

# DOUBLY GIFTED

*The Annual Bell Jazz Lecture, 2010*

## *The Myths of Jazz...*

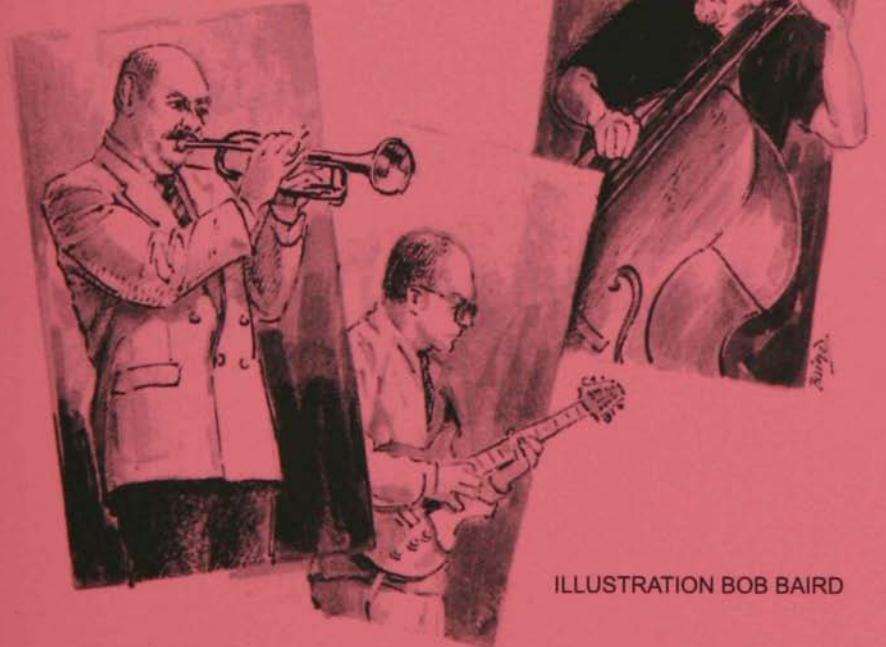
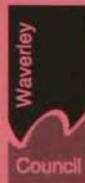


ILLUSTRATION BOB BAIRD

*James Valentine*  
*The Eighteenth Annual Bell Jazz Lecture*  
*Delivered 18 September 2010*  
*Waverley Library*





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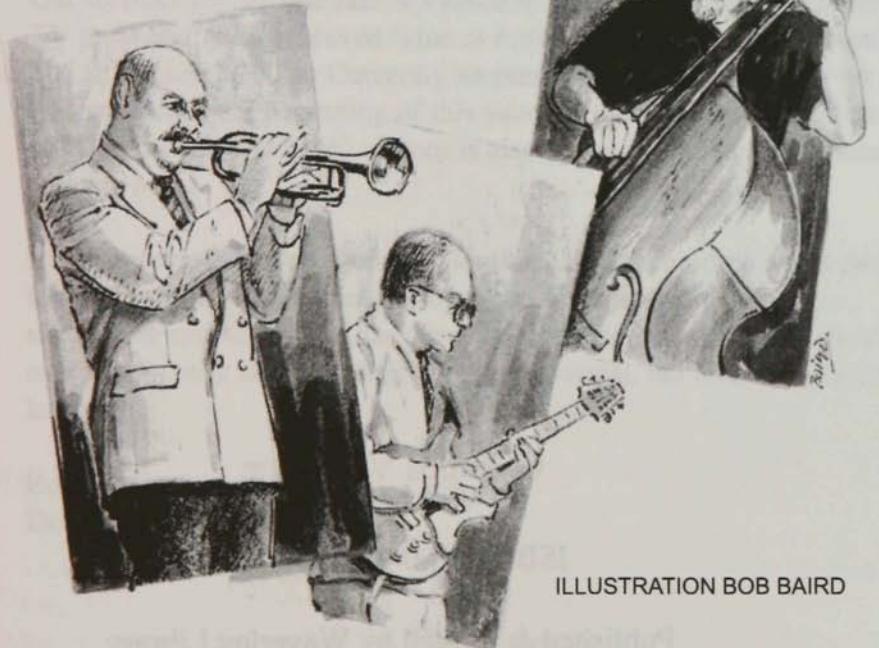


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## **Introduction**

Once again Doubly Gifted presents the Bell Jazz Lecture for the 18th consecutive year. The Bell Lecture was initiated by the late Harry Stein to honour the contribution to Australian jazz by our best loved and most appreciated jazzman, Graeme Bell, who celebrates his 96th birthday this year.

Thanks are due to Waverley Library and to the Friends of Waverley Library, without whose support the Committee would not be able to present yet another prominent member of Australia's jazz community who will bring us a further individual view of jazz.

And this year that individual viewpoint will certainly prove controversial. Our lecturer for 2010 is James Valentine – journalist, musician, radio and TV presenter, who achieved fame as host of the Afternoon Show on ABC TV, in the late 1980's. Currently he presents an afternoon show on ABC 702 and, since the beginning of this year, narrates the Australian version of "Come Dine With Me". James is also the author of several books for teenage boys.

But, importantly for us, James Valentine has also returned to his early love of jazz and has formed his own quartet, with which he plays saxophone and sings. He has a wry humour, which will surely provide us with not only an interesting and controversial, but a most enjoyable lecture.

Ron Lander  
Doubly Gifted Committee



## James Valentine

**James Valentine** presents *Afternoons on 702 ABC Sydney*. It's a whimsical news talk shift dealing with the social issues of the day.

He is also the presenter of *Showtime Movie News*. He is the author of six books, the *Jumpman Series* for young readers, *The Form Guide* and *Spotfull* for adult readers and *The True History of Stuff* for children. James plays saxophone and sings with his own quartet and can be heard around Sydney wherever he can scuffle up a gig.

James has worked on television most recently *It Takes Two* and *Sunrise* for Channel 7. He is remembered fondly by anyone aged six in 1986 as the host of ABC TV's *The Afternoon Show*.

James began his career as a musician studying jazz in Melbourne before going over to the dark side and joining rock bands. In the early 1980s he played with Jo Camilleri, Kate Ceberano, The Models, Absent Friends and Wendy Matthews.

James is married to Joanne, a clinical psychologist, has two children Ruby and Roy, and lives in Sydney.



## 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.

## The Myths of Jazz...

I was sitting in my car listening to Eastside Radio. Track is already playing. I start playing Leonard Feather's *Blindfold Test*.

In my mind, Leonard and I are sharing a cognac in his Manhattan apartment while he plays interesting rarities and live tracks and I have to guess them. Afterwards we'll go down to the Five Spot to hear Monk and Coltrane. Fantasy done I become intrigued with the track. I know this tune, but more strangely, I know this solo. It's a trumpet solo. It's Miles Davis's trumpet solo from *Four*.

I heard jazz for the first time over the radio. I can even claim truthfully that I heard it on a large brown bakelite wireless; its native broadcast medium.

I'd been playing flute for a little while and started to realise that it was a girl's instrument and that I wasn't that eager to become the next James Galway. Even though he wasn't a girl. My teacher had lent me Don Burrows *Live at Montreux*, so I'd heard jazz flute, but it was the clarinet and saxophone I was really taken by.

I found the jazz programs on the radio. Monday night on ABC Radio with Ralph Rickman – kind of west coastish, Concord Jazz, lots of Herb Ellis and Oscar Petersen; Saturday mornings with Eric Child; King Oliver, Bix Beiderbecke and Louis.

But the one I really loved was Music to Midnight. I missed Arch McKirdy by a few years. I got Ian Neal. Ian played what sounded like the real thing to me.

One night I heard *It Never Entered My Mind*. The back announce was Miles Davis Quintet, 1956, Red Garland, Paul Chambers, Philly Joe Jones, John Coltrane. From a Prestige reissue called *Working and Steaming*.

I had to get it.

I'm in a country town in Victoria. Took a week or two, but it turned up. Red double album with Miles on the cover, in giant clear glasses, biting his lip. On this album was a track called *Four*.

As I got better on the saxophone, I learnt to play it. And I transcribed the solo. I liked Miles better than Coltrane. Coltrane was in his messy, pre Monk at Five Spot stage. Miles was sweet, exact and cool.

So thirty five years later, I'm in the car driving up Oxford St. I start thinking this is a really interesting tribute performance. Someone's taken the solo and they're playing it kind of the same but a bit different. They're very Miles. Turns out, it is Miles. It's Miles live. Maybe at the Half Note, the Plugged Nickel, Birdland. I loved those club names so much. But wherever it was, Miles was playing the same solo that he recorded at Rudy Van Gelder's in New Jersey, a month or two later.

Hang on.

Jazz is an improvised music isn't it?

Jazz players make it up on the spot.

Jazz players strive to never repeat themselves. Jazz players are judged on their freshness.

They don't play the same solo twice.

Well, they do.

Often.

Sometimes for years.

Sometimes it's the same solo, it's only the tunes that change. When favourite albums are re-released, there's often alternative takes. There's a reason those takes weren't picked on the first album. Sometimes it's just space, or taste. But often when you listen to them, they're a poorer version of what was actually released.

*Giant Steps*, by John Coltrane is a great example. On the alternative takes he plays a lesser version of the legendary solos.

There's a *Cousin Mary* that has this as well. At the same point in the solo, he'll go for the same kind of thing. You can hear him introducing the same idea at the same point. He just doesn't bring it off.

Let's not forget that *Giant Steps* itself – regarded as key transitional moment in jazz history – is there anything left to do on fast moving chord changes after *Giant Steps* – regarded as an essential piece for any serious bop and post Coltrane bop player to have under their fingers – *Giant Steps* itself is based on a series of changes from a practice book that Coltrane was working on at the time.

**Myth Number One.** That Jazz is an improvised music.

Malcolm Gladwell, great journalist and researcher for the New Yorker has looked at talent and expertise and has come up with a kind of formula. Take a top ranking tennis player, a maths genius, a concert pianist... all of them have put in around 10 000 hours into their speciality. When a top ranking tennis player seems to instinctively know where the ball is, that's because there's thousands of hours of repetitive practice where every single moment of the game and potential shot has been rehearsed over and over and over again.

The same is true of the jazz musician.

Jazz – and for this moment I'm talking the quite traditional approach where players play a melody and then improvise upon the form – jazz happens when players spend 10 000 hours working on all the potential possibilities.

And in fact, it's not even all the potential possibilities. It's only the possibilities that sound like jazz.

If one is playing *Four* with the Miles Davis Quintet or with a similar line up, there's no point playing like Ornette Coleman. Or Eddie Van Halen. Or BB King. Or any one of a hundred other improvising musicians who don't play the changes in a manner that would suit that particular genre.

In order to do so, the would be jazz musician learns in intimate detail the language, the grammar, the phrases, the sentences and paragraphs of the language of his preferred approach and attempts in the heat of the moment, to bring them out.

The stories of how this works are well known.

Louis Armstrong learnt everything he could from King Oliver. Every other trumpet player of the day learnt all of Louis's stuff. Charlie Parker learnt all of Lester Young's licks. In turn we all learnt all of Charlie's.

I took a long break from playing. Ten, or twelve years. Previously to that, I'd played in rock bands with some success. Previous to that I'd studied jazz and played jazz in Melbourne for a few years. I'd had a quintet with Smacka Fitzgibbon's kids, Mark and Nichaud. We were quite good. I had a kind of fusion band for a while.

We were horrible.

When I became attracted again to the horn in recent years, I thought, all I want to do is go back to where I was in my jazz studies and pick it up again. I had a simple aim. I want to learn to play like Dexter Gordon. Dexter's my man. I love that big swinging sound and I love his accuracy. When Dexter laid down four quarter notes on a chord, he meant it. It's entirely deliberate. He's a great player to study.

I found what every jazz player finds. Dexter repeats a lot of stuff. He's got his favourite little licks that he does all the time.

I started doing some Bird as well. I love the joy that Bird has in his playing. There's so much humour. Bird the same. After a while, you hear them really clearly. There's that thing he does on a two five in bar four of the blues. There's that thing he does in the turn around leading into a rhythm bridge and so on.

I think jazz has often sold itself short.

I think for too long, jazz players have kept a mystique around their playing, like magicians guarding their tricks. They like to shrug and say little about what they do. They like this idea that they're making it up. It's all improvised.

It's not true. The tune is agreed upon, the harmonies agreed upon. Even the acceptable variations on the harmonies are usually well known and often explored in the same order each time. When players begin to improvise, they reach into their bag of tricks and pull out things they've been working very hard on.

To make it look effortless, requires an enormous amount of effort.

Can I clarify at this point that I'm not being dismissive of the music that results. I love the sound so much I waste far much of my time listening to it and trying to play it. I'm in no way trying to reduce the artistry of the performer. I don't care how long someone has spent perfecting an idea before I hear it. It's the idea I'm interested in.

I'm interested in truth in art. I want to know how it's really done, in writing, in painting, in film making, in music.

If careful preparation, hard slog discipline, dedicated study underlies the bebop approach, is it true of the free jazz, of the funksters, of the modern Australians, the Sandy Evans, the Matt McMahons, Dale Barlows and a dozen other fabulous musicians that excite us all.

Yes. When Ornette Coleman blew he was working through a new system and new kind of language, because of exactly what I'm talking about. If he didn't deliberately, consciously construct a new way of thinking, he'd sound like just another Bird.

Same for anyone today. It doesn't make them any less inventive, wonderful or passionate to suggest that there's been a lot of wood-shedding going on. Rather it highlights the true nature of their art.

**Myth Number Two.** That jazz is special because it's improvised.

If you look around the world of music, and I mean the entire globe of music, then improvisation is the norm. All the swing forms do it - country music, rock music, blue grass music, blues, French hot swing, Texas Western swing. Go to Spain , the flamenco guitarist is doing it; go to India, the sitar and the tabla are doing it; head to the middle east every oud player worth his humus is doing it; every mad Balkan accordion player is doing it; every gypsy fiddler; every klezmer clarinettist; every single string Chinese violin guy is doing it. Africa, South America are full of music where part of the art is to blow a solo; to improvise the harmony and rhythm around some predetermined rules and ideas.

Jazz improvisers are no more skilled at it than any of a hundred different stylists around the world.

**Myth Number Three.** Those classical cats don't improvise and can't swing.

The classical cats improvise everything except the notes.

If I'm in the position to sit down and perform Bach Fugues, Bach Cello suites, Beethoven piano sonatas, Chopin, I have an enormous amount of music in my mind and in my muscles.

Vast quantities of it, probably far more than the average jazz player with his standards and his licks.

On any one day, I will play any one of these pieces in my repertoire in all sorts of different ways. I will attack aggressively, I will play it fast, I will play it slow, I will pull the tempo around. I will attempt to make it sing, I will try to bring hitherto unheard aspects of the piece and so on. It may be an idea that might occur to me as I hit the keyboard or the strings. The mood of the day might enter me and I might try to express that. The time of the year, the zeitgeist, a current fashion in playing, a reaction against that fashion - all of these things will influence how I might play.

Go and pull out three versions of Beethoven's Fifth. On each version, the opening notes, most famous opening bit in the world, will be played completely differently.

I will attempt to represent the composer, but so the does the jazz guy. When we play a piece by Ellington, we try to present the spirit of Ellington. Ben Webster, Dexter Gordon and many others use to say they don't really have the changes in their head; they have the lyrics. They want to stay true to the song and the intention of the composer.

But as well as that, the classical guys will attempt to represent themselves through their interpretation and attempt to represent the times in which they find themselves.

And that is as complex an interaction with the score and with the music as a jazz musician has, with a set of changes, or whatever form within which he or she is improvising.

See I'm not saying that musicians don't improvise. There is spontaneity, there is immediacy, there is that which can only happen at this moment and not at some other, but like the old show-biz joke – it's taken me years to be an overnight sensation – or my best ad libs are the ones I've been working on all day.

The truth about improvisation is that it requires meticulous preparation, discipline and forethought in order to be in a position to bring it off on the night.

Let's take the comedians as an analogy – and jazz and stand up are blood brothers. The comedians have a bunch of material, a set of comic riffs. How it comes out will be determined somewhat on the night. But comedians are often insulted if you suggest that they are making it up on the spot. They feel like that's not paying respect to their work, their craft, their discipline. Their skill is bringing out right on time, right when it's wanted and being able to weave what's happening right now into their carefully honed, and polished material. If you've ever stood up and tried to be funny, you'll know that delivering a comic line is about having it exactly right, down to the last syllable, the precise accent, the precise rhythm. Sound like

a great jazz riff? It's exactly the same. And comedian and jazzer alike, both strive to make it sound like they just thought of it just then.

**Myth Number Four.** That jazz needs no presentation, the music speaks for itself.

Miles Davis stopped speaking. He stopped announcing tunes, he stopped saying thank you. He turned his back on the audience. He left the stage.

Miles was a huge figure to all musicians, jazz and otherwise, that came in his wake.

Miles stopped speaking , I think only partly because of a throat injury which left him with his famous rasp. Soon after throat surgery, Miles shouted at a cop, who was arresting him.

But I think Mile stage persona was just that. Miles was no Dizzy. He was never going to charm the crowd. He wasn't cooky like Monk. He was going to bewilder and bemuse anyone. He created a persona of unreachable artist. Of man beyond the audience. Of a man reaching into deeper levels to bring the music forth. By doing so, he put the music on centre stage and removed his personality, but that in itself is a dramatic, theatrical gesture.

Miles could carry this off. And let us not forget that he continued to perform – he put himself on stage and when he did, he put on a show. He dressed at the height of fashion, he presented a carefully crafted set. When he went electric, in the late sixties, he went and played rock venues. He wanted to be on stage.

I met Miles for an excruciating eight minutes on his tour here. Triple Jay was presenting his concert here and no one wanted to talk to him. I did. It was awful and I was so intimidated by his presence.

Which is my point. Miles had an incredible presence. He could command a stage and not announce tunes, and not acknowledge the crowd.

But that was a schtick as much as Dizzy's really.

Over the years, jazz musicians have adopted this posture but without I think the full realisation of what Miles was doing. There is a sense in which, yes the music should speak for itself. But musicians are asking a lot of an audience unfamiliar with their music, that they get it.

I find it kind of hilarious, when I go to a concert at the Opera House of a major touring performer, and some Sydney players have the support. Invariably, out they shuffle in jeans and untucked shirts. They pick up their instruments and start to play. It can be challenging, exciting, wonderful and everything you want.

They play another tune. Then the band leader says, thanks. The first tune was this, the second tune was that, so and so on the drums, such and such on bass and on we go.

There are 3000 people there. They have to play at SIMA or the 505 for thirty gigs to play to the 3000 people. And they're 3000 people who are not necessarily going to the 505. Tell us who you are. Tell us about the music. Tell us what you're up to.

These are pieces I've been working on this year. I'm fascinated by trying to expand the rhythmic basis of what we do; I was very moved by a book I read and these tunes just seemed to flow after that; I'd just had a baby and I was writing these while I was half asleep and overwhelmed.

I listen differently when you tell me that. The performer has invited me in. We now have a relationship.

And have some respect for an audience and tuck your shirt in! This is not trivial. There is no other performer who stands up in front of people, expects them to come and look at them, and turns up as badly presented as a jazz musician.

I'm not saying everyone's got to be James Morrison. And of course there are personalities who will find this hard.

But the first Australian jazz musician, I followed was Don Burrows. And Don may not have been a cutting edge musician, but he was a superb player and he could take a mainstream audience into the music of Brazil, the music of Australian composers like John Sangster, he told people what he was doing. It wasn't showbiz. It was communication.

I think if far more players who were presenting music that is avant garde, that is challenging, that is as new, fresh and wonderful as it can be; if they spent half an hour thinking about the presentation of the music when they get a chance to do so, they might be surprised at the response.

**Myth Number Five.** That jazz can't get anything in modern media

I work in modern media. There are few organizations, art forms, or activities that present themselves so poorly as jazz. One of jazz publicists sends me emails about forthcoming events and inquires whether 702 Fm might be interested in being involved.

It's not a big deal, but getting the name of the media organization right is one of those things that tells the media organization, that I'm dealing with a fellow professional. I occupy a very small corner of modern media. But even I receive an overwhelming number of requests for space. Plays, books, movies, musicals, gigs from folk, rock, blues, Indian musicians. Cultural events, sports, fund raising, lectures, launches – it's in the range of a hundred approaches a day. Every single one of them is worthy of bringing to the attention of my audience. Every single one of them is anxious to get some space and exposure for their thing. Every single one of them deserves. Every single one has worked hard, deserves the support of the community - will work if everyone gets behind it.

No modern media outlet is obliged to do anything but serve its audience. 702 ABC Sydney - which is its actual name – and it's an AM radio station – does not have to promote anyone's event. What it has to do is provide good listening to its audience. It's not enough to approach media organizations and tell them that they should do something about your event. It must be framed in terms for the audience that uses this form.

In my experience of attempting to put jazz into a mainstream context, to bring jazz musicians to a mainstream non-jazz audience, it's the jazz musicians and the publicists and promoters who stuff it up. They're unreliable, they don't turn up – when they do, they make no concession to the people they're talking to. They tell you late about stuff. There's no sense of making helping to meet the needs of the medium. Bring this audience in, they don't know what you're talking about. People today are bombarded with information.

#### **Myth Number Six.** That Jazz isn't dead ...

'ONCE COMMON ART FORM' is dead is a common theme for weekend magazines and art supplements. The approach is to outline how a once vibrant activity has become about as popular as croquet, and detail ways in which the form has become moribund. The defence is supplied by those still practising who point to a journal here, a publication there, a festival somewhere else as evidence that there's life in the corpse.

I think sometimes it's more respectful to bury the dead than to keep them on life support.

Jazz is dead. From 1920 to around 1970, jazz was the score of the world. When my kids watch Scoobie Doo and a dozen other cartoons from two generations ago, the soundtrack swings. It's a mass of saxophones and trumpets. The theme of Fred Flintstone was a rhythm changes be-bop head. Every movie – that didn't have a Russian influenced orchestral soundtrack, swung on two and four. Every jingle, every game-show theme, every tonight show intro. went ba-dup bababooo bup!

When Sinatra sang he sang the standards. When Miles took the stand he played the standards that Frank had been singing. The newspapers had jazz columnists. Normal people, not just jazz fans owned records by Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong and George Shearing. They knew who Oscar Petersen was. They could do joke scatting.

A club here, a scholarship there, inclusion in the academy and conservatorium does not mean it's a living art form intrinsic to everyone's life. There is great music being made and enjoyed, but jazz is not the rhythm of our lives.

Don't worry. Jazz has plenty of company in the old people's home of the arts. Plays and poetry are in there too. Once a new Arthur Miller play was the thing. And he could marry Marilyn Monroe. Once T.S. Eliot's latest work was in every literate back pocket. No more. Musical theatre the same. The fact that Broadway is popular is a statement about the vibrancy of New York's tourism industry not about the vigour of musical theatre. The fact that we can mount *Wicked* here, is due to the same economics. Time was when there'd be four musicals playing in Sydney and they'd all be crucial documents of the day.

Madrigals, Lieder, the five-act play, the string quartet, the symphony, Royal Tennis – things have their day.

Jazz in the terms of a swinging ride cymbal, a walking bass, a stab of piano, spark showers of horns is dead.

Music is alive and well.

Don't forget .....

The 19th Annual Bell Jazz Lecture  
will be presented in  
September 2011

General enquiries or further information may be  
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