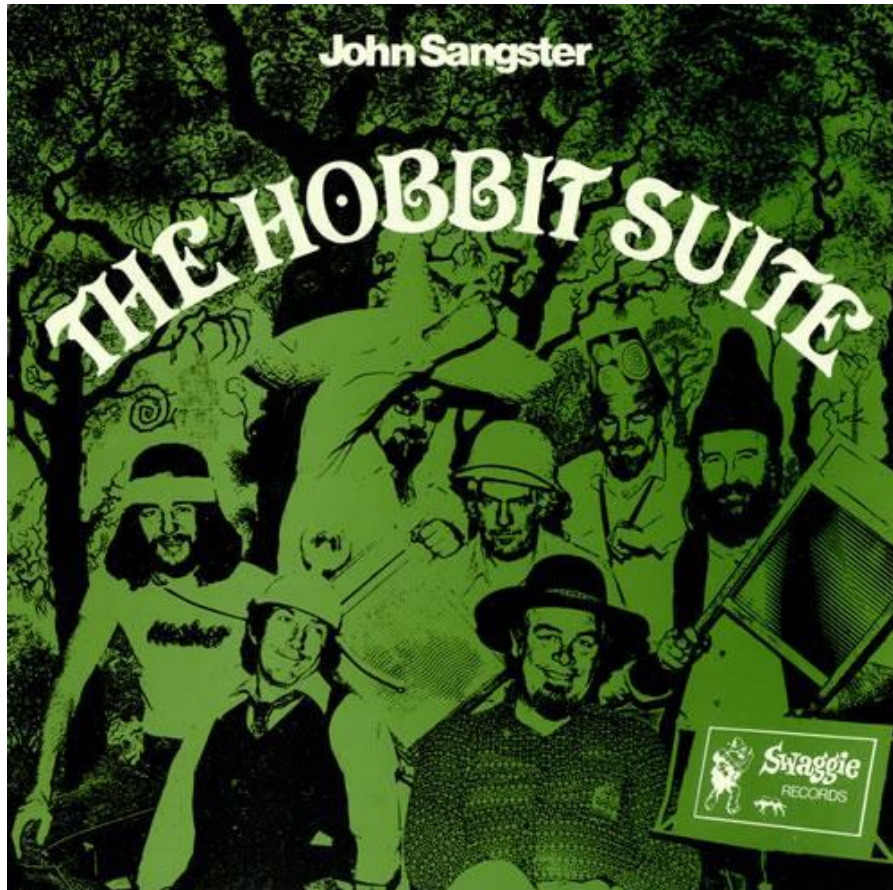
John Sangster squints and beams through his thick facial undergrowth. "I'm supposed to have an elfin quality", he says, making his face deliberately sparkle, "there it is again". Sangster likes to send up some of the more fatuous things that are said about him. Partly it's the response of a man who is not used to taking himself all that seriously. He has been composing orchestral and jazz-oriented music for many years with extraordinary but relatively quiet success. But these days he is increasingly being required to cope with wide recognition as an important Australian artist.



John Sangster: the most prolific composer in Australian jazz... best known for his monumental suites inspired by the works of Professor J R R Tolkien... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

**When this was written in November, 1982, Eric Myers was editor of the APRA Magazine.*

Aged 54, John Sangster is the most prolific composer in Australian jazz, best known for his monumental suites inspired by the works of Professor J R R Tolkien, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord Of The Rings*. In all, since 1973, he has released ten LPs of music suggested by the characters and situations of Tolkien's fantasy world. This project has been the most consistent, inspired and prolonged exploration of a single theme in the history of Australian jazz.



It also explains why Sangster is seen as something of an elfish character. He has been likened to the stout hobbit himself who likes eating, drinking, jesting and good company. "I don't identify as such with any one character in Tolkien, but the whole fantasy world rings a bell somehow to me", he says. "It feels like home to me. All those places, and lots of the characters, I feel I know".

"The Hobbit was given to me about 18 years ago, and I fell for it hook, line and sinker. I waited for years for someone like Crosby, Stills and Nash to put the verses in the books to music. I waited for impressions of the characters, I waited for a ballet to come out of it, a rock musical, maybe a kids' cartoon series on television. But nobody was doing anything, so I thought I'd have a go myself".

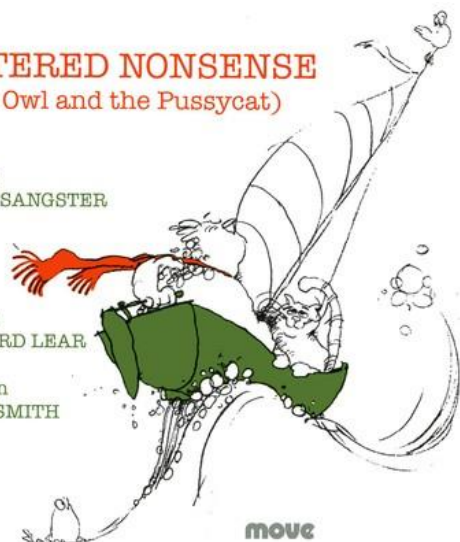
"The Tolkien world is just magic, full of goblins and elves, and spooky things, and great crusades", he says. "It's an adventure story on the grand scale — a huge, mythical fantasy. It has beautiful, peaceful things, lovely people like Lady Glad'riel, who is everyone's mythical dream princess, there are giant battles. It's a very broad canvas, full of things to write music about".

UTTERED NONSENSE (The Owl and the Pussycat)

Music
JOHN SANGSTER

Words
EDWARD LEAR

Spoken
IVAN SMITH



Since completing his Tolkien music in 1978, Sangster has continued to produce an immense amount of original music. In fact, he quickly outpaced the capacity of EMI Records, who released his Tolkien works, to put his music out. In 1981, with the leading recording engineer Martin Benge, he formed his own record company, Rain Forest Records. In April of that year this fledgling company released three new records at once: a double album called *Uttered Nonsense*, with music to accompany the nonsense verse of Edward Lear, (who wrote *The Owl And The Pussycat*); an album called *Peaceful* featuring the saxophonist Errol Buddle; and an album called *Meditation Music*, with the flautist Mal Cunningham.



L-R, unidentified person, Martin Benge & John Sangster in the studio in the early 80s... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Sangster and Bengé have released the first two LPs of the John Sangster Jazz Music Series entitled *It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Doo-Wup Doo-Wup Doo-Wup* and *Requiem For A Loved One*. The first is a swinging treatment of the Duke Ellington legacy — even though Ellington's name is nowhere mentioned — by a 12-piece orchestra composed of some of the best players in Australian jazz.

The latter LP has had more than usually fulsome praise from the critics. For example John Clare in the *Financial Review* of January 15, 1982, wrote: "*Requiem For A Loved One* is the best of (Sangster's) work that I have heard. It is certainly one of the few totally satisfying albums of Australian jazz that has come out for a long time."



Requiem For A Loved One: one of the few totally satisfying albums of Australian jazz that has come out for a long time...

The latest Sangster LP is devoted to his music for the Australian film *Fluteman*, which had its gala world premiere at Sydney's Lyceum Theatre on October 26, 1982. Sangster's orchestra, featuring Don Burrows, played some of the music live on stage before the screening.

"There's a secret to all this", says Sangster. "I'm actually mad. There are many bands playing in my head all the time. There's Ravel going at the moment, King Oliver's band, there's a mariachi band going now, there's a mandolin band, and I can hear Duke Ellington, possibly a bit of John Lewis. There are many others".



Sangster on vibraphone, performing his music before the screening of the film Fluteman, October 26, 1982. In the background is Don Burrows... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

"I'm actually an eclectic. I believe that all art is a process of selection, rather than inspiration. The idea is to put differing elements together and mould them into some-thing new".

John Sangster describes his present stage of creative outpouring as his "fecund period". "It's my time of life, my time to flower", he says. "I've had an incredible burst going for the last three or four years. The music is just pouring out of me, and I can't find the off switch".

Sangster's fecundity is all the more striking because he came to composition relatively late in life — he was 35 years old before he wrote his first major jazz work *Conga Blim Blam Blem*, in 1964. He began to compose seriously only in the early 1970s, and quickly became highly sought after to provide original music for films.

During the 1970s, he completed the music for over 50 films and television documentaries, both for local and American productions, including his award-winning animation film *The Gentlemen of Titipu*, which he adapted from the Gilbert & Sullivan classic *The Mikado*. In Australia his commissions included the ABC's *Bill Peach In Australia*, the brilliant *Journey Into India*, and *Harry Butler In The Wild*.

Why did John Sangster wait so long to compose, and what explains the late flowering of this extraordinary figure in Australian music? He began, of course, in jazz as a traditional trumpeter and drummer. He joined the famous Graeme Bell band in 1950, and toured England, Europe, Korea and Japan with them. Later, in a developmental odyssey through many jazz idioms, he took, up various percussion instruments, including the vibraphone, which became his main performing instrument.

During his progression to modern jazz, when he played at Sydney's legendary El Rocco jazz cellar during the early 1960s with his own group, and groups led by Don Burrows and Judy Bailey, he became attracted to composition. By that time, he had become one of the outstanding multi-instrumentalists in Australian jazz.



L-R, John Sangster, Judy Bailey and Derek Fairbrass, pictured in the El Rocco jazz cellar in the early 1960s... PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

"I began in jazz as a performer, and my energies were in playing", he said. "It didn't really occur to me to write music. But, about 15 years ago, I started to get sick of playing other people's music, and American music. Also, I got sick of carrying all those instruments around. As a composer, I only needed a pencil and a pair of shorts".

One of the greatest merits of John Sangster's music is that it has enabled Australian jazz instrumentalists of the 1970s to be comprehensively documented on studio recordings. Most leading Australian players — Bob Barnard (trumpet), Bob McIvor (trombone), John McCarthy (clarinet), Tony Gould (piano), Len Barnard (drums), Errol Buddle (saxophones), Don Burrows (saxophones) and innumerable others — have, at one time or another, played on Sangster's memorable recording sessions.



Australian jazz instrumentalists of the 1970s have been comprehensively documented on Sangster's studio recordings, including John McCarthy (above) and Tony Gould (below)... McCARTHY PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR, GOULD PHOTO CREDIT FIROZE MISTRY



With food and alcohol in plentiful supply, a John Sangster studio call might well resemble a party rather than a recording session. But it is still a serious business, as well as fun, and the work gets done admirably. The "good vibes" of Sangster's sessions are now legendary among local jazz musicians. Sangster describes the musicians invited to appear on his records as his "old and olden friends" who not only enjoy a warm relationship with him, but also have that combination of technique and imagination needed to bring his music to life. Many of them are boyhood friends who grew up in Melbourne with Sangster listening to the same seminal jazz records.



John Sangster began in jazz as a traditional trumpeter. Seen here in Sydney, 1950...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Without Sangster's music, many Australian jazz players of the 1970s would have remained unrecorded, and therefore their styles lost forever. If he continues with his extraordinary output in the future which seems likely he will leave a massive body of original music for future generations of jazz lovers.
