

ROGER FRAMPTON: AN OUTSTANDING JAZZ MUSICIAN IN HIS TIME

by Ted Nettelbeck*

This review of Emily Rytmeister's film "Roger Frampton comes alive!" was written on November 21, 2022, and illustrated on December 15, 2022.

Roger Frampton (born 20 May, 1948 – died 4 January, 2000, aged 51 years) was one of the most extraordinarily talented and dedicated improvising musicians whom I have met. Although he long preferred to think of himself as a saxophonist, and even a percussionist, in my opinion he became the most outstanding jazz pianist in Australia during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. But he was also an impressive composer, an accomplished arranger; and he was an exciting alto and soprano saxophonist, with a lovely alto tone reminiscent of Paul Desmond, whom Roger had admired during his formative years.



Roger Frampton: he became the most outstanding jazz pianist in Australia during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s... SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM

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This beautiful and highly personal film, made by his daughter Emily Rytmeister, has captured in intimate detail Roger's enormous creative capabilities and drive, apparent from infancy and highly developed by his teens. The film forms part of a Doctor of Philosophy degree, completed by Emily in 2021 at Western Sydney University. The title of her thesis is "Roger Frampton comes alive: Finding the father, sleuthing the self through an analysis of grief, patriography and documentary film".



Frampton with his daughter Emily, then aged 21, pictured in 1995 ... PHOTO COURTESY EMILY RYTMEISTER

Essentially, the film is a series of "talking heads", edited from one-on-one interviews conducted for the most part by Emily and her husband, the well-known drummer Gordon Rytmeister. These interviews have been seamlessly interspersed with excerpts from sundry performances by Roger in various band settings. The artwork during the Introduction, Conclusion, and elsewhere within the film is delightful; coloured pastel animated drawings by Sydney artist Janet Saunders of Roger playing an alto saxophone or a piano, on occasion with Don Rader on flugelhorn, with the

black outline to the main figure sketched in real time. Archival footage of interviews with Roger about his approach to improvisation have been included, along with anecdotes and comments from members of his family and by many of the now-celebrated musicians with whom he played or whom he taught.



The film includes coloured pastel animated drawings by Sydney artist Janet Saunders, such as the one above of Roger playing an alto saxophone, with the black outline to the main figure sketched in real time... SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM

Overall, the film is wonderfully effective. The comments convey a strong impression of the complexity of the man, warts and all. It is apparent that he could be difficult, even confrontational, and that his struggles with the problems of earning a livelihood from the highly idiosyncratic forms of music to which he was steadfastly committed could result in eccentricities and moments of poor self-discipline. Undoubtedly, he endured financial hardship, which inevitably sometimes impacted on personal relationships and he clearly struggled at times to reconcile his circumstances with the success of others, no more accomplished than he. However, the most compelling message of the film is the love, affection and profound respect afforded him by so many, including Australian jazz luminaries like James Morrison, Mike Nock, Dale Barlow, Sandy Evans and Kevin Hunt.

In light of Roger's untimely early death, many comments are poignant, those by his mother Margaret and his long-time friend, percussionist Phil Treloar, particularly so. The archival footage of Roger's playing is superb, convincingly conveying his enormous energy, imagination, highly original style, playfulness, and frequently startling brilliance.



Comments from Frampton's mother Margaret (above) who was interviewed in 2017, are particularly poignant... SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM

The film also establishes his very significant influence, at a time when Australian jazz was emerging as a local form of jazz practice, on a generation of aspiring young Australian jazz musicians, many of whom went on to successful careers. Of course, Roger enjoyed some 30 years at the top of his game but there was also a sense, which the film brings out, that his tremendous promise was left not fully realised, particularly because of his early death. The title of the film, "Roger Frampton comes alive", picks up on a family in-joke that throughout his life Roger was often mistakenly confused with near-contemporary Peter Frampton, the English rock musician and songwriter, who was not related but whose major breakthrough 1976 album was titled "Frampton comes alive!". Mischievously, during his final illness, Roger joked that a posthumously released album of his music could use the same title. Of course, the title also successfully expresses a view, amply corroborated by the heartfelt tributes of so many of Sydney's most outstanding contemporary jazz musicians, that Roger's huge contribution to the development of Australian jazz, particularly during the 1970s-80s, has continued, long after his death, to influence so many others in all kinds of ways.

Nonetheless, it is likely that a majority of younger jazz musicians today would be unaware of the major impact that he had, and the film will convincingly address this. Roger's recorded legacy is fairly modest, given his stature at the time; largely recordings of his own compositions, distributed mainly by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation through ABC Jazz and by Tall Poppies Records.

But the film contains many superb examples of his capabilities, with Ten Part Invention, his combo Intersection, or the trio Engine Room, but also including a beautiful duo with US trumpeter Don Rader.



Don Rader (left) & Frampton: a beautiful duo... SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM

However, nothing matches the blistering, maniacally exuberant piano solo with Ten Part Invention playing Miroslav Bukovsky's *For Woody*, following Emily's opening interview to the film with his mother, or his heart-achingly beautiful soprano saxophone solo on his composition *So It Goes* with the same band to close the film over credits.



Frampton: a blistering, maniacally exuberant piano solo with Ten Part Invention playing Miroslav Bukovsky's "For Woody"... PHOTO CREDIT JOE GLAYSHER

The film is chronological, first briefly covering Roger's childhood in the UK and his early emergence as a saxophonist and pianist within London's mid-1960s jazz scene, before the family emigrated to Adelaide, arriving in early 1967 when Roger was 18. I knew him well at this time.

He lived with several younger jazz musicians at Rose Street, Prospect and was a regular performer and part of the crowd at The Cellar, a successful jazz club then in Twin Street, within Adelaide's CBD. Even then, he stood out; he also corrected my voicings for Victor Feldman's *Joshua* (I had not yet fully mastered stacked fourths) and we became friends, despite an age difference of 12 years.



Frampton on piano in Adelaide's jazz club The Cellar circa 1967, with David Kemp (bass), & Trevor Frost (drums)... PHOTO COURTESY TED NETTELBECK

However, he did not long remain in Adelaide; and the film is largely concerned with his career in Sydney after he moved there permanently, aged 20, in 1968.

Having moved to Sydney, Roger began a collaboration with the avant-garde composer David Ahern, flautist Geoffrey Collins and percussionist Peter Evans (later Geoff Barnard), forming the group Teletopa in 1970 to explore the possibilities of free improvisation, outside of jazz, using electronically changed sounds. Although this group toured the UK, Europe and Japan, this endeavour was relatively short-lived, and the group broke up in 1972, for reasons that Geoff Barnard relates in the film.

Some of the scenes of the group performing struck me as weirdly pretentious, like experimenting with, among other things, the sound of a vacuum cleaner attached to the saxophone; and there is an amusing appearance of Roger, long hair, shades, beard, the epitome of the "the Age of Aquarius" in the 1970s. Nonetheless, Roger credits these experiences with helping him to broaden his musicality by opening his

mind to the possibilities that improvisation, free from preconceptions, can draw on. And this is a feature of Roger's approach to music making that the film confirms again and again; he was absolutely fearless – willing to trust his imagination in the moment, together with the capabilities of his fellow musicians, and then try to exploit the outcome musically.



An amusing appearance of Roger with long hair, shades and beard, the epitome of “the Age of Aquarius” in the 1970s on the ABC-TV program GTK...

Although some of Roger's comments during interviews included in the film suggest that, at times, he felt restricted by constraints around the forms and conventions of jazz music, it seems clear that, ultimately, his main interests were concerned with jazz improvisation.

And, at around the time of his move to Sydney, the jazz scene was on the cusp of a remarkable change in local jazz evolution, with Australia's leading jazz figure Don Burrows collaborating with Rex Hobcroft, Director of the then NSW State Conservatorium, to establish the first Australian tertiary-level jazz studies program at the Con. The film charts these events in summary.

Following the appointment in early 1973 of US saxophonist and educator Howie Smith as the first Head of Jazz Studies, Roger quickly became involved in this endeavour, both as a teacher but also through his band Jazz Co/op, formed with Jack Thorncraft (bass), Phil Treloar (drums) and Howie Smith (saxophone). A symbiotic relationship between Smith and The Basement as a jazz venue, ensured frequent opportunities for these musicians and their students to perform. The film very successfully captures these times.



*Jazz Co/op performing in The Basement in 1974, L-R, Phil Treloar (drums), Jack Thorncraft (double bass), Howie Smith (saxophones), Roger Frampton (piano)...
PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE*

The latter part of the film covers the last years of his extraordinary life. He was virtually self-taught but proved himself as an inspiring teacher and had, in fact, worked at the Con for over 20 years, including a stretch as Head of Jazz Studies during the 1970s. Nonetheless, when he applied in 1995 for a continuing lecturing position at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music -- essentially the position that he currently held -- his application was not successful.

The narrative of the film around this outcome suggests that Roger believed that he had been misled by the then current Chairman, Dick Montz, into believing that he would be appointed; and it is obvious from the comments of observers that many regarded the outcome to be unjust. There can be no doubt that Roger was amply artistically qualified for the position but, nevertheless, it is likely not truly fair to hold Montz responsible for what occurred. The Con by this time had become a Faculty of the University of Sydney and a time when university appointments were the prerogative of a Head of School was long past. Such appointments are actually made by committees, constituted from senior managers representing the university and faculty and charged with appointing the applicant most qualified in terms of predetermined criteria that define current perceived academic requirements.



Chairman of jazz studies Dick Montz: he may have unwisely expressed an opinion about Roger's prospects... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Moreover, within this process, it is essential that an application properly address employment criteria. The school involved will have at best only limited representation on the committee but even this is not necessarily so. My impression of the circumstances around this incident, as relayed in the film, is that Roger may not have fully appreciated what was required for a successful application.

Although Montz may have unwisely expressed an opinion about Roger's prospects, he was never in a position to guarantee anything and it seems likely that Roger did not understand that. In any case, Roger's response to the setback was typical of his gutsy personality; a determination to find a solution to any problem. He undertook to gain formal qualifications by completing a doctorate. The final scenes of the film that show him receiving his degree and continuing to perform, despite being so markedly compromised by the brain tumour that was soon to kill him, are profoundly sad but also inspiring.



Frampton, pictured on the day he received his doctorate: markedly compromised by the brain tumour that was soon to kill him... SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM

This is truly an inspirational, rivetingly interesting film about an outstanding jazz musician whose story deserves to be told. It succeeds on all levels: great music, interesting art work and a fascinating story line about an unquestionably extraordinary talent. Running for 1:20:19, the film is a joy to watch and I hope that its distribution is an unmitigated success.



Another coloured pastel animated drawing by Sydney artist Janet Saunders of Roger with Don Rader on flugelhorn, with the black outline to the main figure sketched in real time... SCREENSHOT FROM THE FILM