

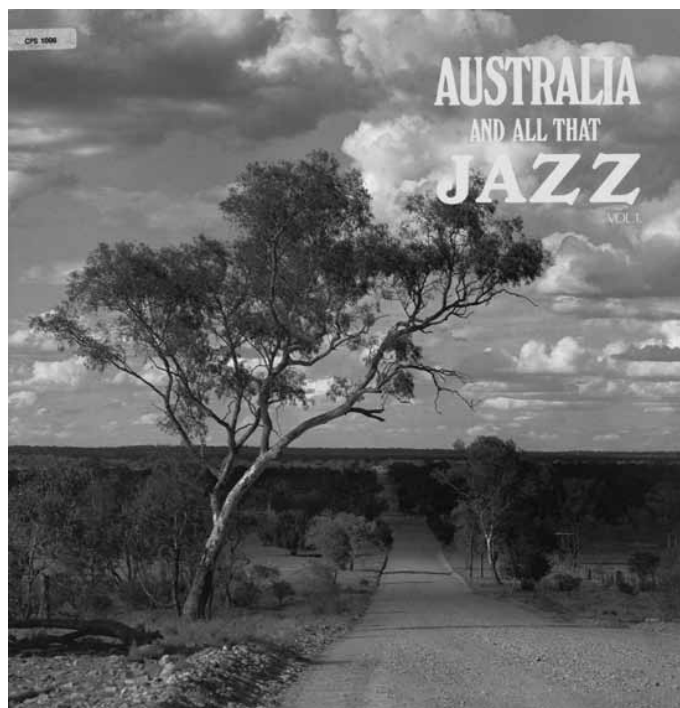
# *Two Way Traffic: mediation of identity through sound, and sound through identity\**

By Bruce Johnson

It is by now a truism in popular music studies that one of the primary mediators of individual and collective identity is music (Stokes 1994). And it is equally recognised in acoustic ecology that a major identity marker is the local soundscape (Järviluoma et al 2009). The two converge when a composer or musician seeks to represent that soundscape in musical terms. Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia Antarctica* incorporates literal signifiers of locality through the sound of a polar blizzard, while more oblique representations of a soundscape include the use of reverberation to evoke senses of place, such as the open 'home-on-the-range' (see further Doyle 2005). I want to present some thoughts on the relationship between music, sound and Australian identity from two directions. The first is the more obvious one that I have just sketched; that is, the use of music to mediate national or local identity. Then, however, I want to move in the opposite direction to a connection much more rarely, if ever, made. That is, how place mediates sounds which are categorised as music.

The Australian continent of course has a musical history as old as its indigenous community. The European presence brought a range of music, from folk traditions to high art forms, and from the mid-twentieth century rock became a distinctive presence. All of these at some time have sought to 'musicalise' the Australian soundscape, through sounds of fauna and musical articulations of landscape and place, both rural and urban. The establishment of the political entity called 'Australia' dates from the federation of its various states in 1901. Of all the music genres that have lodged themselves in that entity, the one that is closest to coeval with the history of 'nation' is jazz, first performed under that name in 1918 (Johnson 1987: 3). As such, the history of its relationship with the evolution of national identity and modernity is of special interest.

A great number of jazz musicians have sought to represent the sense of Australian place. From pioneers like Graeme and Roger Bell, to jazz modernists like Bruce Cale and Brian Brown, these attempts have ranged through song titles to attempts to find a musical language that evoked particular individuals, the distinctive flora and fauna, or rural and urban space. Apart from those mentioned, this has been a major and perennial project in the work of Dave Dallwitz and John Sangster. The former devoted himself primarily to the commemoration of historical events, while the latter took a more specifically sonic approach. This was especially prominent in his theme music for the TV series *Harry Butler in the Wild*, and on the recordings *Australia And All That Jazz*, Volume 1 (Cherry Pie CPS 1008, Sydney, 1971) and *Volume 2* (Cherry Pie CPF-1027 L-70198, Sydney, 1976), and less explicitly on the album *Peaceful* (EMI/Rain Forest YPRX 1747, Sydney 1979), which although not directly referencing Australia, includes compositions evocative of the Australian



soundscape, such as "Raindrops" and "Reed-Warbler Song".

The sleeves of both volumes of *Australia And All That Jazz* are replete with vivid full-colour photographs of the Australian landscape, flora and fauna. Apart from the visual elements, Sangster evokes the soundscape both through the music and his own notes on each track, in which he emphasises the instrumental choices he has made, as for example:

From *Volume 1*:

"The Birds" (Features Graeme Lyall's tenor saxophone)

"Forest, with birds" (features John Sangster on vibraphone and Don Burrows' alto flute)

"Rain (Water brings the desert to life.)" Features John Sangster's electric piano improvisation).

And from *Volume 2*:

"Bush Walk, with Curlew" (Two tenors, the marimba and the Bush-Curlew)

There is a sleeve note by F. A. Talbot, Director of the Australian Museum, and the following extracts foreground the convergence of many strands in Australian culture and jazz. He begins, "Would

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you believe? A Museum promoting Cool jazz? Why not?" He describes the Australian landscape and jazz as, "a natural combination" explaining that the museum, "exhibits the tangible products of ethnic evolution, while Jazz is the outcome of the more transient aspects of the same evolution ... both comprising complementary forms of human progress – Anthropology" (ellipsis in the original). He refers to the various stakeholders in the project, and these include the Broken Hill Proprietary Co. Ltd. who provided generous assistance. This rather unlikely convergence between a wildlife conservation project and a massive mining company may be read as an attempt to reconcile two otherwise contending forces in Australian cultural history. And it is notable that the company brands itself as 'The Big Australian'. All this gives force to Talbot's theme, that the record is "a product of synthesis ... between education, big business, photographic art and musical creativity" (ellipsis in the original). He then addresses the music:

The music is not just cool jazz; it incorporates the sounds and feel of Australia – the differences between the red, dry heart-land and the cool, lush valleys of the coastal fringes. Each piece of music depicts different aspects of the films; animals and scene changes are mirrored in changes in rhythm and instrumental combinations, and the music is as varied as the country it depicts. (Talbot, liner notes to Sangster 1971)

Discussing the decision to make a recording based on the films: "Take some of the sounds from nature ... birds, frogs, the rustle of foliage ... and interweave these with the music to make an LP record. This synthesis was a new concept for all concerned." (ibid.; ellipsis in the original).

Sangster also comments on his approach as composer/performer:

It had to incorporate miniature sounds, yet sounds which are warm, full of life and vigour. I wanted to contrast the feeling of life, which thrives in abundance around the water holes, with the great, open, empty, silence of the desert, and to highlight the tiny life-cycles which enliven even the dry heart of this dry continent. (Sangster, op. cit.)

His musical explication incorporates the following comments: "The 'musicians' of the Australian bush – the bell birds, whipbirds, kookaburras and frogs – whose artistry has been employed to heighten the mood of the music, were all recorded by Howard in their vast, open-air 'studio.'" "On 'First Light' and in the opening section of the film *Where Water is plentiful*, the improvisation 'was fed through a repeater system and then mixed with Howard's sounds of the bush at the first light of dawn'" (Sangster, ibid.). In this image of the bush as a natural sound studio, and the mixing of bush sounds with Burrows' improvisation, we have as complete a convergence between jazz and the bush mythology as can be imagined, and achieved sonically.

It is important to remember that these bushscapes are unpopulated, except on one track on which man is characterized as potential destroyer. This is significant if we are talking about the bush mythology, in which the adversarial relationship between man and nature is actually the site of potential redemption, as in the film script for *Tall Timber* referred to below. In that mythology, it is precisely the conquest of the land that represents the triumph. The Sangster project is more strictly a harmonization between man (musicians, photographers) and the bush. This may be seen as a development of the bush narratives that bring it into the age of conservation. This project links man and nature not as physical adversaries, but as allies. The adversarial sound that sustained the original heroic bush myth was axes and logging equipment. In *Australia and all that Jazz* the men wield musical instruments and through the improvisational fluidity of jazz, achieve a harmonisation with the bush.

The mention of improvisation parallels one of the keys to the bush myth; that is the ability to improvise, to 'bodge' something together, make something out of the materials that happen to be at hand. There is in this a homology with the centrally distinguishing aspect of jazz (among the other Australian twentieth century musics). It provides a hook on which jazz can hang perhaps more appropriately than any other music.

The *Australia and all that jazz* project emphasizes the novelty of the convergences, and that signals the remarkable evolution in the relationship between jazz and Australia since the arrival of the music in the early twentieth century. Sangster's work is most conspicuously the mediation of Australian locality through jazz. But the negotiation is mutual, and I want to dilate on that other process which is neglected in studies of sonic mediation. That is, rather than the mediation of local identity through sound, the mediation of particular kinds of sound through local identity. I want briefly to summarise a historical process through which jazz passed from being regarded as a depraved modern music antagonistic to the 'Australian identity', to a symbiotic relationship. This was achieved by a merging of the music with the Australian *mythos* through a number of means, including a melding with the soundscapes of two archetypal Australian sites: the bush and the beach. Here I will focus on the former.

An Australian film, now lost, made for a 'Jazz Week' in Sydney in 1919 set the tone for the Australian movies of the 1920s through its title: *Does the Jazz Lead to Destruction?* Its publicity answered with a defiant yes. Throughout the decade jazz was demonised as the music and lifestyle of a degraded modern urban ethos, as illustrated by contrast with the bush, where Australian identity was formed through honest labour, masculine virtues, pioneer enterprise and anglo-saxon traditions of stolid decency. A number of feature films centred precisely on this contrast, as in Charles Chauvel's *Moth of Moombi* (1926) in which a country girl is drawn like a moth to the city where she becomes a victim of its glamour and jazz parties, and returns to the country sadder but wiser.

The reverse process is traced in Chauvel's other film from the same year, *Greenhide*. The central character is Margery, "Spoilt and motherless – living in a dream land" (intertitle). She is a city girl, a 'flapper', whose pointless and trivial lifestyle is summarised in a private garden party at which the all-girl guests project their 'new woman' status through such conduct as smoking prolifically and talking about gambling losses. The only men present are the members of a jazz band playing for their entertainment and, in Margery's case, backing a solo improvised dance. This is also the earliest surviving moving footage of an Australian jazz band. We are told that Margery is becoming bored with "eternal Seaside Sheiks and Hotel Lounge Lizards" (intertitle) and so she determines to visit her father's rural cattle station, where, of course, she discovers the embodiment of true masculine virtue in the form of the station manager, Gavin, aka Greenhide for his toughness. She trades jazz parties for darning his socks.

Similar associations are made in *Tall Timber* (1926). Although there is no surviving copy, the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) holds an early handwritten shooting script which is of great interest, not least because it indicates that the original title was *Wild Oats*, crossed out and replaced by *Tall Timbers*; showing a sense of the two poles of modern urban prodigality and on the other hand, redemptive bush imagery of woodfelling labour. The opening scene is a 'jazz party' at which the hero Jack Maxwell is described as "The most reckless spendthrift among the city's fastest set" (intertitle). Obviously drunk, he delivers a eulogy to 'the widow Cliquot' and describes her "dainty golden head and delicately sloping shoulders. When she kisses your lips dull care flotes [sic] off in amber bubbles

of delight. A sweet adler [sic] of wits ... Behold" (intertitle). And he points at the champagne bottle, from which a girl appears to emerge, and walks off with Jack. Disgraced by his debauched behaviour and disowned by his father, he retreats to a rural timber mill, where through honest labour and the love of a good country woman, he redeems himself. He not only becomes a member of the mill workforce, his now disclosed talents lead him to becoming a partner. This is a tale of the redemption of a prodigal son by becoming reconciled to the collective labour of the Australian bush.

These representations of the antagonism between jazz and a central site of Australian identity, the bush, could not be more extreme. Yet somewhere over the period from the late 1930s to the 1950s, this valency is reversed, a process inviting close investigation. This involved a marriage of jazz to two mythologies: the bush and the beach. One thing the two have in common which is central to Australian identity is outdoor recreation, and one of the features of the transition I am documenting is the shift of jazz activity from enclosed or indoor spaces like smoky, dimly lit clubs, or sybaritic garden parties to the healthy outdoors. It is suggestive that this also corresponded to the shift from silent to sound movies. The soundscape was thus able to be incorporated as a factor in the transition.

As Sangster's project exemplifies, the greatest impetus to the alliance with the bush was from the 1970s. Over the same decade increasing numbers of jazz festivals retreated to rural venues. There have developed annual jazz festivals in, for example, Merimbula, Moruya, Ballarat, Wagga, and today Australia's premier jazz festival is in rural Wangaratta. The world's oldest annual jazz festival, the Australian Jazz Convention, began in 1946 as an urban event, in Melbourne then Sydney and other capitals. Today it is most frequently held away from metropolitan centres. One of these festivals, held in rural Dubbo in 1970, was documented in a film produced by the government body, the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, in its Australian Colour Diary series No 37, *Country Jazz* (ca. 1971). The title itself is instructive.

Behind the opening titles we hear the sound of a solo jazz trombone mingled with birdcalls, as a continuous aerial tracking shot creates a continuity between the transition from rural landscape to a jazz parade in the town. These choices visually and sonically embed jazz in that rural community. In the main street, the sound of a jazz band beginning "Bill Bailey" on a hotel balcony segues into the local Salvation Army band. These overlapping sounds are characteristic of the way jazz becomes 'naturalised' via the local soundscapes, complementing visual linkages. This is again manifested in the jazz picnic sequence, in which delegates and locals are seen and heard swimming in the river, drinking and picnicking. The underscore is Margret Roadknight singing "Weeping Willow Blues". Again, what we see – a typical Australian rural leisure scene – is directly linked to a jazz/blues standard. Like the song we hear, this *al fresco* jazz convention activity is merged with the bush setting. As the scene concludes the music fades into the soundscape of birdcalls, the jazz is absorbed into the bush noises. (Jazz) culture merges into (Australian) nature, and both emerge as a version of Australian identity.

The film concludes with the dawn after New Year's Eve celebrations. The streets are empty except for what appear to be post-revels stragglers. The trombonist plays, recalling the sound at the opening sequence. As they walk down the middle of the road the impression is that they are entitled to this space, they have a place in this rural township, with their instruments and their jazz. The sound of the solo trombone fades into the Salvation Army band, again establishing continuity with the music of the local community. A slow pan backwards, like the opening scene in reverse, establishes the same sense of continuities, of life continuing, like a fade in and fade

out on a song. The music again segues from the Salvation Army into a jazz underscore: Margret Roadknight is heard singing "Gimme That Old Time Religion", again a direct link with the Salvation Army band. The sounds of brass-band hymns and jazz, sacred and profane, merge into each other, reconciled in this rural space that so centrally stands for Australian tradition: the bush town.

The implications of these developing connections with the natural landscape and soundscape remain to be explored further, ranging from matters I have touched on here – the potential of jazz to map the evolution of the Australian identity – to more specifically sonic questions. Playing outdoors, as opposed to within a highly regulated interior concert space, for example, produces a very different adaptation to the performance space, a different consciousness of sound, different articulation, and audible changes to musical execution. These enquiries go beyond the scope of this discussion. In the meantime, the negotiation between jazz and the distinctively Australian soundscape is a two way process; the music mediates the soundscape, but the soundscape also mediates the music.

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## Discography

- John Sangster. *Australia And All That Jazz*, Volume 1 (Cherry Pie CPS 1008, Sydney, 1971); Volume 2 (Cherry Pie CPF-1027 L-70198, Sydney, 1976).
- John Sangster. *Peaceful* (EMI/Rain Forest YPRX 1747, Sydney 1979).

## Filmography (chronological)

- Does the Jazz Lead to Destruction?*, dir. unknown, 1919
- Moth of Moombi*, dir. Charles Chauvel, 1926
- Greenhide*, dir. Charles Chauvel, 1925
- Tall Timber*, shooting script by Dunstan Webb, 1926
- Country Jazz*, Australian Colour Diary No. 37. Production Company: Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, 1971

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