

WANGARATTA FESTIVAL OF JAZZ & BLUES 30 YEARS

by Adrian Jackson
& Andra Jackson

The sceptics said it couldn't be pulled off. How on earth could a tumbleweed town like Wangaratta in rural Victoria host a jazz festival? Even if the town managed to get a jazz festival off the ground for a year or two, it couldn't possibly last, the doubters said.

Now thirty years later, the festival having also added on a blues event, is firmly established as Australia's leading jazz festival, bringing musicians and punters from all over Australia together. It has won tourism awards and is now ranked as a Hallmark event by the Victorian Government.

In February 2016, Wangaratta drew international attention because an outbreak of tumbleweed had left it piled up meters deep outside the doors and homes of some residents. But to the international jazz fraternity, especially in America, Wangaratta was already well known as the place that hosted one of the most discerning and cutting edge jazz festivals on the international jazz festival circuit. Word of mouth glowing endorsements from returning overseas musicians who had performed at the festival secured its reputation.

But the festival's success didn't just happen overnight. It evolved through careful planning, astute decisions, the search for an artistic director able to create a jazz festival that could differentiate itself from the host of jazz festivals around Australia, and most importantly with the support of the townspeople.

There were many challenges and obstacles along the way. The book *Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues 30 Years* is the behind the scenes story of how they were overcome, told by its artistic director of twenty-seven years standing. It is also the story of how musicians and punters alike embraced the festival told through their recollections. Leading local and overseas musician have written about their experience of the festival, one where the usual performer/audience barriers are broken down and musicians walk around freely through the crowds and rub shoulders with punters.

The Authors

Adrian Jackson (OAM) earned a reputation as one of Australia's most respected jazz critics through his work as the regular jazz critic for *The Age* from 1978-1999. For many years, this included a weekly jazz column in *The Weekender* (later *The EG*), and weekly CD reviews in *The Green Guide*.

He was also a frequent contributor to other publications, including *Jazz Down Under*, *JAZZ*, *Australasian Jazz & Blues*, *Rhythms*, (until mid-2015), *Jazzchord*, *exTempore*, *The Bulletin* and *Business Review Weekly*. His articles were also printed in *The National Times*, *The Herald*, *The Wire* (UK) and *Down Beat* (USA).

He was artistic director of the Wangaratta Jazz Festival from 1990-2017. He took on the same role with the Melbourne International Jazz Festival (1998-2003), and the Stonnington Jazz festival (2005-2014). In the Australia Day announcement of honours in 2019, he was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia, for his contribution to the arts, specifically jazz, in Australia.

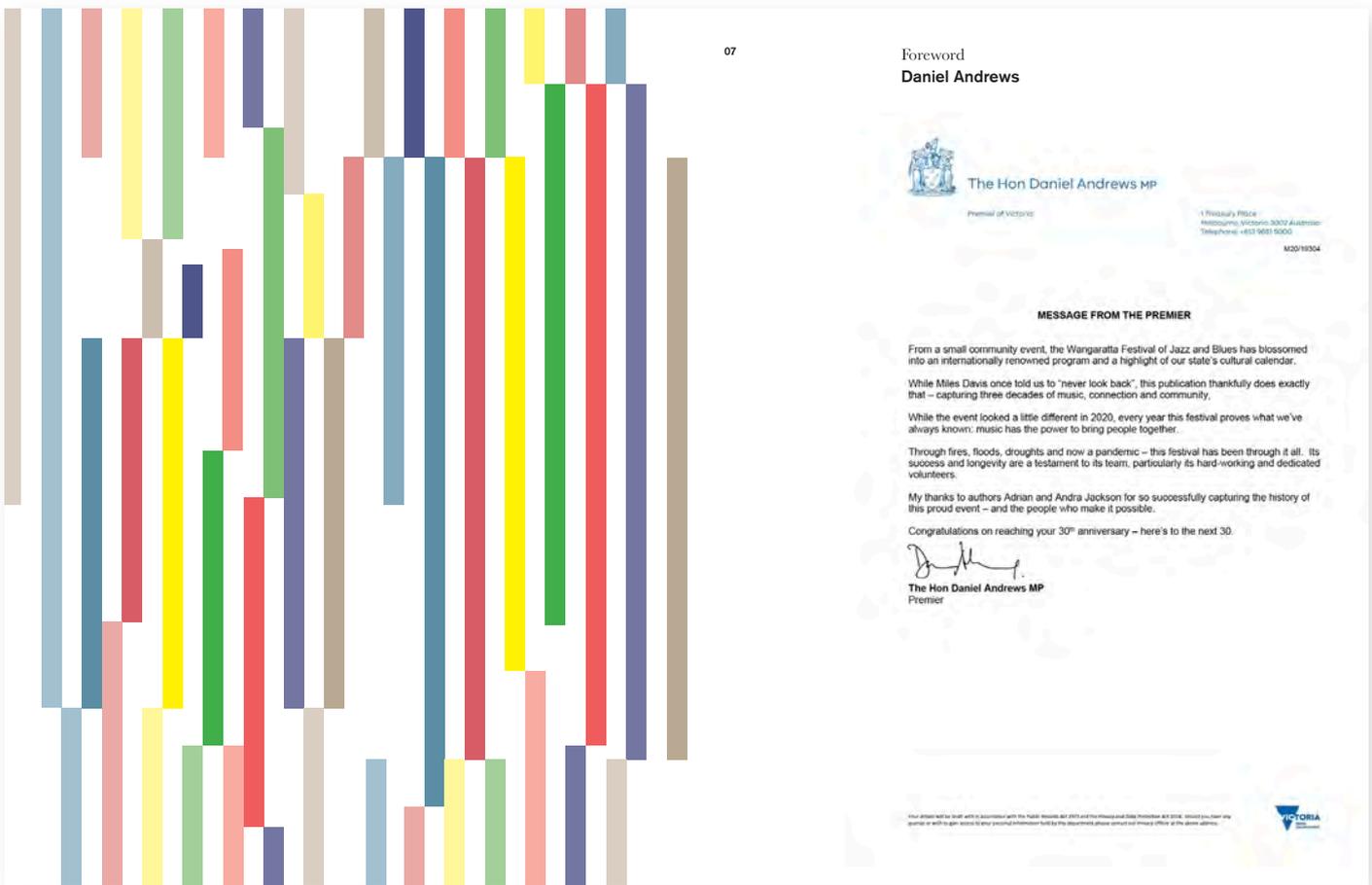


Wangaratta Festival of Jazz & Blues 30 Years is also a tribute to a rural success story, of a town that pulled off what it was told couldn't be done. And the tumbleweeds? Long since cleared.

Includes an annual glossary of every band and musician that has played at the Festival.

Andra Jackson is an award-winning journalist formerly from *The Age*. She wrote a regular jazz column for *The Sun* newspaper in the eighties and the *Herald Sun* newspaper writing on jazz from 1995-2000. From 2000 to 2011 she was a staff journalist on *The Age* covering general news and specialised in writing about refugees, human rights, the Middle East and music, in particular jazz.

She currently writes jazz interviews as a freelancer for *The Australian* and *Rhythms Music* magazine. She considers her greatest jazz accolade to be when someone read out to Wayne Shorter her review in *The Age* of his first concert in the *Melbourne International Jazz Festival* in 2005 and he listened and responded with: 'She Got it.' Andra is Adrian's sister.



Foreword
Daniel Andrews



The Hon Daniel Andrews MP

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MESSAGE FROM THE PREMIER

From a small community event, the Wangaratta Festival of Jazz and Blues has blossomed into an internationally renowned program and a highlight of our state's cultural calendar.

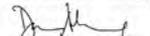
While Miles Davis once told us to "never look back", this publication thankfully does exactly that – capturing three decades of music, connection and community.

While the event looked a little different in 2020, every year this festival proves what we've always known: music has the power to bring people together.

Through fires, floods, droughts and now a pandemic – this festival has been through it all. Its success and longevity are a testament to its team, particularly its hard-working and dedicated volunteers.

My thanks to authors Adrian and Andra Jackson for so successfully capturing the history of this proud event – and the people who make it possible.

Congratulations on reaching your 30th anniversary – here's to the next 30.


The Hon Daniel Andrews MP
Premier

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Introduction
Paul Grabowsky

Wangaratta, or 'Wang' is, on the one hand a medium-sized regional city on Yorta Yorta country, and, in the imagined, remembered and awaited experiences of several generations of musicians, a destination, even a dream.

My association with the Festival goes right back to its prehistory, when Adrian Jackson invited me to address the City's worthies on the extraordinary opportunities awaiting them upon taking the cultural high-dive into the pool of a jazz and blues festival. Not that regional Australia was any stranger to the j-word: Australian Jazz Conventions had been hosted by numerous regional centres for decades. The difference here was that the proposal involved a focus on contemporary jazz and blues, quite a conceptual leap for the good burghers of Wang. I seem to remember making the comparison with the tiny town of Montreux placed beside its worldwide reputation as one of the world's most illustrious jazz festivals: for anyone who has been to the Montreux Festival, you will know what a smoke-and-mirrors moment that was. Anyway, whether or not my snake-oil pitch made any difference, a decision was made to proceed.

Wang quite quickly became the most important event on the yearly jazz calendar, and for several good reasons. Most important was the annual competition, which saw musicians, generally on or below the poverty line, vying for useful prizes, generally cash and recording/broadcasting opportunities. The list of winners represents a potted history of the last few generations. What began as a piano competition has

gone on to embrace most jazz instruments and includes vocalists on a regular basis. While I'm not a huge advocate for musical competitions, I do understand their attractions to players and audiences alike. We are, after-all, a sports-loving nation, or so I'm told...

Another reason why Wang became a success is the fact of its location. One suggestion around the original meaning of 'Wangaratta' is 'meeting of two rivers', in this case the Owens and King, and the resulting sense of Wang as a meeting place where musicians from the relatively tribalised scenes of our major cities could come together and form a true appreciation of the national spread of the music. This sense of the jazz nation coming together encouraged collaborations, undid prejudices and did much to raise morale and foster a valid sense of pride in the diversity and creativity of improvised music.

A third important reason was the programming vision of Wang's founding and long-term Artistic Director, Adrian Jackson introduced Australian audiences to many leading US and European artists, often placing them in collaborative settings with Australian artists for the first time. I was the lucky recipient of many such musical encounters: duets with Steve Lacy, Dave Douglas and Han Bennink (the latter found me variously attempting to tap dance and play the underside of the piano lying on my back), band performances with Dewey Redman, Sheila Jordan and Enrico Rava.

When I look back at the many opportunities I was given at Wang, I realise what a great festival it has been: it has helped me (and, I can only assume, many others) to propel my musical journey forward. The many Australian Art Orchestra appearances, including memorable concerts with musicians from India, Indonesia, and our own First Nations performers, are a prime example. These were never easy to accomplish, with at times complicated setups and confronting combinations of sounds and textures, but Adrian shared my view that jazz was born in a cultural melting pot, and the idea of its Australian iteration continuing that process of metamorphosis was central to his wide-angle, democratic idea of the music. His true love of jazz was the driver, and I am grateful for it.

A fonder memory is of playing chauffeur to Steve Lacy and Dewey Redman, both great heroes of mine (and both no longer with us) and just listening to them share stories about Monk, Ornette, Duke and Bird as we drove from Wang to Melbourne. I felt privy to a mythical conversation being held by the gods from the lofty heights of a Jazz Olympus. That, for me, was what the Festival was all about, and hopefully that spirit will continue to guide it as it enters its fourth decade.



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I also added a Tony Gould-Brian Brown duo concert, a trio set from Allan Browne, with Ben Robertson and the prodigiously talented young pianist-trumpeter Stephen Grant, and a set from Wilbur Wilde's Blowout, capitalising on the saxophonist's high profile via regular TV appearances.

I squeezed in saxophonist Ian Chaplin's Trio and added a set from the Allan Browne Jazz Band and guests to play music as heard on his then-new CD release, *Genre-Jumping Jazz*. The drummer was adept at playing both traditional and modern jazz, equally passionate about both, and loved the idea of showing that players adept in one genre could transpose those skills to the other.

It supported my view that the festival should be about jazz in the broad sense. I believed that an emphasis on modern/contemporary jazz would give the festival a refreshing point of difference. But I also realised there was plenty of great jazz to be heard from both established and emerging artists in the traditional and mainstream styles, and it was important that they be included.

Eric and Peter had recommended booking a major international band to headline the program. That idea had been shelved for cost reasons. But I urged the committee to consider booking an international guest, arguing that one airfare and a modest fee would be a worthwhile investment.

In subsequent years, the internet has made it a quick and easy process to contact an international musician. But back in 1990 some detective work was required. I remember finding the contact details in an ad in *Down Beat* for Ken Greengrass, who managed altoist Frank Morgan. I also was given a few phone numbers by Martin, including one for the great tenor saxophonist Joe Henderson. I thought Henderson would be a suitable headliner. He had been a consistently prolific artist since the mid-sixties, and was still at the peak of his powers.

A month later, having persuaded American Airlines to contribute a return airfare from New York, we got the green light, but Joe Henderson by then had accepted some firm offers in Europe.

My fall-back option was Vincent Herring, a brilliant young alto saxophonist who had toured Australia twice in recent years for Martin. While his visit was not a dramatic coup, he was known to audiences and had been positively received – plus I knew he was friendly, professional and easy to work with. So, he was added to the line-up, to be backed by Mickey Tucker, Melbourne bassist Geoff Kluge and veteran Sydney drummer Alan Turnbull.

Meanwhile, I had taken on the task of fine-tuning the rules for a competition for jazz pianists, the National Jazz Awards. Eric Myers had suggested this as a point of difference for the festival, based on the Thelonious Monk Institute's annual competition.

I gladly accepted an offer to help with setting up the awards from Tony Gould, one of Melbourne's leading jazz pianists, and a senior teacher in the Improvisation Course at the Victorian College of the Arts. We went through the rules of other competitions, and we worked out a sensible format that would appeal to local pianists and listeners.

We invited pianists of any nationality, up to the age of thirty-five, to submit a recording of three pieces to be assessed by the judges on a 'blindfold' basis. The ten highest-rated entrants would be invited to Wangaratta to perform on the festival weekend, with three being chosen to play in the second and final round. The first prize was to be \$5000 and an international airfare with UTA; second prize \$3000, and third prize \$1000.

There was much, much more to be organised in that first year. The town hall's pride and joy was a Steinway grand piano that had been there for many years, but we needed more than one good piano for a multi-venue jazz festival.

The piano tuner who kept the Steinway in good nick lived not too far away, in Yea. Through David Lawson's contacts with Kawai in Sydney, we were able to arrange a sponsorship deal, with several pianos loaned to the festival gratis.

We also needed to hire audio equipment and a crew. Geoff suggested a local audio engineer, Rob Howell, to take on the job of providing audio equipment, and a crew to run the front-of-house mixing and foldback desks and lighting.

Part of my job was to let Rob know what stage set-up each band would require, what instruments or amps they would bring, and what instruments they would expect the festival to provide for them. In each venue, we would provide a standard drum kit setup, asking the various drummers to bring their own snare drum and cymbals.

Apart from booking the bands and organising the production, I was set a target of \$100,000 in ticket sales, which I thought was wildly optimistic. I was charged with drumming up group bookings through the Sydney Jazz Club and the Victorian Jazz Club (VIC).

The then-President of the VIC, Marge Burke wondered why I would expect VIC members to buy tickets to a festival that featured so much modern

Top: Adrian Jackson, Photo: Kevin Peterson
Bottom: Ade Moresbough with New Orleans Rensals, Photo: Borlie Mui



That's a stupid idea!
How much money do you have to waste on it?



Dr Tony Gould AO
Pianist, regular performer and National Jazz Awards judge.

I am proud to say that I was involved with the Wangaratta Jazz Festival from its very beginning, and witnessed it grow quickly into a festival of international standing. Largely responsible was Artistic Director Adrian Jackson who through his vision and vast knowledge of jazz, both here and abroad, was able to engage annually a collection of the finest improvisers in the world.

Among the most satisfying aspects of the festival was Australian musicians being given the same status as the visiting headliners. The ongoing result has been a growing appreciation of the extraordinary talent we have in this country. It is a proud legacy.



Mike Nock
New Zealand/Australian pianist and composer and former chairman of the National Jazz Awards

From 1990 right through to the last one I attended in 2017, the Wangaratta Jazz Festival was the highlight of my year, a very special time when I got to catch up with musicians and fans from all over the world and hear what they were doing. The enlightened and knowledgeable programming by Adrian Jackson always guaranteed a stimulating listening experience and included a wide range of jazz styles and idioms, featuring selected musicians from all over the globe. It was a fantastic opportunity for Australian musicians to present their original music to a discerning audience and often offered them an opportunity to collaborate with leading international artists.

ABC jazz broadcast much of the weekend's music live, which played also a large role in the festival's popularity and artistic credibility. The National Jazz Awards also saw many talented young musicians receiving a huge career boost through the extensive exposure they received. Many

award winning CDs, articles and videos were also created through the festival.

If you happened to crave a change of musical diet, there was always the blues tent, featuring a range of the best available blues artists from Australia and overseas.

It was a golden period for me as I often got to play with top Sydney and Melbourne musicians in interesting contexts, plus the yearly influx of top international players enabled me to re-connect with many musicians who'd played significant roles in my life. These included saxophonist Sam Rivers, Fourth Way drummer Eddie Marshall, saxophonist Dave Liebman and expat guitarist Peter O'Mara who I'd toured Europe with a few years earlier.

I met Sam Rivers in 1961, soon after I arrived in Boston on a Berklee School of music scholarship. I subsequently spent much of my time in Boston playing in a group with him and drummer Tony Williams, where my musical concepts were developed and honed. It was wonderful to find myself performing with Sam again at Wangaratta 1997, with bassist Cameron Undy, drummer Nick McBride and myself completing the quartet. That same year I also debuted my composition *Environments*, featuring Sam plus a string quartet and drummer Niko Schauble, which was filmed live and broadcast nationally on ABC TV.

Saxophonist Dave Liebman was another US musician who I'd previously played with some twenty years earlier. We met at Wangaratta, discussed what we

were going to play. The resultant recording won the 2007 ARIA award for best jazz album.

I also got a chance to reconnect with one of my big inspirations, drummer Eddie Marshall, who I'd worked with for many years in various groups, including Dione Warwick's band, and who was a founding member of the Fourth Way. (ED: Mike's ground-breaking US electric jazz fusion band based around San Francisco from 1967 to the early seventies.) My heartfelt thanks and eternal gratitude go to all who contributed to those memorable years.



Wilbur Wilde
A Blowout Wangaratta reverie.

In 1990 my video camera accompanied us to Wangaratta Jazz Festival.

Bless David Hick's cotton socks for preserving a precious if somewhat disjointed look at the afternoon (as shot mostly by Perfect Robert Ratt, sumptuous vocalist and surrealist cameraman).

Hickey had his dignified Z-Car Jaguar, me the 1985 Ford LTD in which Amanda Testro, Robert and Bill McDonald had laughed our way up the Highway.

Matt Kirsch travelled with David, Peter Lee and Robbie McWilliams.

Blowout!
A close-knit Jazz family of diversely talented players and singers.

Trumpet and Tenor sound so tough together, still my favourite front line in Jazz.

Billy Harper's 'Priestess' went next level and 'I do Believe' sounded sweet.

Ratt's grabs from side of stage document the mighty energy of that line-up.

Matt Kirsch guitar supreme and over-teenage David (Stix) Hicks

conversing urgently with elegant Bass McDonald and Peter 'The Booter' Lee on congas raising the groove off the deck.

Jazz levitation.
Standing in front of a Rhythm-section like that is why we do it in the first place.

Incandescent, hard-bop trumpeteering from Robbie, Perfect's mellifluous stylings over 'God Bless the Child' and Amanda's belligerently lyrical 'Drycleaner from Des Moines' creating seminal moments of our lives.

The audience dug on it too, which is nice.

Back outside the gig we bumped into summer-frocked Shelley Brown and cool-o Ian Chaplin in good form.

Martin Jazz Jackson features in the video memoir as does brother Adrian (Festival overlord) with whom I was briefly consulting side-stage during our performance.

Gorgeous Gary and Liz Costello had a chat also Ben Robertson with cats joined whilst together we hung on the sunny footpath.

All very fond reminders of the musical camaraderie in the Melbourne Jazz scene.

Blowout's apres gig sidewalk quorum decided Pizza and wine at my dump in East Ivanhoe would cap-off the day well.

It did.
I love them still.

It was a golden period for me as I often got to play with top Sydney and Melbourne musicians in interesting contexts



Judy Jacques
Improving vocalist, gospel belle
and trad jazz singer

On Flinders Island, where I find myself living in 2020, the saxophone neck image on my 2002 Wangaratta Jazz Festival T-shirt is frequently misread as either the neck of a Cape Barren Goose or of a Tiger Snake set to strike. Context is everything. Jazz is still great!

When Adrian Jackson asked The Brian Brown Quintet to play at the first Wangaratta festival in 1990, we all got to work, feeling pretty excited. Even in that first year this brand new festival was a buzz, full of possibilities and a prestigious stage to be on. The festival program aimed high and so did we.

There were many times at Wangaratta when the music with Brian, as well as my own ensembles, felt like a coiled snake ready to strike. Original music played with passion and risk, and taking risks was always the aim of the musicians who played with Brian and myself.

I was the vocal instrument in the quintet and wrapped in the

sonic arms of those extraordinary musicians and friends, we danced on hot coals, we shouted and whispered, and shouted again through performances that had me leaping up and over what I had thought was my vocal limit. Brian's music was always exhilarating and freeing, as visual as it was aurally exciting, enough to spin me in a whirly whirly all the way to the Pilbara.

In the Playhouse Theatre at the first Wangaratta Festival, I recall a powerful, challenging and spirited performance. In that first year, Vincent Herring was the international guest. A jam session followed Vincent's final concert, and the memory that sticks...

I'm backstage standing next to Adrian Jackson, the big final jam session is in full swing, and I said to Adrian something like 'But they're all blokes, where are the women, why aren't the women up there ...?'

You're a woman, go on, out you go, said Adrian. Ah...I so now...I have to do it! I move closer to

But they're all blokes, where are the women, why aren't the women up there ...?

the wings where trumpet player Tom Baker, sees what's going on, kindly sets up a microphone and now...he's encouraging me, and there's no backing out. Out I stalk, into the reality of that big bright stage with no idea of what is being played, but, fresh from the whirly of the quintet, I grab the microphone with fake confidence, and out comes a series of whoops and glides and chattering atonal drifts, which probably had the fellas looking at their feet.

Margie Lou Dyer
Photo: Keen Peterson



...trying to organise musicians can be an exercise akin to herding cats.



WANGARATTA



What shines through in the story of Wangaratta is the remarkable community spirit despite adversity.



Top: Crowd 2009.
Bottom: Reid Street Stage 2011.
Photos: Chris Herft

