

## FRANK COUGHLAN: AUSTRALIA'S GREAT MASTER OF JAZZ

by Charles Jay

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In this rich, intellectual, mechanically pulsating life, the musical movement known as jazz, has grown to enormous importance. Once jazz was dubbed the ragamuffin of music. Cast aside as insignificant, the very name 'jazz', to some people is sufficiently vile enough for them to bury their heads in the sand like the ostrich. As for the names "Ragtime," "Hot" or "Swing," which have been the commercial labels of jazz, they are snobbishly snubbed by the devotees of what is now called "legitimate" music.

Jazz is no "Cinderella" of music. It was born grown up and we are still endeavouring to catch up to its intellectual construction and pulsation.

To many, it is still considered that the gambit of jazz is limited. But there is no limit for we now have Symphonic Jazz, Jazz Opera and Jazz Fugues. At present, these works appear to the uninitiated, as merely intellectual; but, to the executants, who must be more expert than the "legitimate" executants, there is manifestly more passion, more stimulus, and a greater interpretation of life than any other branch of music.

Monody is subconscious as a player takes a "break" or "hot lick."



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The great Louis Armstrong played 20 choruses of the one subconscious melody. Into them he interpreted [sic] every pulsation of life—joy, laughter, sadness, tears, ridicule, banter, love and kindness. Even when he played a chorus on one note, he interpreted [sic] the various moods of human nature. It is to this type of playing jazz "maniacs" react. The Negroes are experts at it and a few whites have mastered its truth. Unfortunately many whites have misled themselves by imagining that just a mere technique and a knowledge of chords is all that is necessary to be a first class executor of jazz. But, they are quite erroneous.

In Australia, a land where culture is predominantly obtained by importation, and whose latent indigenous culture is born in chains, we have few exponents of the art of jazz. Amongst these few, the greatest of them all is Francis James Coughlan.



*Frank Coughlan on trombone (left) with bassist Reg Robinson... PHOTO COURTESY JACK MITCHELL COLLECTION*

Coughlan is now 33 years of age and at this stage of his life appears to have found an equilibrium from which he is once more ready to travel into the realms of a career that will be full of anxiety until he has achieved a further mental trophy in the orb of his life. Born at Emmaville, NSW, situated within the laughter of the kookaburras, the cry of the koala and the sight of a rainbow of rozellas, Frank was so well trained by the local bandmaster (his father), that 1929 saw him playing trombone in London with such world-renowned players as Fred Elizalde, Mario "Harp" Lorenzi, Bill Mason, Quealy, Payne, Knight, Davis, Max Farley (Whiteman), Phil Cardew, Fud Livingstone (Dorsey), Arthur Rollini (Goodman), Adrian Rollini. The band was the

pioneer swing band of London and doubled on the Palladium stage from the Savoy Hotel.



*Adrian Rollini, one of the world-renowned players with whom Coughlan worked at the Savoy, in London ... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIM P GOTTLIEB*

Back in Australia "Skinny" Coughlan, for Frank is as thin as a match, played in nearly every combination that has been in existence; the lowly and the lordly. He is the one man in Australia who can get into a "groove" at will, and marvellously enough can play a trombone chorus, miss a bar, pick up a trumpet and play a chorus as well as if he had only his trumpet embouchure to consider.



Coughlan plays trumpet in the traditional jazz manner of the great Louis Armstrong and Bix Biederbecke. He plays trombone 'a la Coughlan.' In both instruments he is magnificently faulty at times and magnificently perfect at others. In each phrase he states a mood. At most times you can discern the mode in his facial expression: he closes his eyes, he laughs, he cries, he screeches out in pain or halloos in joy until both his and your blood are heated as if by a bottle of rich wine. Coughlan is creative in every bar whilst he is playing. But . . . strange, queerly strange—he composes the most "corny" commercial melodic numbers, as witness by his *Bushland Calling*. It is certainly enigmatic when it first dawns on you.



*Frank Coughlan: He is a thinker—a slow deliberate thinker, whose mind wanders almost to dreaminess around the works of the great masters of thought whom he devours as if their weighty words were luscious ice creams...PHOTO COURTESY OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ*

But, when you know Frank like I do, the enigma explains itself. He is a thinker—a slow deliberate thinker, whose mind wanders almost to dreaminess around the works of the great masters of thought whom he devours as if their weighty words were luscious ice creams. Then like an oncoming Southerly Buster, his entire energy is whipped into a white foam and the storm of his creative genius manifests itself in the ecstasy of the "mad" music of which he is so great a master. . .

Frank Coughlan will be seated at the official table when the first supper of the Great Men of Jazz is held in the limbo of forgotten golden ages.