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Jazz on the far north Queensland resort circuit: a musician's perspective

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Contents

Preface: Jazz in place
Philip Hayward

Introduction: Grey Beads and Pimples: Youth and Experience meet the Hamilton Island Jazz Festival, 2003
Jim Mienczakowski

Keynote Address: Tools not of our making: shaping Australian Jazz History
Bruce Johnson

Response to Keynote Address: Our jazz-making tools and how we chose to use them
John Whiteoak

Invited Paper 1: Jamming with Japoneseness: Various ways of Indigenising Japanese Jazz
Shuhei Hosokawa

Invited Paper 2: Sanguma and Jazz in Papua New Guinea
Denis Crowdy and Tony Subam

Crossfire: an Australian jazz-rock fusion journey
Jon Fitzgerald

Voice: the invisible jazz
Irene Bartlett

Australian Improvisation: defining the vocal techniques of jazz singing
Leigh Carriage

Enough to warm the sea: the island songs of Judy Jacques as research-based musical production
Robin Ryan

Spontaneous Spirituality: religion, improvisation and the groove
Mark Evans

Jazz on the Far North Queensland resort circuit: a musician’s perspective
Annie Mitchell

Developing a successful jazz program in a regional centre
Glen Hodges and Derrin Kerr

Jazz Studies: a vehicle for Edutourism
Greg Whateley, Ian Bofinger, Derrin Kerr and Glen Hodges

Contributor Information
JAZZ ON THE FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND RESORT CIRCUIT:

A Musician’s Perspective

ANNIE MITCHELL

Background

This study is confined to the area of Far North Queensland (henceforth referred to as FNQ) encompassing the city of Cairns, the resort town of Port Douglas, the Atherton Tablelands and Dunk, Bedarra and Lizard Islands. I have worked in the music industry in FNQ for sixteen years as a pianist/vocalist, entertainer, music educator, composer/arranger and radio broadcaster, specialising in the jazz genre. I have had residencies on six island resorts and many of the major mainland resorts, and played in most venues in the Cairns/Port Douglas area, either as a solo entertainer, in jazz ensembles and big bands. Research for this paper was conducted through a series of questionnaires and phone interviews of the most renowned and eminent jazz musicians working in the FNQ region. Information was collected and analyzed, to inform and extend the personal and professional observations I have gleaned from my sixteen year career in the local music industry. All quotations, unless otherwise specified, derive from interviews with the author.

Significant Musicians and their contribution to Jazz in FNQ

The jazz community of FNQ consists of a small core of musicians who have been prominent in jazz performance for many years. Their tenure ranges from 16 years to a lifetime. The jazz scene is, or has been, dominated by a few key figures:

Paul Zammit: an exceptional musician fondly regarded in the community as a ‘monster’ due to his multi-talented virtuosity on several instruments (saxes, flute, violin, double bass).

The See Poy family: Herbert (junior): saxophonist, who with Paul Zammit created the early jazz scene, jam sessions, gatherings and collegiate in FNQ; his sons Tom, a virtuoso pianist who specialises in Latin jazz and John, a drummer. Tom has been the leader of several jazz and Latin bands, such as Hoo Ha, the Latin Jazz Excursion and is pianist in the Sound Sculptors.

Wayne McIntosh: a virtuoso guitarist, session musician and composer, who has worked in bands such as Hot Nuts and the Sound Sculptors. Wayne works as session guitarist for many local recording artists, supports visiting national and international jazz artists and freelances with much function/conference work.
Michael Knopf: guitarist and composer known for his originality, creative compositional ability and feverish work ethic

Robert Howlett: pianist, organist and Musical Director of Trio Non Troppo, whose experience in the rhythm and blues and funk genres have expanded the jazz palette to cross-over fusion of these styles with jazz. Bob has also been resident pianist on Dunk and Bedarra Island resorts.

Julie Hibberd: pianist and vocalist, who enjoyed a 5 year residency at the Cairns Hilton from its opening in 1987.

Frank Marino: drummer and bassist in bands such as Fun Jungle, the Sound Sculptors and Latin Jazz Excursion. Frank maintains a steady stream of original and innovative jazz compositions in the relative isolation of the Atherton Tableland.

Ruedi Homberger: talented saxophonist with Fun Jungle and the Sound Sculptors

Giuseppe Vizzone: drummer and percussionist

Gary Howard: drummer

Phillip Rigg and Jimmy Mann: bassists

Joey May and Tony Townsend: pianists

One of the most significant factors apparent in the careers of certain world-class jazz musicians is their ability to maintain the development of their creative expression and virtuosity throughout a lifetime; the integrity of their creative expression and exploration of the jazz genre and their ability to renew and redefine their creative product over periods of changing artistic trends and fashions. Jack Chambers describes Miles Davis’ career as sustaining a long, creative life in which he grew, changed and renewed himself and the music, leaving “behind not a flash of insight but a luminous trail” (1985: 364). Chambers attests to the similarity of this phenomenon to that of Duke Ellington whose “creativity lasted at least as long and shone at least as brightly” (ibid).

The contribution of some of the listed FNQ musicians (particularly Paul Zammit, the See Poy family and Wayne McIntosh) to the development of jazz in FNQ is similarly based on the product of their long-term residency in the region. Throughout this time, each musician has performed professionally in the entertainment industry on a regular basis, maintained a professional and artistic commitment to the jazz genre despite passing trends and fashions, and engaged actively with the local artistic community to foster the growth and practice of jazz in the community and nurture developing talent. Tom See Poy and Wayne McIntosh, according to Tony Hillier (musician, jazz radio broadcaster, journalist) have shone out like beacons in the FNQ landscape for over 20 years; a testament to their exceptional talent, virtuosity, and long-term musical activity.

In recent years, the migration of several South American (and particularly Chilean) musicians to Cairns has brought a culturally authentic Latin element to the performance of jazz. This group of musicians includes a guitarist/singer/band leader and two exceptional percussionists. The timing of their arrival in Cairns coincided with the Latin dance craze and the establishment of a salsa dance club called Caza de Mez,
simultaneous events which added vibrance, energy and variety to the existing jazz scene.

History

The early jazz activity of FNQ, especially during 1950s and 1960s, was centred around local musicians such as Paul Zammit and Junior See Poy. Paul Zammit was tireless in performing and promoting jazz, and conscripting any available talented musicians to become involved in the development of jazz in FNQ. Junior See Poy’s band had arguably the longest residencies in North Queensland, playing at the Innisfail Town Hall every Saturday night from 1948-1968, and the Queens Hotel, Innisfail, every Friday night from 1955-1968.

The mid 1980s saw the advent of the big hotels, which provided many more performance venues. These venues ushered in a period of increased sophistication of taste. My arrival in Cairns coincided with this development boom. Several restaurants/piano bars employed resident pianists 7 nights/week, and a vibrant band scene existed, which included jazz performance. Club Tropique was opened in 1988, an elegant venue with a large jazz supper club and dance floor, resident band (Boys on Safari) commissioned from Melbourne, and a night club featuring dance acts. Some excellent music was performed in this club, as the resident band provided many opportunities for local jazz musicians to sit in, and it became a regular nightspot for many local jazz musicians after their gigs. Unfortunately, the venue only operated as a jazz club for about 6 months, then changed management and became a Leagues club with televisions screening football, and poker machines lining the walls.

The development of many 4 and 5 star hotels and resorts provided a great variety of venues for jazz performance. In addition to established venues such as the Great Northern and Crown hotels, the Cairns Colonial Club, Tradewinds Sunlodge, Tuna Towers, Pacific International Hotel and Duke’s Restaurant and Piano Bar; new resorts such as the Cairns Hilton, Cairns International Hotel, Matson Plaza, Sheraton Mirage Port Douglas, Radisson Port Douglas, Harbourside, Cairns Radisson, Tradewinds Outrigger and Esplanade, and the Ramada at Palm Cove emerged. The advent of these new venues in the late 1980s and early 1990s also coincided with the promotion of the first large scale, national and international jazz festivals. These were brought about chiefly through the entrepreneurial energy and zeal of then Cairns International Food and Beverage manager, Lou Gianola. These Jazz in June festivals brought eminent Australian jazz artists such as Don Burrows, James Morrison and Vince Jones to the city, plus several international acts. Many local artists played in support bands or were recruited as session musicians for these acts. These festivals ran for about 3 years, and have been recognised by the local jazz community as highlights in the development of jazz in the region.

The airline pilot strike of the early 1990s led to a sharp decline in employment opportunities for musicians, as some venues closed and many places laid off staff. This significant decline in domestic and particularly international tourism created a period of stagnation for the live music industry. The recovery of the industry was hampered by the karaoke craze and the increasing mechanisation of musical performance. Many bands were consequently reduced to duo and solo acts with sequencers or drum machines.
New venues, such as Cairns Hotel Casino, Radisson Treetops Port Douglas, Cairns Convention Centre, the Chapel, Latin bar Casa de Mez, and the Metropolis Restaurant, have emerged through the 1990s. Even though more venues exist, they do not seem to employ as many musicians as previously; and reflect a marked reduction in the performing media from bands of 4-6 members to duo or solo acts.

The mid to late 1990s saw a growth in corporate work that enabled jazz musicians to practice their craft. The Latin/salsa dance craze of this period extended the jazz performance genre to embrace traditional Cuban and other South American repertoire and performance idioms. This fashion has been capitalised upon by local artist Tom See Poy, who specialises in the Latin jazz idiom.

From about 1994, FNQ has benefited from the entrepreneurial skills and enthusiasm of promoter Han Van Leeuwen, a key figure in importing Scandinavian jazz to Australia and marketing their live performances around the Australian circuit. Concerts of international standard by performers such as the Finnish ensemble Trio Toykeat, have brought a style of original European jazz renowned for its virtuosity to a solid core of jazz fans in the region. These concerts are well patronised by a discerning cohort of about 100 jazz fans. Similar promotions of Australian jazz musicians have included Ten Part Invention, Mike Nock, and recently Michelle Nicole and Joe Chindamo. A current series of jazz concerts, Jazz Up North, is underway.

Venues and Cultural Events

Some venues have contributed substantially to the growth of jazz in FNQ. Julie Hibberd cites her 5 year residency at the Cairns Hilton as an example of this, as she was allowed compete artistic control over her repertoire, and was called on to book jazz bands every weekend that suited the ambience of the venue. This process created regular, quality jazz band performance. The enlightened and supportive attitude and management style of the Hilton General Manager at the time is gratefully acknowledged. Dukes Restaurant was also managed by a jazz connoisseur who provided regular employment for jazz musicians and creative opportunities for guest artists to sit in with the resident acts.

Jazz concerts have been hosted by the Cairns Civic Theatre for many years. Some older, established hotels, such as the Crown and the Railway, have a long history of engaging jazz bands. The Cairns City Club contributes greatly to the expression of jazz in FNQ as it has hosted weekly meetings of the Cairns Jazz Club for the past 2 years.

As well as the Jazz in June festivals that have been mentioned, local community events provide opportunities for jazz performance. These include the Yungaburra Jazz Festival, The Reef Festival, and the Jazz under the Stars concert series. The role of the big hotels and resort circuit as a conduit for jazz has declined, as the performance venues for such acts have shifted away from their corporate atmosphere to the community-based Tanks Arts Centre (refurbished fuel reservoirs from WW2 in the botanical gardens) in the botanical gardens and Grafton Arts; two community arts centres.
Significant Trends

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the jazz scene was much more lucrative, with many solo and band gigs. Since then, the live performance of jazz, particularly band gigs, has been in steady decline. The only continuous residency is the Cairns International Hotel which features solo acts 4 nights per week, and a jazz trio on weekends. Corresponding to the decline in performance is a marked decline in the standard of musicianship, according to Wayne McIntosh. He describes this process as a decline from a group of musicians playing standards reasonably adequately to current duos with sequencers with limited musical skill or technique. The roles of drummers and bass players have seemed to become especially redundant, as many are replaced by drum machines and sequencers. The proliferation of acoustic pianos, and associated accomplished pianists, in resort venues has declined; being replaced by electronic keyboard operators usually displaying limited technical and aesthetic mastery of the instrument. Keyboards are increasingly used as a master controller for sequenced music and electronically created sounds.

The reduction of the performing media from several to a very few musicians has another insidious consequence. Music machines such as sequencers allow little flexibility in arrangement and expression (eg rhythmic change, feel, tempo, form). The essential performance elements of spontaneous composition and expressive freedom through improvisation, enhanced by musicians communicating and interacting during performance, is severely compromised by the replacement of many of these musicians by machines and the lack of artistic partners to improvise with.

The observations of many musicians reinforce this view. As well as a decrease in opportunities to perform music, the lack of jazz-related compositional elements in contemporary popular music was cited as creating a youth culture ignorant of, and intolerant to, the jazz idiom. The jazz fusion styles of the late 1970s and the 1980s marked a heyday of jazz influence on popular music, with artists like Al Jarreau, George Benson and Michael Franks enjoying wide popular appeal; their repertoire displaying an active cross-fertilisation of various musical elements of jazz and contemporary popular music.

My own observations of the current retro 1970s/1980s era and popular appeal of contemporary rhythm and blues support this argument. Significant complex compositional elements have disappeared from, or again been dumbed down, to fit into contemporary popular music styles. The revamping of 1970s and 1980s repertoire, which includes some cross-over jazz repertoire such as *Feel Like Making Love*, with contemporary grooves and harmonies, usually have a detrimental effect on the composition as contemporary musical trends are mostly reductionist, minimalist and extremely monotonous. The beautiful complex harmonies in the original versions are particularly compromised in this process.

One significant trend in jazz entertainment in FNQ is the change of focus and location from local to more global performance. FNQ is now on the global jazz circuit. The Scandinavian music frequently brought to the region is characterised by an eclectic mix of virtuosic jazz, classical and folk; with less American influence than most jazz.
Repertoire, Originality and Creative Expression

Repertoire is significantly influenced by the demands of the tourist audience. This can be a positive experience, as European and American audiences generally exhibit a greater appreciation of, and familiarity with, jazz repertoire. This phenomenon is sometimes found in tourists from cities like Sydney and Melbourne. Because Cairns and FNQ relies so heavily on the tourist dollar, meeting the demands of the tourist clientele was seen as a condition of work and a means of keeping your job by most of the musicians I interviewed. Wayne MacIntosh’s experience is that employers want musicians to play middle-of-the-road, publicly accepted jazz repertoire that is palatable, containing no extended bebop solos. The result of this process is that jazz is becoming increasingly dumbed-down.

Very little original material is included in the working repertoire of most FNQ jazz musicians. A few songs (5% of repertoire) may be original, depending on the venue and audience. Original work, when performed, is usually slotted in after the audience has been suitably prepared by more expected, familiar repertoire. Some musicians are productive composers, but feel the engagements they perform are rarely suitable venues or environments for the expression of this material. This material, however, is frequently used on recordings, whether the composer’s original CDs or contracted compositions for release by other artists.

Opportunities for creative expression are limited, mostly occurring in an autonomous working environment where musicians experience little or no interference from venue management in the choice of their material. This may occur at certain corporate functions. At other times, the agenda to entertain the audience with some preconceived musical formula negates this creative opportunity. A strong need exists for empathetic, culturally aware venue managers and employers who allow musicians the professional respect and artistic autonomy to operate as experts in their field, trusting in their judgement and knowledge to act as artistic consultants and providers of entertainment.

Positive factors contributing to Jazz in FNQ

The jazz community of FNQ was identified overwhelmingly as the most positive factor contributing to the growth and development of jazz in the region. This fraternity of musicians who get along well, support each other, play together, and nurture developing talent, is underpinned by many lifelong and long-term friendships. The very high level of musicianship of several members of this community (which is widely appreciated and respected) has dictated the strength and quality of jazz in the region over many years. The self-direction, creative energy, artistic integrity and committed work ethic of this collegiate have established jazz as a significant entity in the FNQ cultural landscape. The relatively recent development of many elegant and beautiful performance venues also contributes significantly to the performance of jazz in the region.

Negative factors undermining Jazz in FNQ

The inexperiencence and lack of expertise in the arts exhibited by most venue managers and employers is a serious issue that undermines the professional activities of FNQ jazz musicians. Employers are often young and book music akin to their taste rather than the
taste of the audience. This lack of cultural education, exposure and awareness is seen to extend to much media, creating reporting mechanisms that are often uninformed and inaccurate. Based on frequent audience apathy and incomprehension, this lack of cultural awareness and education is seen by most musicians to also extend to much of the general public.

As well the lack of appreciation of jazz as a form of entertainment, the inadequate care and maintenance of instruments is my personal concern. From a time in the late 1980s when most resorts, large hotels and several restaurants in the region housed resident grand pianos, the number of pianos available for performance in these venues has steadily declined. There is often little money allowed for the tuning and upkeep of these instruments, a particular priority in the tropical heat and humidity; and in some cases the aesthetic appearance of the instrument seems to be valued over its musical function and output. Once the piano has been removed from a convenient, workable area of the venue it is virtually impossible to restore it to its original status and function.

One of the most detrimental activities that occasionally occur in the FNQ music industry is the employment or engagement of outside artists for little or no money, with venues offering a cheap working holiday by providing meals and accommodation to visiting musicians but very little payment. This activity often results in the loss of a financially viable gig for an existing musician, the decline of the venue’s future value as an employment environment, and the undermining of the economic structure of the profession.

A conservative, parochial attitude by some locals who are seen to resist the migration of southern musicians to the north, unwilling to have the existing status quo (and possibly comfort zone) challenged has been identified as a factor detrimental to the development of jazz in the region. My observations, however, support the view that competent musicians are usually quickly recruited into the professional life of FNQ by the jazz fraternity. A lack of professional work ethic, commitment and motivation is displayed by some musicians, wanting to be employed playing gigs, but unwilling to arrange and adequately rehearse for engagements. This attitude is exacerbated by an unwillingness to accept responsibility for one’s professional development and career opportunities, with some musicians lacking business, management and promotional skills.

Geography and Lifestyle

FNQ is characterised by its remote geographical location, beautiful natural environment, tropical climate and relaxed lifestyle. The beauty of the environment has been the creative inspiration for the composition of original jazz repertoire such as *Saturday Afternoon* (Annie Mitchell), *Bedarra Sailing* (Robert Howlett), and the orchestral work “The Reef” (Michael Knopf). The existence of many beautiful performance venues, often with an appreciative national and international audience, provides an attractive working environment. The mixture of relaxed naturalness and casual elegance and sophistication is a valuable lifestyle option. The natural and working environment are further enhanced by a community environment which is vibrant and multi-faceted, displaying a strong artistic flavour and a diverse demographic. My professional and personal life has been greatly enhanced by the acceptance and encouragement I constantly received from the general FNQ public. The community of jazz and contemporary musos, plus the teachers and the classical music community, has provided a valuable support network.
Occasional residencies by eminent visiting artist such as Boys on Safari, John Nicol and Col Nolan, and Michael Kenny inject new life into the local jazz scene. These short residencies usually create a new gig or music scene, and often provide employment opportunities for local artists to work with musicians of national repute.

Tony Hillier describes the tropical lifestyle and climate as conducive to the expression of Latin jazz. The relaxed, friendly, sexy and exotic characteristics of Latin dancing seem to fit naturally in the tropical lifestyle. Junior See Poy attests to this phenomenon, stating that the predominantly Italian cane farming audience that frequented his Innisfail performances, were particularly fond of Latin jazz. The current popularity of Latin jazz and salsa dancing within a dedicated Latin venue in Cairns affirm this ongoing relationship.

The negative effects of living in tropical FNQ include the lack of cultural stimulation and access to a varied palette of quality arts entertainment, education or professional development opportunities. Musicians have less opportunity to play, study and interact with a range of musicians. Consequently, they have a limited cohort of musicians to work with, and so have to make compromises such as accepting a lower level of musicianship and musical standards, less professional work ethic and preparation of material, and lack of commitment to the ongoing musical development. The remoteness of the region and reduced access to artistic stimuli can result in some individuals remaining in artistic ruts, and not keeping aware of current trends, fashions or artistic movements.

Other issues

Jazz seems to be falling victim to the dictates of a world in which communication and other forms of human interaction are becoming increasingly impersonal (e.g. email rather than conversation). Home entertainment offers strong competition to live music, as people have greater access to available fashionable and current forms of entertainment; snuggling comfortably at home with their DVDs and surround sound systems. It is often too much bother to go out, play music and socially interact with other people. This situation worsens if the outing is not perceived as a new, challenging or rewarding experience: another symptom of the increasingly isolationist world we are creating. This is resulting in the FNQ jazz scene losing some of its community/collegial feeling, as fewer people play together, many leave the industry and/or the area, and some become embittered and give up. I have observed a lack of appreciation of musicians living in FNQ by the public and employers; extraordinarily talented artists being taken for granted and grossly undervalued. The attitude that most musicians will play for free needs to be eradicated. Hypocrisy is evident in some government initiatives promoting Cairns as a centre of cultural and artistic excellence, with the view to capitalising upon, and exploiting, this phenomenon; and at the same time, not paying the musicians to perform at such promotions.

Conversely, a lack of appreciation by some musicians of the privileged life they lead, i.e. earning a living playing music, expressing their creativity and exhibiting their talents in classy venues in one of the most beautiful locations in the world, is the opposite perspective of this debate.
Current state of the industry and future developments

Observations by several local musicians about the current state of live music performance in FNQ are very negative, with some interviewees describing the standard as appalling. The marked decline in musicianship is paralleled by a decline in audience expectation. The use of sequencing and other electronic apparatus has severely undermined the standard of musicianship, with some performers being described as barely capable machine operators. Tony Hillier admits to being sometimes pleasantly surprised by the local offerings, but more often finds the music mundane. There is much repetition of established repertoire, idioms and performance practices by regular players. Some excellent musicianship exists in the jazz fraternity, but not a great deal of creativity.

Cairns audiences are notoriously fickle, flocking to see an act that is new in town (such as a local singer who has recently returned from working in the USA). Once such people have resided in the area for a while, they too are taken for granted and often not provided with ongoing support. In the words of Bob Howlett: “Once you are a local, you’re no good”. Wayne MacIntosh supports this view, believing that Australian audiences have stopped listening to creative music, and observing that there are no surprises or depth to the repertoire. This is in stark contrast to the high standards of Brazilian audiences in the bossa nova era, described in by as expecting “to be taxed by their musicians. Only the best wordsmiths, the most precise interpretations, and the most careful arrangements meet with their approval. Hence their pride in their musical heritage, which often lies at the border between popular and High Art.” (1996: 1).

The lack of training of young jazz players results in a talent drain of excellent young classical musicians, few of whom return to FNQ as practising musicians. Most have to learn jazz under their own direction and motivation. My concerns about the dearth of young jazz musicians are increased by the knowledge that the existing jazz community in FNQ is aged between 40 and 70. Once these players have died, left the area or quit playing, no new generation will continue this art form in the region. This situation could be compounded given the prevailing negativity of a few of the best local jazz musicians, currently in the prime of their careers. The detrimental influence of their embittered attitude contrasts starkly with the irrepressible, infectious joy, enthusiasm and camaraderie of elder statesmen like Paul Zammit and Junior See Poy, who spent a lifetime encouraging and nurturing young jazz musicians.

Recommendations

The understanding and appreciation of venue managers is crucial. A need exists for empathetic employers who allow musicians freedom, don’t interfere in their performance or choice of repertoire, and allow artists to explore media such as solo work, unencumbered by machines and computers. Tony Hillier recommends the maintenance of exposure and access to world-class music on a regular basis. This creates a need for an enlightened arts policy in return for export monetary value of Australian artists. Government subsidies to enable visiting artists (national and international) to perform in FNQ need to be increased. Funding is necessary to keep the jazz scene active and to support local and national Australian acts. One dedicated jazz entrepreneur/manager could make this happen.
I agree with Tony Hillier’s recommendation of finding one effective entrepreneur. Cairns has long been in need of a dedicated jazz venue managed by an entrepreneur/musician/business person who is savvy to all styles of jazz and original performance, and who can promote and network effectively, maintaining the integrity of the art form and not being swayed from this artistic purpose by passing market trends. This club and entrepreneur may then be able to do for jazz what Rick Montgomery has done for blues in the Far North.

I strongly recommend the development of university jazz and contemporary music training in the region to undertake training of young jazz musicians and capitalise on the excellent classical training many local secondary schools and private teachers provide. In addition to the training of young musicians, I recommend the provision of regular professional development opportunities for established jazz musicians working in FNQ. Musicians could also benefit greatly from factoring in opportunities for their professional development, such as annual visits to city music festivals, and regular application to government funding bodies to support their original creative work. An increase in community cultural events that showcase more original contemporary jazz is desirable. The Far North needs to be more actively engaged and included in state and national arts networks and activities.

More proactive networking is needed between musicians, business people, employers and finding bodies. Musicians must be more active representatives of their artistic and financial causes. An increasing demand is obvious for musicians to develop and implement sound promotional, marketing and business management skills and practices. Musicians, and the jazz idiom, could also benefit from artists accepting greater professional responsibility for the condition of their beloved art form and its place in contemporary culture.

Martin Williams (describes one of Duke Ellington’s achievements thus: “Throughout his career, Ellington met audience after audience on its own level and transported it up to his own” 1983, 121). Jazz musicians need to follow this model, by accepting and embracing their educative, aesthetic and altruistic responsibility to lead and shape culture rather than just respond to it.

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