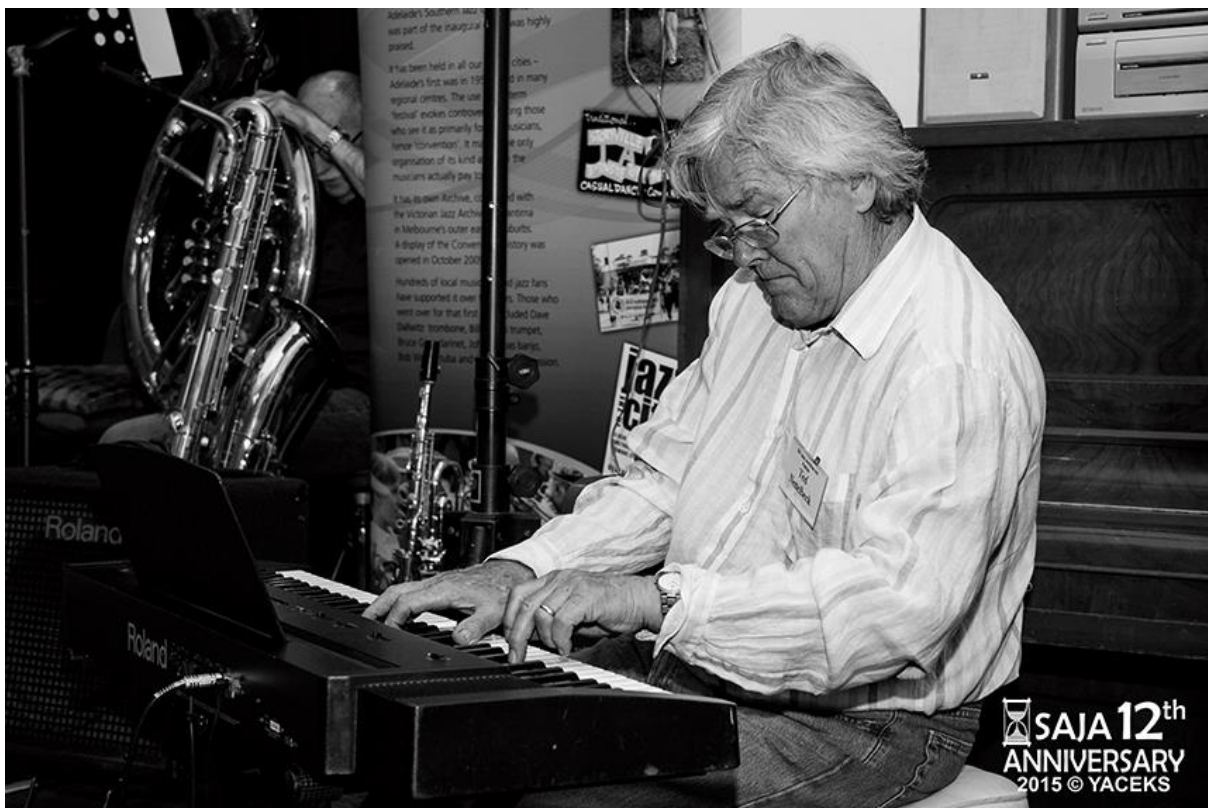


TED NETTELBECK: HE TESTED POSITIVE FOR JAZZ

by Sylvan Elhay*

When May Nettelbeck (nee Ross) delivered up a baby boy in Streaky Bay on 4 January 1936 she and her husband Harry would never have imagined that 85 years later their son, Theodore John, would be Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Adelaide and one of Australia's best-known and most respected jazz pianists.



Ted Nettelbeck at the electric piano in 2015: his parents would never have imagined that their son would be Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Adelaide, and one of Australia's best-known and most respected jazz pianists...

**Dr Sylvan Elhay, an academic in numerical analysis at the University of Adelaide, has pursued a parallel career as a professional musician from the early 60s, emerging as one of the country's leading tenor saxophonists. In the mid-70s he and pianist Ted Nettelbeck, both working at the University of Adelaide, formed a rehearsal duo, which was later joined by drummer Laurie Kennedy. This trio was the nucleus of Schmoie's band Schmoie & Co which was resident for some time at Adelaide's important jazz club The Creole Room for many years, and was active for four decades.*

The family lore was that Harry had been a talented, small country town dance-band pianist. But he died on active service during WW II and could not have influenced young Ted all that much. But his grandmother, when Ted turned five, arranged for the aptly-named Mrs Crotchet to teach the young boy the classical approach to playing piano and some basic music theory. She taught him until, when he was about 12, he began lessons (paid for by a Repat scholarship) with a teacher who persisted for about three years but then gave up, telling Ted he was wasting his time because he never practiced. The piano lid remained closed for the next four years.

A few days after Ted's 16th birthday he went, with a schoolmate, to an Adelaide Jazz Convention where Bruce Gray's band struck a chord with young Ted. He started collecting records even though his family had no record player. He relied on the boy next door's wind-up gramophone player to listen to his collection.

While at school Ted ran into pianist (and later, politician) Richie Gun. Richie showed him how to build a major chord, a minor chord and a couple of other basic elements of jazz harmony and then asked him to join his King Oliver-Louis Armstrong Chicago style band. What he showed Ted was reinforced by the theory that Dickensianly-named dear Mrs Crotchet had taught him.



Richie Gun's Collegians in 1954, L-R, Ron Sullivan (compere), Ted Nettelbeck (piano), Glyn Walton (banjo), Rod Porter (clarinet), Richie Gun & Tony Wells (cornets), Ron Williams (bass), Kevin Scutter (drums), Andrew Davidson (trombone): It was Gun who showed Ted how to build a major chord, a minor chord and a couple of other basic elements of jazz harmony... PHOTO COURTESY TED NETTELBECK

In case you're wondering why pianist Richie wanted another pianist in his band, Richie was playing cornet in those days. The first song the young Ted ever played in Richie's band was *At the Jazz Band Ball* and he rendered it enthusiastically with four root-position block chords in every bar. Richie, Ted and clarinetist Rod Porter, made up the core of the band but the other chairs changed quite a lot. At that point the band was getting two to three paid (£5 each!) gigs a week.

Eventually the talented Ted was spotted and poached, in 1955, by Bruce Gray to play in his band - a more attractive proposition since the gigs now paid £5/5 shillings each.



Bruce Gray's All Star Jazzmen (date unknown), L-R, Gray (clarinet), Bill Munro (trumpet), Jeff Ward (piano), Bob Wright (trombone), Max Dickson (bass), Don Knispel (drums), John Malpas (guitar & banjo): Ted was spotted and poached, in 1955, by Bruce Gray to play in this band... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ VOICES: HOT MUSIC IN THE CITY OF CHURCHES

Meanwhile, in 1953–1954, Ted was enrolled for a degree (paid for by the Repatriation Commission) in architecture at the University of Adelaide. I deliberately didn't write that he "studied for a degree" because he didn't. In his own words he "crashed" and the lack of family money meant that he had to leave university. He had spent too much time in Adelaide University's George Murray Lounge playing duets with trumpeter Alex Frame and clarinetist Ian McCarthy.

Forced to undertake gainful employment he took on clerical work for a company called COR (later BP) which ("of course") he blew. He did well enough for a while but at the end of the first year the manager carpeted him for not attending night-classes in accountancy at Adelaide's School of Mines. Ted says "I didn't grow up until I was 40."

Basically though, that didn't matter because by this time Bruce Gray's band was working regularly Friday and Saturday nights playing for dances in the Burnside Town Hall, and that was supplemented by other casual gigs. He was making a lot of money — £15–16 a week — and by 1957–1958 he had become a professional musician.

This life continued until in 1960 drummer Billy Ross drove Ted and bassist Dickie Korff to The Embers nightclub in Melbourne to hear the visiting greats in the Oscar Peterson Trio. The Embers house band was led by the legendary alto player Frank Smith*. On bassist Freddie Logan's recommendation Frank hired Ted and Bill and a month later they were back in Melbourne ready to play their first night at The Embers.



In 1960 drummer Billy Ross (above, second from left) drove Ted and bassist Dickie Korff (above, far left) to The Embers nightclub in Melbourne to hear the Oscar Peterson Trio. Others to the right are pianist Neville Dunn & Bill Greeneklee, holding an alto saxophone... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The bands at places like The Embers played dance music for the punters and then typically played the backing for a floor show which, in most cases, turned over every few weeks. At the rehearsal for the first floor show both Billy and Ted, neither of whom could sight-read music very well, quickly earned the ire of the floor show artist as they stumbled chaotically through the act. A calm Frank assured the act that the band would have the music thoroughly worked out by the time of the show that night and sent the act away with those famous words "It'll be right on the night". He then took the two of them through every bar of the show again and again until it was

**For more information on this gig, see Ted Nettelbeck's article "Frank Smith at The Embers Melbourne 1960-61" on this website at this link*

<https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-26>

presentable and sent them away to practice individually until it was time for the music to start that night. In the event, the show was passable and a relieved Ted said to Frank “I thought that went pretty well.” Frank answered that, “Yes, it did. There’s a new floor show in two weeks. If you can’t play that you’re fired.”

That next act turned out to be Mel Tormé and the band was augmented for his show. Ted says that Tormé, who was a very nice guy, looked at the line-up in the backing band provided for him and then sat down and wrote all the arrangements for the show as he chatted amiably with band.



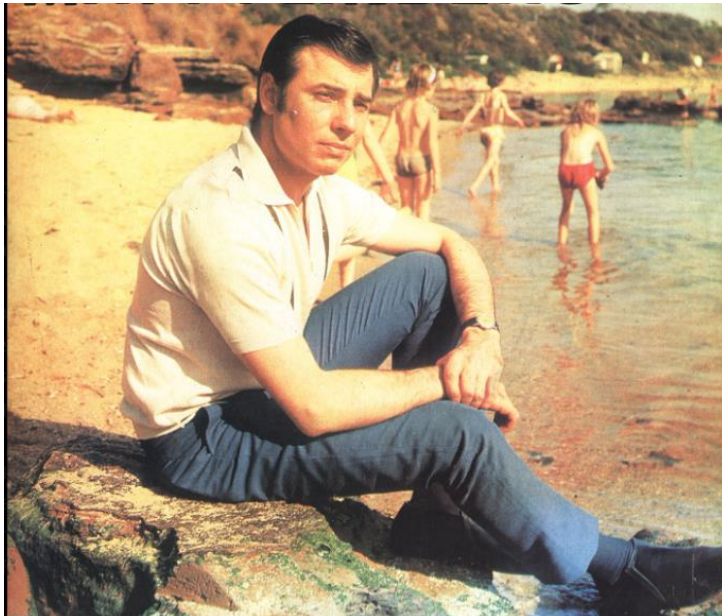
Mel Tormé at The Embers in 1960. From left: Ted Nettelbeck (piano), Frank Smith (alto), Ivan Videky (bass), Tormé, Paddy Fitzallan (trumpet, hidden), Billy Ross (drums), Geoff Kitchen (tenor), Slush Stewart (trombone)... PHOTO COURTESY TED NETTELBECK



Ted on piano at The Embers night club in 1961...

About a year after Ted and Billy joined the band, Frank left the Embers to play in TV Channel Nine's *In Melbourne Tonight* band. So Ted led the band which by this time had Alan Turnbull on drums and Darcy Wright on bass. Frank Smith was replaced by the multi-instrumental wunderkind, Graeme Lyall. A year later Graeme and Alan left for Sydney and Ted decided, in January 1962, to leave Australia and seek his fortune in London. He had been making £88 working some 40 hours a week playing gigs and writing arrangements for singers on the TV show compered by Graham Kennedy and Bert Newton.

From London he took work playing a three-month summer season on the Isle of Wight, touring Turkey and the American bases in France. Back in London he ran into singer and bassist Sylvan Bonett whom he knew from Australia. Sylvan, who made his name on the national Australian music TV scene as Matt Flinders, was playing bass and singing and wanted Ted to join his trio. The work with Sylvan's trio lasted until 1965 when Ted, now with a wife and family, returned to Adelaide.



The singer Matt Flinders, whose real name was Louis (Sylvan) Bonett. Ted worked with him in the UK until 1965 when Ted, now with a wife and family, returned to Adelaide...

Back on home turf, Ted gigged casually for a short while and then scored a full-time gig at the Feathers Hotel in Burnside: solo piano Mondays to Thursdays and with a quartet made up of drummer Trevor Frost, bassist David Kemp, and singer Val Harris on Friday and Saturday nights. The music was jazz-styled but not really jazz, he says. In fact, Ted says he always thought of himself as a jazz player but, he says, “the reality is that I wasn’t really a jazz player until I joined Schmoe & Co.”

During his time at the Feathers Hotel, Ted decided to train as a music teacher and enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts with a major in music. Unlike his earlier period at the University of Adelaide, this time he sailed through brilliantly and, changing direction, took out a PhD in psychology, accepted a lectureship at the University’s Department of Psychology and gave up playing at The Feathers.

In the early 1970s I had been playing with Freddy Payne (trumpet), Grahame Conlon (guitar), Geoff Kluke (bass) and Dean Birbeck (drums) in a band we called Onions - "The band that bought tears to your eyes". In parallel I had a band called The Bottom of the Garden Goblins which later morphed into Schmoe & Co.



The reunion of Onions in 2011 at Maxims Wine Bar, Norwood, Adelaide. L-R, Freddy Payne (trumpet), Dean Birbeck (drums), Schmoe Elhay (tenor), Geoff Kluke (bass), Grahame Conlon (guitar)...

For a short period around 1975 things went a bit quiet musically for Ted and for me and seeing we were both working at the University of Adelaide I suggested to him that we form a rehearsal duo. Strangely, I had never played with Ted before but this seemed like a good opportunity for us to explore new material. Once a week we repaired to a usually vacant room in the University's Union building that had a piano and started playing through things that we both found interesting. Some of those were Ted's own compositions, like *Uluru* and *Kanyaka: Ruins of a Homestead*. Once in a while we'd get a gig for a quartet and add Trevor Campbell on drums and David Kemp on bass.

But in 1977 there was an important development in SA Jazz: the opening of Michael Strautmanis' jazz joint, The Creole Room. There had been no place committed exclusively to jazz since the Cellar in Twin St closed many years earlier. The Creole Room presented very many national and international jazz heroes such as Dave Liebman, Herb Ellis & Barney Kessel, Phil Woods, Dale Barlow, Peter Cross and Paul McNamara. In many cases Ted was booked as part of the rhythm section to

accompany these great artists. He became the first call jazz pianist in Adelaide and played concerts with the likes of Lee Konitz, Richie Cole and Mark Murphy.



The Ted Nettelbeck Trio at The Cellar in Adelaide, circa 1966-1967, with Ted (piano), Trevor Frost (drums) and Dave Kemp (bass)...

Soon after the Creole Room opened Schmoe & Co became the resident band for the 11pm–3am shift on Friday nights. Backing me on tenor were Ted, Angela Smith (later Elliott) singing, Laurie Kennedy drums and initially Steve Elphick on bass. After Steve went back to Sydney around 1979 the bass chair was occupied by a range of excellent players in succession.

And when the Creole Room eventually closed in 1980 I kept Schmoe & Co running with (pretty well) the same personnel for another three decades. Angela left Adelaide for London and was not replaced and, as has always been the case, bass players changed but the core, Ted, Laurie and me, remained the heart of the band. We rehearsed each week come rain or come shine (I mean that in both senses) and played gigs, concerts, radio, TV (Schmoe & Co with Ted on piano, was the very first band presented on an ABC TV and FM radio simulcast broadcast by ABC jazz presenter, Jim McLeod). We even flew all the way to Sydney to play for the Bondi Jazz Festival one year only to be rained out about ten minutes before we were due to start. The band toured from Perth as far north as Broome, Western Australia, in 1992 to play our version of New York jazz to somewhat puzzled audiences.

Not long after the Creole Room closed, the South Australian College of Advanced Education, directed by Brian Chatterton, began teaching a jazz course and hired Hal Hall to run it. Over the next three decades, including the years when the University of

Adelaide's Elder Conservatorium took over the SACAE's jazz course, both Ted and I taught classes for a couple of hours a week in it (with our Departmental heads' approvals of course).



The core, for many years, of Schmoe & Co, L-R, Ted, Laurie Kennedy, Sylvan (Schmoe) Elhay in B22, the Elder Conservatorium room where they earnestly rehearsed each week come rain or come shine... PHOTO COURTESY SCHMOE ELHAY

Ted also served on the SA Jazz Coordination Committee and the National Jazz Coordination Committee.

If you listen carefully to Ted playing you can hear that he has been influenced by Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Brad Mehldau, Wynton Kelly and Red Garland. You can also hear that he has a composer's approach to improvising. He's been composing since 1963 and is represented in the *SA Real Book* and the *Australian Real Book*. His compositions are immediately recognisable: they have very distinctive structures and chord progressions, and can be challenging to play.

Unlike some composers who are very precious about their creations, Ted is very ready to hear any ideas about how to interpret his compositions and enthusiastically tries out most things that are suggested. I always found him willing to listen to suggestions about the interpretation of his works, and to adopt many of them. I know

from our years of playing together that he listens intently while playing and works very hard to try to complete what the soloist hears in their head but does not play. That's something that requires a special skill and that takes a lot of effort to learn. He is also very receptive to challenges. I sometimes called pieces which were quite difficult or maybe quite fast and he always dived in head-first to make a good job of playing them. We have always liked each other's playing and have always worked at making our combined efforts more than the sum of the parts. Of course, that's not to say that he and I have not disagreed (sometimes passionately) about harmony and melody: that's par for the course in any artform, isn't it? Who wants to play music with people that are not passionate about what they do?

My collaboration with Ted has changed both of us in ways that I am sure he appreciates as much as I do. You can't play that much music with someone for some 41 years and not be shaped by it. It's something I greatly value and which he tells me he values too.



A drawing of Schmoe & Co, by Ruth Tuck (1978), L-R, Angela Smith (singing), Schmoe (tenor sax), Steve Elphick (bass), Ted (piano)... DRAWING REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION

Ted eventually left Schmoe & Co in 2016, not long before he left Adelaide to live in Melbourne in 2017. Since then he has found a niche there often playing in a trio with Niko Schauble (drums) and Frank di Sario (bass).