Review

Andrew Robson, *Austral Jazz: The Localization of a Global Music Form in Sydney*. London and New York: Routledge, 2020. 153 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-31602-7 (hbk).

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Research into the development and cultural place of jazz in Australia has been well documented, with Bruce Johnson's (1987) seminal work *The Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz* providing an extensive overview of the scene, including artists, venues and record labels. The 1981 text *The Australian Jazz Explosion* by Mike Williams and Jane March sheds some light on the development of jazz styles in specific urban centres in Australia, with a multitude of interviews and analysis of key musicians from Sydney and Melbourne. In *Jazz: The Australian Accent* John Shand (2008) presents case studies of more recent artists in Australian jazz. His descriptive text gives information on influential artists, plus an accompanying CD of selected tracks, notes on modern venues, record stores and associations. Tim Nikolsky developed the *Australian Jazz Real Book* (2013) not as an exploration of the history of Australian jazz, but as another stream in the exploration of the notion of what Australian jazz entails, with Nikolsky adapting the *Real Book* format to include Australian compositions. The *Extempore* (2008–2012) journal gives yet another perspective: the writing and art-focused print journal uses jazz as a theme, giving context to the work of Australian jazz artists through the varied mediums of poetry, photography, artist interviews and audio discs.

In *Austral Jazz: The Localization of a Global Music Form in Sydney*, Andrew Robson presents a detailed and fresh perspective on the already well-discussed concepts of what encapsulates critical people, moments and sounds in the development of Australian jazz music. Robson employs the term 'Austral' to cover musicians from Australia and New Zealand and also to frame the development of jazz from 'multiple expressive forms rather than as a music derived from a single source' (p. 3). Importantly, rather than placing Austral jazz as a product of distance—Australian jazz musicians creating their own kind of American jazz inspired sounds, impacted by their significant distance from the source—Robson presents the creative pro-

cesses in the music as coming from local ideas, and expressive techniques, with the 'propensity of musicians to widen their scope, to incorporate a broader range and number of influences in their creative practice, and to not feel a compulsion to connect creatively to American jazz as the only means of establishing their own authenticity' (p. 4). There is a sense of parallel here with George Lewis, whose writing delves into the development of improvisational techniques, explaining how improvisation is neither a style of music nor body of techniques. 'Structure, meaning, and context in musical improvisation arise from the domain specific analysis, generation, manipulation, and transformation of sonic symbols' (Lewis 1996: 94). Lewis also refers to the two musical belief systems and behaviour that exemplify particular musical logic: Afrological and Eurological (1996). Often the development of an improviser's individual voice encompasses an alignment to these systems, drawing on influences from the Afrological tradition (that of the self-identification and symbolic communication of the performer) and Eurological (connecting with European notions of form and experimental musical concepts). However, Lewis reminds us that the emergence of artists without American or European roots further serves 'to identify improvised music's transcultural nature' (p. 113), and that the action of improvising relates closely to the improviser's cultural understanding and personal identification. Robson's *Austral Jazz* is a neat extension of this concept.

Throughout *Austral Jazz*, Robson narrows his focus to music from the Sydney jazz scene, mid-1960s through to the early 2000s. He breaks up this period of intense creative change and development into decades, with some clear focal points used to illustrate the pathways that musicians, audiences and supporting industry followed. Importantly, the work is not presented as a chronological historical document but, as Robson says, as evidence of a 'sustained period of development and re-fashioning' (p. 148) in Sydney from the 1970s until the early 2000s. To achieve this, Robson presents key moments in this creative change and the book in particular highlights the 1960s, investigating the key figures in sounds emerging from Sydney and Melbourne, with artists such as Don Burrows, John Sangster and Judy Bailey forming the precursor to the contemporary jazz concepts to follow. In relation to the 1970s, Robson explores pivotal moments in Sydney including the initiation of the jazz studies course at the Conservatorium of Music coinciding with the opening of the jazz club 'The Basement'. Alongside this, Robson provides fascinating details into the emergence of the Keys Music Association (KMA), a counter-current artist-led movement focused on arranging and promoting performances by jazz groups such as The Benders, Great White Noise, The Freeboppers and Sandy Evan's Women and Children First, among others. Throughout the 1980s, Robson explains the shift from the KMA into the Sydney Improvised Music Association (SIMA), with

this new organization acting to secure funding and promote performances and recordings by contemporary musicians in Sydney. SIMA became a hugely significant organization for the presentation of contemporary jazz in Australia. Robson's writing here provides a fascinating look at the early days of this organization, with notes on the first performance season, connection to venues (including the iconic Strawberry Hills Hotel) and Australian jazz labels including Spiral Scratch, Rufus, and Birdland. Subsequently, Robson highlights eight key ensembles through the 1990s, groups that have had a close connection to SIMA but also to earlier pivotal moments and artists in the Sydney jazz scene. Names such as The Necks and Mike Nock may be familiar to readers, but perhaps groups such as Clarion Fracture Zone and Wanderlust are more obscure. With Robson highlighting a key recording from the artists, this section of the text offers an excellent way to hone in on some significant recorded output from influential Australian artists.

Robson also considers some important 1990s initiatives, with efforts made to increase gender parity in the student body of the Sydney Conservatorium, Sandy Evan's Young Women in Jazz Workshops and the initiation of the Melbourne International Women's Jazz Festival. Interestingly, there is only a small mention of the 'Jazzgroove' association that emerged around the year 2000, a similar organization to SIMA. Although artist-led, the organization presented a concert series, ran a record label and a summer festival. It was a strong contributor to younger emerging jazz artists in Sydney, and would have been influenced by the existence of SIMA. However, a more detailed discussion of the organization would have been welcome.

To balance the historical information presented, Robson also presents a varied perspective on Austral jazz: geocultural connections. This is a particularly insightful part of the text, as Robson uses this concept to illustrate how modern artists operating post-2000 are engaging with historical developments in Austral jazz, yet responding to cultural change and industry demands. Robson defines geocultural connections as the 'emergence of jazz-based projects that look to influences outside their jazz-based practice' (p. 140) and also presents ethno-historical connections, with musicians looking at 'aspects of their own personal ethnic or cultural heritage, resulting in a disparate series of one-off musical projects' (p. 140).

In the final chapter of the book, the author presents two case studies: the work of drummer Simon Barker and bassist Lloyd Swanton's AMBON project. Barker's work focuses on a creative practice on the drum kit that employs a Korean influenced approach, while Swanton's AMBON—a work created for a 13-piece ensemble—is a 'musical response to the story of his uncle, Stuart Mill Swanton, who died as a POW on the island of Ambon during the Second World War' (p. 140). Robson's writing here gives wider acknowledgement of the artistic process and conceptualization by each musician within these ambitious and rich musical projects.

Austral Jazz is an excellent contribution to the existing body of research on the development of Australian jazz, with Robson drawing attention to a selection of significant artists, performances and recordings created in Sydney over several decades. It highlights musical developments in Sydney, delving into how and why they are connected, giving greater clarity to the relationship between musicians, venues and associations that supported the stylistic direction of the artform from the 1970s through to the early 2000s. While Sydney-focused, many of these artists have had a lasting impact on the wider Australian jazz scene and found acclaim internationally. Perhaps a companion digital resource presenting the recordings mentioned would be a worthy addition to this engaging text, allowing readers to simultaneously explore audio recordings alongside Robson's descriptive writing.

References

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