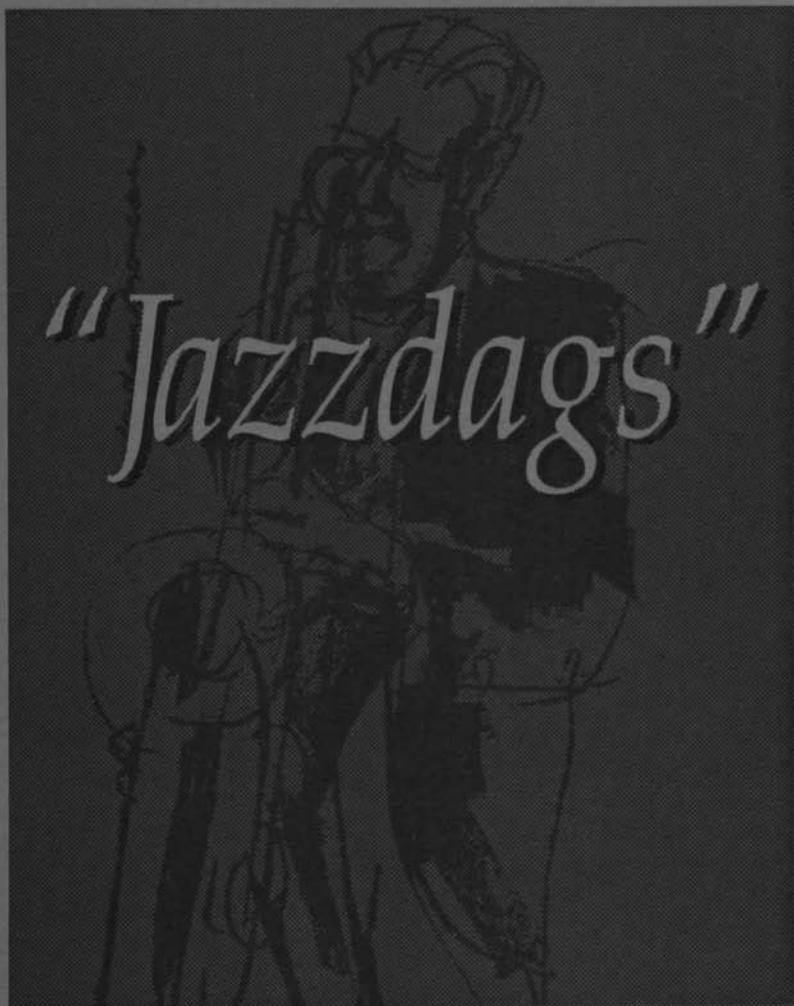


DOUBLY GIFTED

*The Annual Bell Jazz Lecture, 1999*



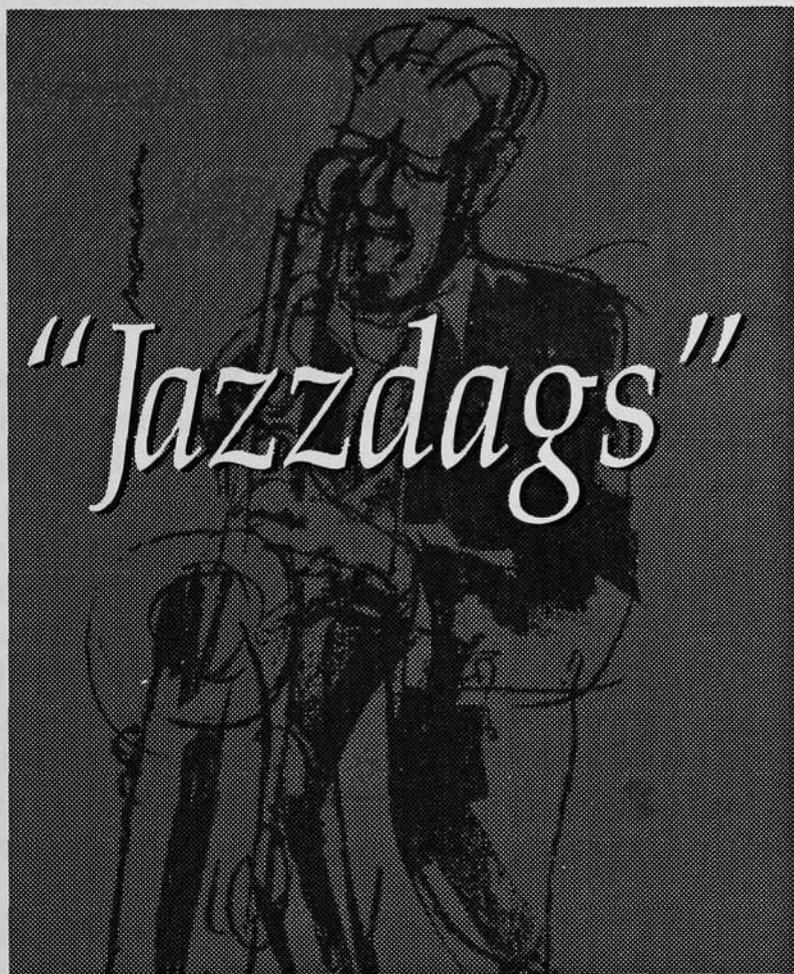
*Jack Mitchell*



Introduction

The Bell Lecture in Jazz, initiated by the late Harry Belafonte, is a series of lectures given by leading jazz musicians and composers.

## *The Annual Bell Jazz Lecture, 1999*



*Jack Mitchell*

*The Seventh Annual Bell Jazz Lecture*

*Delivered 18th September, 1999*

*Waverley Library*

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Telephone: (02) 9386 7777

Fax: (02) 9386 7700

# Introduction

The Bell Lecture in Jazz, initiated by the late Harry Stein, continues into its seventh year, paying tribute to both Harry Stein and Graeme Bell.

The Doubly Gifted Committee presents this lecture in association with the Annual Art Exhibition and extends thanks to the Staff of Waverley Library and to the Waverley Council for making the Lecture and Exhibition possible.

This year is especially exciting being the first occasion when the new Ron Lander Centre is used for the Exhibition and the Theatre for the Lecture.

The Lecture is being given by Jack Mitchell whose knowledge in the field of Australian discography is legendary throughout Australia and abroad.

He has published two very early discographies, both in the 1960s and followed these with a far more complete work in 1988, "Australian Jazz on Record 1925-1980". He then produced and published the history of the famous Port Jackson Jazz Band which he called "Back Together Again" and has recently published an updated discography of Australian Jazz, entitled "More Australian Jazz on Record: 1997", which includes vinyls, audio cassettes and compact discs.

Jack Mitchell is a pioneer in the documenting of recorded Australian and his work is invaluable. It will be my honour and pleasure to introduce him.

Kate Dunbar  
Co-Convenor  
Doubly Gifted Committee



## Jack Mitchell

Besides being Australia's foremost jazz discographer, Jack Mitchell is also a writer and historian on jazz. His early discographies were pioneering works, followed by his comprehensive "Australian Jazz on Record: 1997" was published recently.

Jack produced and published the history of the Port Jackson Jazz Band, entitled "Back Together Again", and has contributed to such works as the Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz.

Jack has a long association with Graeme Bell, compiling the discography for Graeme's Autobiography in 1998.



## Graeme Bell

The Doubly Gifted Committee and Waverley Library have named this lecture series on jazz, the Bell Jazz Lectures, in honour of Graeme Bell's outstanding contribution to jazz in Australia and abroad over the last fifty years. He is an outstanding pianist, excellent band leader and composer of note. Graeme is also a talented artist who has exhibited in the Doubly Gifted exhibitions of visual art works by jazz musicians, as well as contributing to other exhibitions.

# Jazzdags

It is a pleasure and an honour to be asked to give this, the seventh annual Bell lecture honouring the name of Graeme Bell, particularly as it was Graeme himself who put forward my name.

Graeme wrote the forward to my book AUSTRALIAN JAZZ ON RECORD 1925-80, and he quoted Noel Brown of Festival Records as saying "We need people like {Jack Mitchell}." Graeme himself had said in the introduction to NORM LINEHAN'S AUSTRALIAN JAZZ PICTURE BOOK: "Let's raise our glasses to the Norm Linehans, the Jack Mitchells, the Eric Browns and Roger Beilbys, the Andrew Bissetts, the Peter Magees and many others because, by heck, we need them". What Graeme meant was that, in addition to musicians to play, promoters to present and audiences to patronise events, they needed that core of enthusiasts to follow them closely, to join them in record sessions, to, in the early days, dig out rare records of half forgotten tunes, to write for and publish little magazines about jazz, to document the doings of the musicians in print and photographs. That core of enthusiasts revels in the name of jazzdags - and I would point out that back in the forties a band's audience and a group of dags were quite often one and the same thing.

Who the first person to use the term jazzdag was I do not know - if it turns out to have been Roger Bell, I wouldn't be at all surprised, but it may have been Ade Monsborough or George Tack - all three were noted for sometimes sardonic wit. Probably the term was not used at first as a term of respect or endearment. In rural Australia a "dag" is a ball of excrement which adheres to the wool at the blunt end of a sheep, and thus follows the animal around closely, persistently and sometimes annoyingly all the time. Which is the way in which musicians sometimes regard some of the more rabid fans.

However, like other perjoratives, such as the RATS OF TOBRUK and MOULDY FYGGES that have been adopted as proud titles, the term jazzdag was taken as a title of honour by the faithful. The musicians themselves were jazzdags, otherwise they would not have been playing that thing. The Bells took the term to Europe in 1947, and it turns up in reports of their adventures written in England and Holland by various dags over there.

In Sydney we took the term for granted, never bothering to investigate its etymology, and we regarded ourselves as blessed with a unique vision of the importance of jazz. We read THE REAL JAZZ and JAZZMEN, tried to memorise HOT DISCOGRAPHY, rifled through dusty piles of 78s in junk shops and generally thought ourselves as prophets of the coming second GOLDEN AGE OF JAZZ.

What we didn't realise was that, although the term was then unknown, there have been jazzdags ever since there was jazz. The early jazz records were promoted by the record companies as dance music. Almost up to the demise of the 78 rpm disc, each side was labelled as a quickstep, slow fox trot or whatever. The catalogues and advertisements showed pictures of couples

dancing in front of a gramophone. The truth is that most hot jazz records were bought to be listened to, not danced to.

Although America hasn't adopted the term "jazzdags" to describe their enthusiasts, they certainly have them, and they too have been of importance to the US scene. In *ESQUIRE* magazine for February, 1934 Charles Edward Smith, who later co-edited the influential book *JAZZMEN*, wrote: "The substantial following enjoyed by Louis Armstrong is due largely to jazz enthusiasts at prominent universities who began collecting his records five or six years ago." Now to those of us to whom Mr. Strong (as Eddie Condon called Louis) is Mr. Jazz himself, this seems to be a rather presumptuous statement. But when we look back without the rose coloured glasses, it is true that in the early thirties Louis Armstrong's career was in a slump. This was due to a variety of factors – the depression and the desire for escapist music, incompetent management and the attempt by gangsters to own Louis Armstrong among them.

Whether his climb to fame amongst the general public, as opposed to musicians and the buyers of "race" records, really was due to that band of collectors we can't say for sure. Although we may assume that his talent was so overwhelming that he would have risen to the top regardless, the Jim Crow conditions in America then and the vagaries of the entertainment industry mean that it was not necessarily inevitable.

In the early and mid forties here in Australia, the dags were wrapped, and rapt, in the marvellous recordings by the Hot Five and Seven. We also admired the pick of his big band recordings for Okeh and Decca. When we perused the results of the annual polls run by *Metronome* and *Down Beat*, we couldn't understand why Louis Armstrong and his band hardly featured in the results. After Louis ceased to work with the orchestra of Luis Russell in the middle of 1943, he didn't have a studio recording session until January, 1946.

Recently I picked up a CD by the Armstrong Band recorded in May, 1944 for a radio programme called *ONE NIGHT STAND*. I've only played it once, the band was so very poor. I'm no longer surprised that the readers of *Metronome* and *Down Beat* didn't cast any votes for it.

Also it's no surprise that that sixteen piece outfit could command only \$350.00 for a midweek booking, \$600.00 for a Saturday night. A dag named Ernie Anderson took Louis' manager Joe Glaser to task for not providing Louis with a decent band. "What's wrong" said Glaser, "I got him a big band didn't I? Just like Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey". Like hell he did. So Anderson paid Glaser \$1000.00 for Louis on his own for one concert. Backed by musicians such as Bobby Hackett and Jack Teagarden the concert at New York's Town Hall, midnight on May 17, 1947, was an enormous success, impressing even Glaser. The following Monday Joe Glaser gave the members of the big band two weeks notice, signed Jack Teagarden to a seven year contract and the Louis Armstrong All Stars were born.

In this case there is no doubt that an American jazzdag was responsible for an enormous fillip to Satchmo's career. The result was that Louis became a world wide celebrity and ambassador for jazz. During this period, he gave the world another treasury of recorded music, some of it of equal worth to those masterpieces recorded in his youthful days in Chicago.

Bill Russell was another American dag who had a considerable influence on jazz. He's the one who dug Bunk Johnson out of obscurity. Not everyone agrees that that was a good thing, but it was certainly influential. It gave the jazz world something to argue about for years, and led to many young musicians, particularly in England and Australia, rewriting their definition of New Orleans style jazz. Today there are still bands around the world playing a style of jazz that was practically unknown until Bill Russell wrote the letter to the post master at the small town of New Iberia, and Bunk Johnson was found.

Australia's jazzdags haven't been as influential as the Americans just mentioned but they have supported the cause admirably - it might be that without their support the local jazz scene would not have blossomed as it has. In Art Hodes' JAZZ RECORD magazine for October, 1945, American Ralph Sturges wrote: "The field of jazz owes a great deal to the collectors who supported hot music when no one else, outside of the musicians who played it, cared much whether it lived or passed into oblivion".

The first Australian jazzdag we can identify by name was one Eric Barby. He had a collection of records by the Cotton Pickers and the Original Memphis Five (actually much the same band under different names for different record labels). It was this collection that turned Frank Coughlan into an admirer of Miff Mole and a jazzdag himself when he arrived in Sydney early in 1923. Barbara James has recounted how Frank would turn up at her family home with a bundle of records in one hand and his trombone in the other. Although playing in and leading many commercial dance bands, Frank remained a jazzdag all his life, as anyone who met him will testify. Jim Davidson has described his attitude to jazz in the early twenties- there was another jazzdag. Both of those dags became significant band leaders in the swing era.

Another identified dag was a Mr. A. G. Barlow, of whom you have probably never heard. Mr. Barlow left his old home town of Ballarat to run a motor car dealership in Melbourne. Early in 1926, he donated 25 guineas (the equivalent of about \$3000.00 today, to be used towards a jazz band competition, Thus the South Street Society held Australia's first jazz band competition at Ballarat in October, 1926. Today we still find dags financing events, magazines and recordings for the love of jazz - not for commercial reward. Which is just as well in most cases - it means they won't be disappointed.

The lack of information on Australian jazzdags of the twenties is due to the paucity of contemporary documentation. No doubt like minded souls communed together and we know that many Australians read the English magazines MELODY MAKER and RHYTHM. The few music magazines that

existed in Australia almost totally ignored the liveliest of the arts. Jazz was not a subject to be written about seriously in the twenties in the mainstream press.

Even today the press prefers a sensational story, preferably involving drugs or other anti social activities, to straightforward accounts of musical prowess. The sorry saga of the visit by Sonny Clay's Negro band in 1928 received more coverage in the newspapers than all the other episodes in Australian jazz up to that point put together.

Fortunately the thirties saw a big step forward – Eric Sheldon, an American drummer working in Sydney, edited and published THE AUSTRALIAN DANCE BAND NEWS, the first number appearing on June 1<sup>st</sup>. 1932. By April, 1933 it had changed its name to THE AUSTRALIAN MUSIC MAKER AND DANCE BAND NEWS. For convenience the entire run of the magazine is generally referred to as “Music Maker”.

Sheldon was NOT a jazzdag. His stated aims were to help improve both the competence of dance band musicians and their social standing in the general community. Laudable intentions indeed, but not what jazzdags wanted to read about. In fact our music was seldom referred to by its correct name in the first few years of the magazine – the euphemisms of novelty or rhythm music substituted for the four letter word which Sheldon obviously disliked. Six years to the day, Sheldon produced another magazine THE POPULAR MUSICIAN – it contained an article by Sheldon entitled JAZZ IS DEAD – LONG LIVE MUSIC. How long this magazine lasted I don't know – I have only ever seen the first issue – obviously it was not popular. It Don't Mean A Thing.....

Despite the attitude of the editor more and more jazz slanted reports and articles began to appear in Music Maker. Most Sydney dance band and theatre musicians were interested in jazz. On May 10, 1932 the Parlophone Co. presented an evening at Paling's Concert Hall featuring their latest “rhythm” records – to a crowded house. Isadore Goodman's wife and biographer said that all the members of his Orchestra at the Prince Edward Theatre were jazz crazy, and when their gig there was finished they would flock to jam sessions at the various night clubs around town.

Music Maker responded to this interest with articles reprinted from overseas magazines such as Downbeat. It even reprinted a series entitled FROM DIXIELAND TO DUKE, from the short lived English SWING MUSIC magazine. For some unknown reason the magazine's policy was to hide the record reviewers' identities under nom-de-plumes. In May, 1935, the reviewer known as Ceris quoted from a letter from a Mr. R. L. Wills, who was interested in forming a rhythm club. That was the first mention in Music Maker of one of our most prominent jazzdags – Ron Wills.

By the August issue, Music Maker had a new reviewer known as “Disque” to the readers, but actually Ron Wills. Ron brought a fresh voice to the magazine, judging the discs on their merits, not on the length of time since they had been recorded. He also contributed articles on jazz, starting, as might be expected if you have followed Ron's writings over the years, with his

hero, Duke Ellington. The following year the record reviews were divided into two sections – Swing and Commercial. The reviewer for the commercial discs was known as “Wax” – we still know him as Ron Wills.

When preparing my history of the Port Jackson Jazz Band (still available, folks) I interviewed Bob Cruickshanks who said “when writing of the history of jazz in Australia, don’t overlook George Bills-Thompson”. Not a household name today, George ran a radio programme three nights weekly on station 2UW called RHYTHM COCKTAIL. Other musicians have also mentioned how they were introduced to jazz by Bills-Thompson.

In January, 1936 George and Ron Wills formed the 2UW SWING MUSIC CLUB with fortnightly meetings. Another club was formed under the auspices of station 2SM.

About April that year George Bills-Thompson moved to Melbourne and soon had the 3AW SWING CLUB under way. At its first meeting on August 16, 1936, 141 of the 300 plus people present became paid up members. Music Maker reported the names of the provisional committee – amongst these was a Mr. G. Bell – Graeme’s first, but by no means last, mention in a music magazine.

Also formed in that year was the Melbourne University Rhythm Club, with Adrian Monsborough as President. 2UW withdrew its support of the Sydney Club, which became the Sydney Swing Music Club. These two organisations became the longest running of all the clubs formed, existing until well after the war. A lot of other clubs were formed in Australia, often with the support of radio stations, which no doubt saw a captive audience for some of their broadcasts.

I must mention the Newcastle Club, formed by Happy Sutherland. This club soon had a membership well over the hundred mark, but Happy considered most of the members to be less than fervent about the real jazz. The club was dissolved, and a new club formed, with a membership limit of thirty. Real dags they were.

Most of these clubs restricted their activities to record recitals, which helped to spread the message. Frank Coughlan was quoted as saying that “anybody not listening to jazz records should not be classed as a jazz musician”. Graeme Bell has often said that he and his band learned their craft from listening to records, as though that were a minus. In fact, by so doing they were learning from the best Americans, those at the top who earned recording contracts. Many Americans who couldn’t hear the music first hand did like wise. Not that it hurt to hear good jazz musicians in the flesh, but that was a bonus not available to everyone.

Anyway the Sydney Club soon began running monthly live sessions at the Ginger Jar night club, featuring the pick of the local musicians. On one night, which must have been memorable, they had two eight piece bands made up mainly of members of the Trocadero Orchestra. The Newcastle club also

brought up Sydney musicians for some of their meetings. We now have on CDs examples of the music played by some of these groups from the Trocadero, which prove that they knew plenty about jazz.

Presumably clubs in Melbourne and Brisbane did similar things, but they have not been chronicled for us in the contemporary press. In 1939 and 1940, the Melbourne University Rhythm Club sponsored three recording sessions by pick up groups called the Original Tin Alley Five, Six and Seven. It was only when I attended the 50<sup>th</sup> Australian Jazz Convention, held at Melbourne University, that I discovered that TIN ALLEY is the name of the street which more or less bisects the University grounds. I still don't know how it got that name but I do know why that club so named the recording groups.

Actually the Melbourne clubs were bypassed for live performances by a tenor saxophone player named Bob Tough, who presented his band on Sundays at the Fawkner Park Kiosk. Dixieland a la dags it probably wasn't, but Graeme Bell has written how he and Roger sat open mouthed in front of the band.

I have covered this pre war period in some detail, perhaps more than you think necessary, because there are still many people who are unaware that jazz did exist in Australia before they became interested in it. Terry Pierson's statement in Music Maker for February, 1939 that "nobody in Australia has ever earned a living from pure jazz" was to remain a truism until 1947, when Graeme and his merry men threw in their day jobs and sailed for Czechoslovakia and their place in jazz history.

What is often overlooked that a similar, but of lesser degree, situation existed in the home of jazz, America. Most of the jazz classics we all love were recorded by pick up bands, not regular working groups. Art Hodes has told us that he didn't make a living playing only jazz until he moved from Chicago to New York in the late thirties. It comes as a shock to discover that Benny Goodman, at his peak as KING OF SWING, earned less money than Sammy Kaye or Guy Lombardo. So the fact that Australian bands in two cities of about one million people, and no hinterland justifying tours of one night stands, had to play more commercial than hot music is not indicative of a lack of jazz feeling.

The late Norman Linehan once said to me that "what happened in Australia before the war had no bearing on what occurred after the war". Well, as you have probably gathered, I disagree with that. The clubs, the record releases, the jam sessions, the hot little bands that the record combine ignored all laid the foundation for the explosion of interest in jazz after the war.

Of course, jazz appreciation didn't disappear with the war, quite the contrary. In January, 1941, Bill Miller produced the first issue of JAZZ NOTES, as the official organ of the 3UZ Jazz Lovers Society. It began as a tri weekly publication, typed and duplicated via wax stencils, but became a monthly from the fourth issue. In time it became a jazz magazine of world standing. It was the first of many magazines that have been published by dags, some of them

of high quality, and most of them valuable source material for present and future historians.

The commercial magazines, MUSIC MAKER and TEMPO, although dealing with the profession as a whole, found it worthwhile to cater to the dags with many articles. The Letters To The Editor sections were almost monopolised by the dags, arguing as to which musician was better than another, or compiling choices of all star bands and so on.

The full employment brought about by the war meant a greater demand for entertainment, particularly after Pearl Harbour and the influx of thousands of American troops. Many of the top Australian musicians were in the services, and the way was open for younger musicians to enter the profession in leading bands or in the clubs which proliferated to cater for officers and other ranks. Most of these younger musicians were jazz orientated and the wartime attitudes made it possible for them to play far more jazz than their pre war colleagues.

Most of the servicemen made do with dance halls rather than clubs, and so great was the demand that halls in Melbourne and Sydney adopted policies of continuous dancing with two bands. It was this policy that landed the Bell band its biggest breaks – weekly appearances at the Heidelberg Town Hall and the Palais Royal. They never looked back after that.

Other bands in Sydney, Adelaide and Hobart came into being playing what they termed “righteous jazz” and dags in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide began issuing recordings by these groups. Even Columbia ventured into the field, and jazz fans throughout Australia became acquainted with the sound of our own jazz musicians.

The jazz concert era, from 1948 to 1952, brought even more bands into existence, so that we had a community of jazz musicians covering, and very well too, just about all the styles of jazz devised.

I don't think I need carry the story any further – probably everyone present is aware of our jazz history since then. Our jazz dags have played a prominent part in presenting concerts, publishing magazines, books and records, organising clubs and festivals. It would be remiss of me not to point out the role of lady dags in recent years in the running of jazz clubs around the country. Although jazz is taken for granted now as a part of the entertainment industry, it has still to stand on its own feet, with precious little support from the establishment.

The ABC, Arts Councils and Music Boards constantly need to be reminded that jazz needs their support. There remains a role for jazzdags to play in that field, as well as the other activities mentioned. The establishment of jazz archives and museums is another area where their enthusiasm and expertise can be utilised.

My belief is that jazzdags have been, and will continue to be, important members of the jazz community, and I'm proud to be known as a jazzdag. Thank you for listening.

Don't forget.....

**The 8th Annual Bell Jazz Lecture “Along dark  
allies: The literature of jazz & crime” will be  
presented by Peter J. F. Newton,  
editor, writer, book seller.  
September 2000**

General enquiries or further information  
may be obtained from:  
The Secretary, Doubly Gifted Committee,  
Jeannie Mc Innes, 5 Lodge Avenue,  
Old Toongabbie, 2146

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