The Untold History of Tasmanian Jazz

In recent musicological research there has been a focus on divergent and idiosyncratic music cultures. In the context of Australian jazz history, Tasmania stands out as particularly significant. For years, its jazz history has long been overlooked in the writings and imaginings of important contributions to Australia’s jazz history. Within this, the development and documentation of Tasmania’s jazz has largely been untold. In addressing this, the focus of my PhD research through the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Griffith University centres on documenting the untold history of jazz in Tasmania.

The malleable improvisatory methods and diverse social utility of jazz has enabled the recent emergence of distinct creative practices both linked to the genre’s traditional roots in the United States and, simultaneously, to cultures beyond the music’s roots in other countries. Traditionally, the history of the music has used geographic location to help define the identity of the various jazz cultures linked to these practices. Areas that have been commonly defined by early jazz scholars include cities in the US such as Kansas City, New Orleans, Chicago, and New York, along with broader categorisations such as ‘East Coast’ and ‘West Coast’ jazz.

In Australia, research has been slower to adopt new musicology topics and techniques and little research has been reported specifically on the cultural meaning of jazz in Australia, despite its enduring and significant presence in the Australian music community throughout its 90 year history in this country. The significant research from key Australian jazz scholars including Bruce Johnson, John Whiteoak, Andrew Bisset, inter alia, have all made considerable contributions to the advancement and acknowledgement of Australian jazz in the academy. However, a further investigation of this literature presents the absence of any large-scale enquiry into how regional cultural practices outside of Australia’s urban cities; Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, etc., have contributed to the construction of the ‘Australian jazz style’, and furthermore, if they have in fact developed distinctive identities within themselves.

For many years, the question of Australia’s authenticity and cultural nationalism have been at the core of debate across all our art forms; therefore, it is understood that the initial academic historiographical research from the above scholars was related to the establishment and qualification of Australia’s contribution to the international jazz lexicon.

Among Australian jazz developments, it is Tasmania that presents as particularly relatable when considering the idea of regional identities. If we accept that the basis for jazz is improvisation and self-expression, then it is clearly understandable that perceptive listeners will hear in Australian jazz performers and groups, qualities that reflect characteristics of the Australian culture, suggesting that Australians assimilate rather than imitate when embracing
ideas and styles from elsewhere. Bruce Johnson adds, “it seems logical and reasonable to suspect that a borrowed musical genre, especially one so open to manipulation as jazz, will take on some of the unique qualities of its new home” (1997, p. 306). If we position Tasmania and regional areas of Australian jazz parallel with that of the US, namely Chicago, New York or the West Coast for example, it is clear to see how Australian jazz musicians have also developed similar distinctive stylistic characteristics, simply based on geography and the cultural constructs resulting from this.

Tasmania has some of the country’s most significant jazz history, yet its development and documentation has largely been untold.

Tasmania is so often overlooked in mainland imaginings of Australia, yet it has some of the country’s most significant jazz history. Tasmania has produced a number of musicians, such as Ian Pearce, Tom Pickering and Alan Brinkman, who became lynchpins in the Australian jazz movement, and not only contributed and participated in the construction of the Australian jazz sound, but further developed a distinctive jazz discourse within the confines of the island. It is these structures, combined with the central point of Tasmania’s isolation, which provide the fundamental difference between this and other regional areas of Australian jazz developments. It is from the dedication and enthusiasm of the states performers and supporters, that Tasmania has produced a unique and distinctive identity among the Australian jazz scene.

The major influence is that Tasmania’s isolation from mainland Australia, has in fact led to its distinctiveness. This difference is clear, when compared against the differences between the interchange in, Melbourne and Sydney for example. The magnitude of that variance of degree in Tasmania has created differences in kind; on oral and written evidence, the initial jazz craze of the ’20s barely touched the island. Similarly, the amount of bop activity in the ’40s and ’50s was so slight as to make that style negligible in the jazz activity of the period. In more general terms, there have been fewer stylistic developments in Tasmanian jazz, because of the state’s isolation than, say, between Sydney and Brisbane. What this has created is differences in kind, which separate from the interchange in the larger connected urbanised areas. Furthermore, unique adaptions and stylistic characteristics have developed as a direct result of this; the demography between Tasmanian’s North and South has resulted in particular preponderant jazz styles and characteristics. A further circumstance arising in part from demography in Tasmania is the importance of bands rather than individuals.

Tasmania’s cultural, social, cognitive, and biological contexts form part of the isolated components that fashioned its particular distinctiveness among other Australian jazz scenes. From these foci the emergent theme of ethnomusicology continues to dominate this research. Originally my research outcomes centered on an historical approach, addressing gaps in research literature, providing a comprehensive historical account of Tasmanian jazz. However, since commencing this research three years ago, I have recently remodeled the outcomes and positioned them within a new theoretical framework, based upon the research of Jeff Todd Titon, and his two articles, Music and Sustainability: An Ecological Viewpoint (2009) and Economy, Ecology, and Music: An Introduction (2009), positioning Tasmanian jazz within an ecosystems perspective.

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Since 2009, ecology and sustainability have emerged as topics of importance in music research. Scholarly interest in the relationship between music and nature has a long history, reaching back into the nineteenth century, but for reasons that perhaps reflect current global discourses of diversity and ecology, sustainability resonates widely and loudly in the contemporary culture (Bendrups, Barney & Grant, 2013, p. 153). The positioning of Tasmanian’s jazz development within an ecosystems framework broadens the research objectives; it helps in addressing some of the deficiencies in the respective literatures on Australian jazz and illuminates the cultural practices lying behind the development and distinctiveness of Tasmania’s jazz scene and musicians. By expanding discussion beyond what was originally intended as a primarily a historical approach, this new theoretical framework will help explore how Tasmanian jazz development is distinct from other locales of jazz music production within Australia. Focusing on the ecology of Tasmanian jazz, the history of the music, the differences within Tasmania compared to other areas of Australian jazz development, together with individuals, bands and communities will provide the first of this type of approach applied to Australian jazz research.

References


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Simon Petty is coordinator of instrumental music at Trinity Lutheran College on the Gold Coast. Earning his Bachelor of Music in jazz trumpet performance and instrumental music pedagogy from the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, Simon has gone on to complete a Graduate Diploma of Education and a Graduate Certificate in Music Studies on
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