

Jane Bunnett and Sandy Evans: One World, Worlds Apart

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Introduction

This paper will examine the careers and contributions to contemporary improvised music of two leading women jazz musicians, Canadian Jane Bunnett, and Australian Sandy Evans. It will describe their individual artistic directions and the possible effect of living either so close to, or so far from the United States in this regard.

Proximity/distance will be considered as a factor in international visibility as well.

Finally, a commonality with regard to extra-musical concerns will be posited, and a few observations made about women musicians in the forefront of the jazz scene.

I will begin by making a few observations about Canadian and Australian jazz.

Canadian jazz author and journalist Mark Miller (2003) has observed that there have been “inextricable ties, from the very beginning, between jazz in Canada and jazz in the [United States].” He further states that this has been “both beneficial...in terms of Canada’s direct access to the music’s greatest exponents....[and] [p]roblematic, in terms of the stifling effect...on Canada’s own efforts to find [a] national voice in jazz...” (p. C11) As we will see, access to prominent American jazz musicians and the American market has been of great benefit to Jane Bunnett in the advancement of her career. She has however also succeeded in creating a uniquely un-American music.

Australia, on the other hand, due to its distance from the birth place of jazz, has had the reverse experience. John Whiteoak (1999), in his exhaustive study of Australian improvisatory practice, *Playing Ad Lib*, notes that the decontextualisation of African-

American music in early Australian culture resulted in “the loss of certain vital information and the mutation of what remained” (p. xiv), as musicians struggled to grasp the concepts of jazz improvisation from early imported recordings and performances by touring artists.

While one can no longer argue, in the age of cultural globalisation and downloadable everything, that Australian jazz musicians do not have access to authentic American jazz if they choose to seek it out, one can certainly argue that Australia’s distance from the United States has allowed it to develop a national voice in jazz in a way that Canada has not. In this sense distance has worked in Australia’s, and Sandy Evans’, favour. However, Australians do not have access to the American market or media machine, nor do they have easy access to the greatest exponents of the music for study and/or collaborative projects in the way that Canadians do. This has a significant effect on international visibility for Australia’s most prominent artists, including Evans.

Jane Bunnett

According to Billboard Magazine, Jane Bunnett has established herself as “Canada’s best-known working musician...excepting Diana Krall...” (LeBlanc, 2000, p.58), and as an internationally acclaimed jazz soprano saxophonist and flautist in the past two decades.

Jane Bunnett began her musical life as a pianist, but switched to winds as a result of problems with tendonitis. Her desire to play jazz was first inspired by seeing the Charles Mingus band in 1977 in San Francisco, at a time when she was, as she put it,

naïve enough not to realize that these were not “simply classical musicians playing a different style” (quoted in Yanow, 2000, p.160). This Road-to-Damascus experience led Bunnett to look more towards the modern and even avant garde for role models and collaborators, rather than towards the traditions of bebop and hard bop.

Bunnett has enjoyed international success with her work, and is now one of Canada’s top selling acts. She has released a total of 14 recordings under her own name to date, and has appeared as a sidewoman on at least 10 more. Projects have included two duos with pianists Paul Bley and the late Don Pullen, both unique and highly significant figures in contemporary jazz. Four projects could be described as modern mainstream, featuring such artists as tenor saxophonist Dewey Redman, singers Jeanne Lee and Sheila Jordan, and trumpet player Larry Cramer, who is also Bunnett’s husband. Her most recent release, *Red Dragonfly*, is a collection of folk songs from around the world arranged for the Penderecki string quartet and jazz ensemble.

Bunnett’s musical relationship with Don Pullen is an example of the advantages a Canadian musician enjoys from proximity to the USA. Bunnett first heard Pullen play with the Charles Mingus band on her life-changing visit to San Francisco. She met and spoke to him, and although she did not even play jazz at the time, a connection was established which eventually led to Pullen playing on three recordings and touring Australia with her. As an established and enormously influential artist, Pullen’s name would have given instant credibility to Bunnett as an up and coming talent.

However, Bunnett's best known works have been her collaborative projects in Afro-Cuban music. Having visited Cuba as a tourist for the first time in 1982, Bunnett describes "finding a goldmine" (quoted in Erdmann, 2000, p.13) of musical variety and expertise which had "an urgency and complexity...that was missing from jazz in the era of corporate young lions." (quoted in Hale, 1997, p. 12). Bunnett and Cramer have visited Cuba more than 40 times since. Their fascination with the rich musical culture of Cuba has led to eight CDs and a video which features a vast array of Cuba's leading musicians, as well as folkloric ensembles little known outside Cuba from across the island. These have been Bunnett's most highly-acclaimed projects, receiving favourable reviews in such publications as DownBeat, Cadence, Coda, Billboard and Jazz Times.

The success of these projects can be attributed in part to the growing world-wide popularity of latin jazz, and latin music in general; but Bunnett has created a unique library of recordings. Setting out with the intention to not make just another Latin jazz record, she said about *Spirits of Havana* (1991), the first Afro-Cuban project: "We really wanted to present [Cuban] music as we heard it and how it had affected us," without sacrificing anything in order "to make something work." (quoted in LeBlanc, 1992, p. 42).

Critics agree almost without exception that Bunnett has been successful in this endeavour, with words such as "authentic," "genuine" (Franklin, 2002, p.101) and "traditional" (Kamins, 2001, p. 41) cropping up frequently in reviews. *Spirits of Havana* was described as "a new landmark in Latin jazz" (Milkowski, 1993, p.63) and was selected as "one of the top 300 jazz discs of all time...a 'pivotal recording'" by

the All Music Guide (cited in Erdmann, 2000, p. 8). *Cuban Odyssey* (2002) was described as "...one of the...most erudite explorations of folk-inspired Cuban music...conspicuous for its musical intelligence..." (Stone, n.d., para. 2); and further: "...not straight-ahead jazz nor re-interpretations of traditional Afro-Cuban music, but a true hybrid that adds something to both sounds...." (Bowden, 2003, para. 2).

Ironically, although these projects involve far more Cuban-dwelling Cubans than Canadians, they are in a way uniquely Canadian projects. Canada has maintained diplomatic ties with Cuba throughout Castro's rule, whereas the United States has imposed a virtually complete embargo for the past 40+ years. Consequently, it has been possible, albeit time-consuming, costly and frustrating, for Bunnett, to plan and execute these projects, which would have been literally impossible for an American musician to undertake. (1)

(1) Bunnett has spoken frequently about the many obstacles she has had to overcome with respect to visas, finances, etc. *Spirits of Havana* took 3 years of planning to come to fruition.

Sandy Evans

While the main thrusts of Jane Bunnett's work so far have been in the modern mainstream and Afro-Cuban worlds, virtually all of Sandy Evans' work would fall into the experimental contemporary jazz category, if we must place it in a category. Unlike Bunnett, the majority of Evan's work has not been issued under her own name, a circumstance which belies the fact that she has been leader or co-leader of many of the ground-breaking projects she has been involved with.

Evans emerged on the Australian jazz scene in the mid-1980s, recording and touring with her group *Women and Children First*. In the past two decades she has established

herself as “one of the finest, and most interesting, composers that Australian jazz has produced...” (Meyers, 1990, p. 19/40), and “a role model not just to female musicians, but to all aspiring jazz players....” (Pearce, n.d., para 1).

Evans’ commitment from her earliest involvement with music has been to discovering her personal voice, and to creating music which reflects the diversity of her interests and her desire to explore new ground. Women and Children First, which undertook a seven-month tour to every corner of Australia in 1985, combined elements of rock, minimalism and free improvisation, with relatively few references to traditional jazz. Evans cites this tour as clarifying her desire to be “an improvising saxophonist, within the confines of the jazz tradition...” while believing that “all these other forms [of music]...can...feed in and make what I can do really interesting” (Meyers, 1990, p. 18).

The other musics Evans refers to in addition to those mentioned above, include Classical music, Afro-American jazz, Asian music including Indonesian, Korean, Japanese and South Indian, and other folk traditions such as Bulgarian and Hungarian. Evans does not attempt to reproduce any one of them in an authentic way: they are all filtered through the unique prism of her musicianship to give voice to her ideas and emotions.

Evans has been integral to several of Australia’s most influential and innovative improvisational ensembles, both as a player and composer. The award-winning contemporary jazz quintet Clarion Fracture Zone, co-led by Evans and her husband reedsman Tony Gorman, has been recognized internationally for its “...physically, emotionally and intellectually devastating” impact (Pearce, n.d., para 3) with their

1990 debut CD *Blue Shift* rating in Jazz Times and Coda's top 10 for the year. *Zones on Parade* was similarly praised in 1995 with a 5-star rating from DownBeat Magazine.

Evans has written some of her most significant works for Ten Part Invention, widely acknowledged to be Australia's most adventurous and innovative large jazz ensemble. She has had numerous commissions from the ensemble which have allowed her to experiment with the avoidance of conventional big band writing in favour of exploring colours and textures which describe emotions and atmospheres she wishes to convey (Meyers, 1990).

Evans has also been involved with Australia's flagship project in contemporary music, the Australian Art Orchestra. Directed by pianist/composer Paul Grabowsky, the AAO is an interstate agglomeration of Australia's best contemporary musicians. Its repertoire explores what might fairly be called Third Stream, blurring the boundary between orchestral composition and improvisation, and features collaborative projects with guest artists. Evans' most significant recent triumph has been the AAO production of *Testimony*, a music theatre event based on the life and legacy of Charlie Parker. The 2-hour score is a setting of a libretto by Pulitzer Prize winning American poet Yusef Komunyakaa, whose 14 sonnets celebrate the revolutionary and complex life of jazz's most celebrated anti-hero. Evans' score includes several actual Parker tunes, but the majority of it consists of original work "inspired by and quoting from Parker's music" while drawing on different styles of music ranging from blues to 20th century classical music (Barber, 2002, p. 013), *Testimony* played to sell-out crowds at the Sydney Opera House, was recorded by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation,

and is awaiting public release. Critics described the work as "...a composition of immense depth, humanity and expression" (Shrubb, 2002, p. 013).

Evans has not shied away from experimentation with electronics as a means of expanding her sonic palette. The australYSIS Electroband of which she was a founding member, fuses computer-interactive sound improvisation with acoustic instruments in a spontaneous performance setting.

Other projects which Evans has been involved with include but are not limited to: The catholics, a rollicking, audience accessible jazz/world music melting pot; Mara! a Bulgarian folkloric group; and three more recent projects, the Sandy Evans Trio, Waratah and GEST8. The Trio, Evans with bassist Brett Hirst and drummer Toby Hall, plays a mix of originals and other repertoire, with the emphasis on the communication and interaction which can occur in a small ensemble setting. Included are "game" pieces where the action is controlled on the spot by a member of the band through a series of cues, guaranteeing spontaneity and a different result everytime. This is also the setting in which Evans' interest in Afro-American music is most evident, as she invokes John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and other giants of the jazz tradition.

Waratah is another trio project, consisting of Evans, percussionist Tony Lewis and koto layer Satsuki Odamura. This project overtly explores and celebrates Evans' interest in Asian music and the sonic possibilities afforded by the inclusion of a non-western instrument in an improvisational setting.

And finally GEST8, co-led by Evans and husband Tony Gorman, gave its debut performance in Sydney in Aug. 2004. This group combines all of Evans' interests, collocating acoustic jazz instruments with laptop-generated electronics and the Japanese koto and bass koto. The resultant palette of textures, timbres and dynamics has impressed critics, with Sydney Morning Herald critic John Shand predicting that GEST8 "is likely to be a phenomenon in Australian creative music" (Shand, 2004, p. 13).

Despite the quality and quantity of projects Evans has been involved with, a discography of over 20 recordings and recognition in such publications as *DownBeat*, Evans is far from visible in the international music press in the way that Jane Bunnett is. We arrive back at the obvious: Australia is 12,000 miles from New York City, the center of the jazz universe. Organizing a gig where a representative from a major label might hear the band, or inviting a high-profile American artist to collaborate on a project are all but impossible due to logistics and finances. An aspiring Canadian jazz artist living in either Montreal or Toronto, on the other hand, could be in NYC in under two hours for under \$200, which, given the obvious imperative of musical excellence, makes the chances of recognition and networking within the all-powerful American jazz industry rather better than for her Australian counterpart.

On the other hand, far from the commercial demands of the American marketplace and the tyranny of the jazz tradition, Evans and her colleagues have been able to explore improvised music far beyond the bounds of what jazz neo-classicists such as Wynton Marsalis, for example, would find acceptable. They have been able to create music which is uniquely Australian in its pioneering, exploratory spirit. Evans was

chosen as the inaugural recipient of the Bell Award for Australian Jazz Musician of the Year in 2003 ⁽²⁾, in recognition of her unique contribution to Australian culture. This is only one in a long string of prizes, awards and grants she has received in the course of her career.

(2) The Bell Awards are named after jazz legend Graeme Bell, who was the first internationally recognized Australian jazz musician.

Common themes in the lives and work of both Jane Bunnett and Sandy Evans are generosity of spirit, respect for human dignity and a commitment to bettering the condition of their fellows. Bunnett has overcome innumerable obstacles to enable the realization of her recording and touring projects with Cuban musicians. Her respect for them and their musical heritage is evidenced by the way she has integrated herself and husband Larry Cramer into the Cuban context, rather than demanding that they conform to her musical vision. Ensembles such as Grupo Vocal Desandann, a choir performing spirituals passed down from their Haitian slave ancestors, have had their first international exposure thanks to Bunnett's work. In fact Bunnett has been recognized by the Smithsonian Institute with an award for her "lifetime of dedication to the enrichment and diffusion of Latin music" (Bowden, 2003, para7). ⁽³⁾ Her commitment not only to the music but to the people of Cuba is evidenced by her organizing the supply and repair of musical instruments for school children, in a country suffering severe shortages of material goods due to the on-going economic embargo.

(3) As with Evans, this is only one of a series of awards bestowed on Bunnett for her work. Most recently, she was invested as an Officer of the Order of Canada for her contributions to Canadian culture.

As for Evans, given the exploratory nature of her work, there might have been a danger of heading into cold, intellectual, theoretical musical territory. However, she has been praised repeatedly for the depth, emotion, warmth and humanity which

underlie everything she does. For those who would say that music is all well and good, but it can't really change the world, Evans also contributes in a practical way to her community by giving improvisation courses to young women in the Sydney area. Alarmed that in her 28-year career the number of women instrumentalists on the jazz scene in Sydney and Melbourne has changed imperceptibly, she tries to counteract the negative messages young women receive about becoming improvising instrumentalists by creating a safe and encouraging environment for learning.

One last and obvious point of similarity between Bunnett and Evans is that they are both women, and more than that, high-profile, successful, nationally and internationally recognized women at the forefront of their professions. Articles, interviews and reviews consulted for this paper revealed a complete lack of the patronizing and dismissive "pretty good for a woman" sort of rhetoric which has insulted women musicians in the past and hindered their career progress. Indeed, with Bunnett being described as "...one of jazz music's most important contemporary performers..." deserving "...a place in the history of jazz and Latin music," (Bowden, 2003, para7) and Evans as "...a national treasure," (Pearce, n.d., para 1), one might conclude that at the beginning of the 21st century, the jazz establishment may be joining the modern age and proving itself capable of and willing to acknowledge the contributions of outstanding women to contemporary music.

Conclusion

This brief look at two prominent jazz saxophonists has provided an overview of their careers and accomplishments. It has illuminated differences in their musical directions and their levels of visibility on the international scene, due at least in part to the fact

of their living on different continents, at vastly different distances from the global center of jazz activity, the USA. Their mutual dedication to excellence in their professional spheres and the recognition which has followed has been documented. Their interest in the future of improvisational music is evidenced by their involvement in educational projects in Cuba and Australia, which attest equally to their commitment to improving the quality of life for young people and the music community in general. It is further suggested that the jazz world may be becoming more enlightened, and that even if there are still very few young women interested in the profession, at least the ones who are in it already can hope to be recognized for their work.

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