

GEOFF BULL: AN INTERVIEW

by Eric Myers

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The Sydney cornet player Geoff Bull has been a strong advocate of traditional New Orleans jazz since 1958, when he attended the Australian jazz Convention in Sydney, and became interested in records by early black musicians. Self-taught, he began playing in 1959. In 1962 he formed the Olympia Jazz Band. He has visited New Orleans many times and has toured the US, Europe and Japan with various traditional jazz musicians. He now leads a group which plays at the Cat & Fiddle Hotel, Balmain.

Eric Myers: What was the difference between the Bunk Johnson-George Lewis revival of New Orleans jazz in the 1940s, and the original jazz played earlier in the century?

Geoff Bull: Well, "revival" is a word that's been used for it, because they got Bunk [Johnson] playing again - he hadn't played for many years. But, all through that time, the others were making a living out of playing. It was not a real revival for them. Maybe it was a revival of interest in their music.

EM: Had the music evolved much over that time?

GB: All sorts of music change in different ways, according to what's happening at the time, and those guys were playing songs that hadn't been written in the 20s. They were playing songs from the 40s, but they still played them in much the same



Geoff Bull, snapped in 1964-65: he has visited New Orleans many times, and has toured the US, Europe and Japan with various traditional jazz musicians... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

style. People think Just A Closer Walk With Thee was an old hymn. It's not; it was written in the 40s. It was a current popular song of the day amongst the black people there. On one of the first recording sessions that Bill Russell did, one of the AM sessions, George Lewis recorded This Love of Mine, which at that time was a Frank Sinatra hit. So the style of music didn't change much, but the material they were using did.

EM: If most of the New Orleans musicians were still there making a living out of music, what about the demolition of Storyville in 1917, the players losing their jobs and going up the river to Chicago, and so on?

GB: That's crap, because it's untrue. It's been written up that way, because it makes it glamorous. In its early days, black music was frowned upon by white society, so in order to dismiss it, the easiest way was to give it an air of unrespectability, to say it's whorehouse music. That wasn't true; the whorehouses never did have bands, they had piano players. The bands got more work out of the church - street parades, picnics and all that sort of stuff, sponsored by the benevolent societies.

EM: These are myths that have been perpetrated, then?

GB: Yeah, and it's like the distorted lines that people draw between styles of music. People say "What do you play? - New Orleans style, classic jazz style, Chicago style, or this or that?" As far as I'm concerned, the big difference is not between whether you play like a band from the 20s, or like a band from the 40s, namely the so-called "revival" bands. It's the style of music, either black or white. To me, Louis Armstrong is much more like Kid Thomas than he is like Bix Beiderbecke, even though Bix made his recordings at the same time as Louis. There's a noticeable difference between the approach to music of black and white musicians, in all spheres. I don't know that much about it, but to me there's a difference in approach between black and white modern musicians. There was always a difference in approach between, say, Cannonball Adderley and Paul Desmond.



Louis Armstrong is much more like Kid Thomas (pictured here) than he is like Bix Beiderbecke...

EM: Doesn't that put you in an ambiguous situation being a white man and preferring the black styles? Do you try and play as much like the black players as you can?

GB: Absolutely, completely.

EM: But you're a product of white culture in Australia. Doesn't that present a problem?

GB: It's very difficult to find other people who have the same ideas as me about playing music, and it's hard to find people to listen to the music. In Sydney's traditional jazz scene, the usual Double Bay, Saturday afternoon pub drinker who supposedly likes a bit of trad, is obviously more orientated towards, shall we say, the Kenny Ball style of music than he is towards Kid Thomas. For that reason, it's difficult for most people who come and listen to what I'm trying to do, to really know what I'm on about. It doesn't really matter to me, as long as enough of them come, so I don't lose the job, and I can afford to continue doing what I want to do. I think it's wrong to say it's impossible for a white man to play a black style of music; it just takes a much more conscious effort to try and do it.

EM: Why do you spend so much time in New Orleans?

GB: It's a totally unduplicatable experience. You can't do it anywhere else. I'm not deluding myself that the bands are as good as they used to be - they're not. But there are a few people there who still play that sort of music better than anyone else in the world, and that's one of the reasons I keep going back there.

EM: How do you relate to the old black musicians?

GB: When you get to know them well enough, it's like knowing somebody here well. You don't talk about anything special, except what happens to come up at the time. For my own interest I try to draw out experiences from them that they've had over the years. Manny Sayles (the banjo player in Kid Thomas' band) is a very good



The banjoist Emanuel Sayles: a good friend of Geoff Bull's...

friend of mine. When he gets off the gig he likes to go and sit around the bar, and have a couple. He's been a professional musician all his life, and he's been everywhere and done all sorts of music jobs. You mention a name, and that gets

them started. That's what I like to do with them, because you can learn a lot more about different musicians. When you get to know them well enough, they're just like other friends. The only thing is, I tend to forget they're old men. Suddenly a lot of good mates of yours are guys in their 70s! But, they don't think of themselves as being old either - they're still working for a living.

EM: When I was in Preservation Hall, I had the feeling that they were being treated, to some extent, as tourist attractions, historical curiosities.

GB: They hate it. Kid Thomas has been playing there for over 20 years. There are some classic stories about the typical American tourist. Kid Thomas often stands up on his chair for the last chorus of Tiger Rag. One time, the place was packed, and all you could see was heads. This woman peered over the heads, saw Kid Thomas' head above the others and said: "Hey George, come and see this - they've got a trumpet player here who's nine feet tall!" Another time Kid Thomas was sitting there between sets, with the people filing out, and a woman said to him: "Excuse me, Mr Thomas, you're real old, aren't you? How old are you?" And he looked her dead in the eye and said: "One hundred and twenty-seven, lady".

EM: By the same token, I felt also that there was a genuine respect for the old black players.



Sweet Emma Barrett on piano, pictured here with the trumpeter Percy Humphrey...

GB: Almost all of the guys, in their own ways, have that magnetic thing about them. They engender the respect, and in their own way they're all showmen. People go in there to have a look at the museum, but they become aware that there's something special going on. Even when that place is packed, they don't use a microphone for singing and the whole audience will quieten down enough to even hear Sweet Emma (Barrett) sing.



Sweet Emma Barrett: I'm in a good mood tonight, I'm gonna give them tourists hell...

EM: Can you tell me anything about Sweet Emma?

GB: When I was living there, you'd almost dread the phone going, because it would be Emma. Once again, she knows a lot of stories. She recorded in the late 20s with Papa Celestin, and played on the riverboats. Now, she sits in a little house, stuck in a chair, or sits up in bed all day, and she can't walk, so she gets on the phone. As soon as she rings, you know there's 45 minutes gone. But those three nights a week in Preservation Hall keep her going. On the one hand she's a big drawcard to the business, so they're exploiting her to that extent. But, on the other hand, she looks forward to those three nights. She gets there and puts on her little tantrums. I've lifted her out of the car at times, put her in the wheelchair, and wheeled her in there. You say "How you doing, Emma?" and she'll say "I'm in a good mood tonight - I'm gonna give them tourists hell!" They'll be asking for autographs, and she'll say "Get lost, I'm too busy." It keeps her adrenalin going.

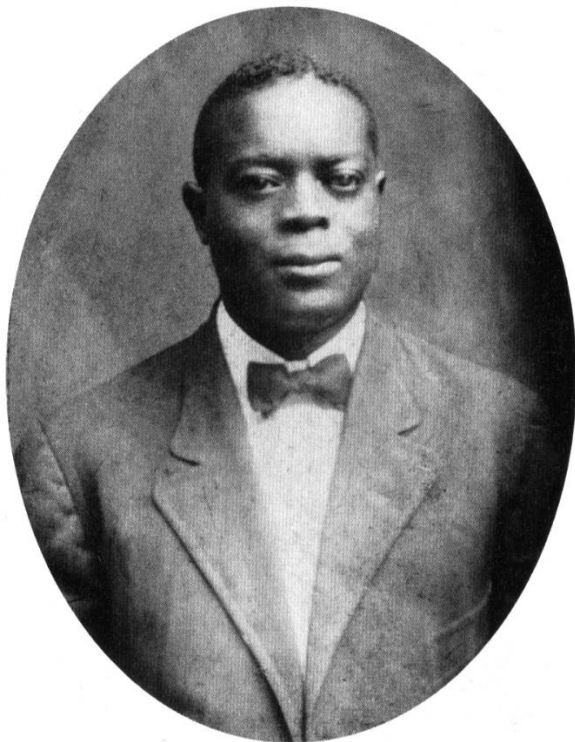
EM: So far as the Australian traditional jazz is concerned, the current of opinion now seems to be, regarding the Graeme Bell and Dave Dallwitz-type music, that Australian jazz developed its own style of jazz which is derived from New Orleans jazz, but which has its own unique qualities.

GB: I'm afraid I totally disagree with that. I think it's a little bit of wishful thinking on the part of those people. I mean, Frank Coughlan had bands playing a type of jazz in the 30s; he was influenced by the big bands, and Frank Coughlan had bands

that played like Miff Mole and those types of people. As far as I'm concerned, the earliest Graeme Bell, Len Barnard and Frank Johnson-type bands are pure extension of Turk Murphy. To me, they sound exactly like San Francisco bands. The revival band that Tom Baker had a few years ago - I was over at the Balmain Convention in 1975 the first time they played - and all the old diehards who had been at those first few Conventions went "Ah, back to the old Frank Johnson band." In other words, it sounded like what they heard before, which is what I call San Francisco-style. I don't think there's anything unique about Australian jazz at all, in that way.

EM: Why did Australian bands play in this "San Francisco style", then?

GB: Because it was easier to relate to other white people adapting to a style. To me, that would be like a revival band trying to copy Ken Colyer or Acker Bilk - getting their influence from these people instead of going back to the original people who started it all. If I wanted to play in a band that did all those 20s-type arrangements, I wouldn't listen to Lu Watters, I'd listen to King Oliver - because Lu Watters listened to King Oliver. But, in the meantime, what Lu Watters produced, to me, is not at all similar to King Oliver, and I find King Oliver much more similar to Bunk Johnson and George Lewis than to Lu Watters. Watters himself was a swing band trumpet player earlier in his career, and then he got on to the older records. He actually wrote arrangements for his whole band - you can buy them now, somebody's dug them up and printed them. The Frank Johnson, early Graeme Bell, and Dave Dallwitz records sound, to me - I wouldn't say copies of Lu Watters records - but I'd say they based their style completely on that.



Geoff Bull would listen to King Oliver (pictured) because Lu Watters listened to King Oliver...

EM: To what extent, then, is there an Australian jazz?

GB: I don't think there really is; I don't think there's any noticeable Australian style of jazz, except for the fact that a lot of the early bands played in that San Francisco style. Now the bands didn't sound exactly the same, because no two bands ever do, and maybe the odd guy had a distinctive sound - Pixie Roberts maybe did - whether you like it or not is another thing. But I don't think there's any particular Aussie style of jazz, and I think if you played one of those early 40s records by any one of those established Australian bands at the time, then played a Lu Watters, or played a Bay City Jazz Band, which is another California-type band, and then you played a George Webb's Dixielanders from England, it would be fairly similar right through. Claude Luter, before he went on an out-and-out Johnny Dodds and Sidney Bechet kick, had a band that was also very similar. The Australian players related to other white people.



The clarinetist Pixie Roberts, pictured here with Graeme Bell (piano) and Roger Bell (trumpet): maybe Pixie had a distinctive sound...

EM: So, this stuff about the birth of an Australian jazz, and the development of an indigenous style is rubbish?

GB: Max Harris, in The Bulletin recently, said that the Graeme Bell music in Melbourne was part of the cultural rebellion of the 1940s; it was nationalist, for free expression... It's the same thing as saying that Johnny Dodds used to turn up with his clarinet in a piece of brown paper with elastic bands on it. Johnny Dodds was a famous musician, playing in a series of famous bands, in well-established clubs in Chicago. He was well-paid, and probably played most nights in a dinner suit. But, it sounds glamorous, like the closing down of Storyville. Did you ever see that movie called New Orleans, that Louis [Armstrong] was in? In that, all the whores are walking down the street with their mattresses over their shoulders, all the musicians are holding their instruments, with their heads bowed. It's a lot of crap, the same thing with the Australian jazz. Just because it happened to be in the Eureka Youth League hall and because, in the early days, Graeme and Roger [Bell] and a few of them might have been slightly left-wing in their political views, it's like the Che Guevara of jazz, or something. People like to do that, they like to glamorise things, and make it into something which it isn't really.



The American clarinetist Johnny Dodds: he was well-paid, and probably played most nights in a dinner suit...

EM: Would a lot of people in the traditional jazz world accept this stuff? Would the people who go to the Australian Jazz Convention swallow that myth?

GB: A lot of people who go to the Conventions swallow it because they want to, because it's the style of music they relate to. The hard, cold facts of the matter, as far as I'm concerned, is that most people in Australia who do relate to jazz relate to that sort of jazz that is in their realm of experience. In other words, they relate to good-time, happy, white Dixie. It's been proved over and over again. Go to the [Sydney] Hilton, and look at the bands they hire there. Go to Red Ned's. They like

straw hats, striped shirts and white pants, plenty of comedy, the odd bit of gyrating, so it looks like hard work, and a bit of sweating here and there. But keep it light and happy, lots of smiles and lots of fast tunes. It's not just here, it's the same in America. There's a whole cult of white jazz clubs there, California in particular. Sacramento had a festival with 72 Dixieland bands and, of those, I think there were three or four black musicians.

EM: How would you place someone like Bob Barnard in this general spectrum?

GB: When he first started, he was in a band that played - shall we call it, for want of a better name - that "early Australian jazz". He had a lot of natural ability right from the word go, he was lucky enough to come from a musical family, and get started early, so the technique side was no real problem to him. He obviously got on to a lot of things Louis [Armstrong] was doing. I don't know if there's a lot of Louis



Bob Barnard (centre) pictured here with Frank Traynor (left) and Tich Bray (right): Geoff feels that Bob prefers white trumpet players in general to black... PHOTO COURTESY LORETTA BARNARD

now. He seems to have tempered that with other things, less strictly traditional jazz. I don't know if he himself says what he really prefers. To me, it sounds as though he prefers white trumpet players in general to black. For instance, he sounds as if he likes Bobby Hackett a lot, Bix [Beiderbecke] as well, rather more than someone like Red Allen, or Lee Collins. He's got the technical ability to play like Roy Eldridge, but he doesn't seem to have that approach to it; he seems to have a more decorative approach, not so much a fiery approach. Over the years, he seems to have developed a more embellishing approach.



Geoff Bull (left) with the Sydney clarinetist Johnny McCarthy... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

EM: What is it that is missing from the white music, for you?

GB: You can call it “hotness”, but to explain what that means to me... it’s a lot to do with the rhythmic complexity, the way they approach playing, both in the rhythm section and also in the way the front-line people attack what they’re doing. Louis is a classic example of someone whose rhythm is very complex. He can play the same phrase that he played in the previous chorus maybe, but he’ll do it in just a different spot, and it comes out sounding quite different. If you hear a record by a good white band, and hear the same tune by a black band, it’s different. It’s like the difference between Fletcher Henderson playing his tunes, and Benny Goodman’s band playing Fletcher Henderson arrangements of the same tunes. Jazz is a combination of African and European music. The white bands are far more European orientated than the black bands are, and that was particularly so in the early days.

EM: Why does traditional jazz exert such a fascination today? Why do people want to preserve it?

GB: Because it is one of the genuinely valid art forms that have come out of the 20th Century. Why do people want to preserve Chopin or Mozart? Because they are also genuinely valid art forms that came out of their period. Why do you pay millions of dollars for a Van Gogh painting, when he wasn’t such a good painter in terms of technique? The valid contributions from the past keep coming back.