Australian Clarinet and Saxophone

Volume 10, Number 2 June 2007

Print Post Approved PP 424022/00165



Interview with Mark Taylor

I met Mark Taylor when Hugh Jackman's Boy From OZ tour travelled to Brisbane in 2006 and I had the good fortune of being in the reed section with him. As with all the musicians invited to perform the season, I was also initially struck by his amazing sound on all his instruments – alto saxophone, flute and piccolo, then further awed by the fact *he did not make a mistake....* anywhere! – not notes, tone, pitch or even style.

Upon chatting I realised he had lived quite a varied life of music and travel, performing and recording with some star international entertainers and shows. I seized the opportunity in asking if he would mind doing the interview for the magazine and possessing the incredibly unassuming and easy going nature that he does, he graciously gave his time, memories and advice. His CD 'Shakedown' can be purchased securely from his informative personal website www.taylormademusic.com.au

- Diana Tolmie

What was your earliest musical experience or impression of music?

My earliest musical experiences would have been at home as a child in Bathurst with my mother playing the piano and the family standing around doing a sing-along kind of thingsongs from Disney shows and other Broadway type musicals. I enjoyed these situations a lot. My mother has always been very passionate about singing and playing many of the great popular songs from the Great American Songbook. Hearing many of those great compositions by the Cole Porters, Gershwins, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hart et al at a young age has most certainly remained with me. My father is also an avid listener of classical music and had a sizable LP collection that he played regularly. Through these experiences I feel that from an early age I was exposed to fine music by wonderful composers. There was always a great appreciation of music in our household which has no doubt had a very big impact on me.

What was your music education in Bathurst like when you were growing up? Did you have any particular role models or visiting artists that inspired you to develop your skills further?

Music education and in particular performing opportunities as I was growing up in Bathurst were

extremely strong and positive. Initially at around the age of 9 or 10 I took piano lessons from a local teacher but I wasn't really motivated to learn the piano. I was far more interested in playing soccer and cricket. However, my mum was always very influential and insisted that my older brother and I learn to play something. My brother stayed with piano and became very proficient, later adding drums and trumpet.(He's a professional drummer now). I settled with the clarinet, starting lessons at the Central West branch of the NSW Conservatorium

of Music in Bathurst. The branch was set up around 1980 and I started lessons there in 1981 at age 11 with a very good teacher named Geoff Simm who had recently retired from the RAAF band in Sydney to teach woodwind and to also conduct the Bathurst and RSL Concert Bands. I later joined the concert band and performed regularly in eisteddfods, concerts and numerous other events. My local high school also had some excellent music teachers and a very good music program with stage and concert bands. By the time I picked up saxophone in 1982 in high school



I found I was regularly playing in school and community ensembles. My mum was always keen to see that we had decent instruments and as we progressed she wouldn't hesitate in helping us purchase better gear. Bathurst has an excellent amateur musical society and from about the age of 14 I was playing in the orchestras for their annual productions. There was also a very good town big band that Geoff Simm led that I later joined and really loved performing with. I should say also that my brother John had considerable influence on me and he had a great love of music with a growing record collection also. He introduced me to albums of Grover Washington Jr, Duke Ellington, Al Jarreau, Glenn Miller, Buddy Rich, Bob Barnard.....very diverse but very inspiring for a young player. Musica Viva in Schools also sent "The Sydney Jazz Quintet" to my high school in about 1983 and I remember that workshop being very memorable and inspiring. The turning point for me though was probably 1984 when I attended the Pan Pacific Jazz and Big Band Camp in Sydney, James and John Morrison were the main teachers, along with members of their big band at the time. I think it was probably the experience of being around these musicians and their music that made me decide that I would become a pro player. I then started coming to Sydney once a month in my last two years of high school...1986/87...to have lessons with the great saxophone player and teacher Col Loughnan.

Don Burrows is hailed by many to be a consummate musician and a highly respected gentleman - are there any particular memories of your study with him that you felt left a lasting impression on your musical journey?

I loved my time studying with Don. Amongst other things he really encouraged and inspired me to play the flute well. I'd had a very solid saxophone technical grounding with Col Loughnan and the transition to serious flute study with Don was the logical step. We spent a lot of time on tone, technique and breathing and applying it to both classical and jazz situations. I have no doubt that his influence and inspiration has enabled me to move into professional situations such as Broadway type shows and studio work with absolute confi-

dence when playing the flute. He also gave me the opportunity and confidence to grow and develop as a lead alto sax player in big bands. Oh....he is also a classic story and joke teller so I'm always smiling when I reflect on the few years with Don. He's a wonderful musician with great spirit, passion and humour. Those qualities have certainly inspired and influenced me over the years.

Describe your first paid 'gig'?

First paid gig was at age 13 at "Julie's Steakhouse" in Bathurst. My brother John played piano and I played alto sax. John had written some little arrangements for us of some songs from "The Readers Digest Book of Popular Songs" and we serenaded the diners. I remember getting paid \$20.00 and a great steak dinner for three hours work. At age 13 I had been making \$5.00 for three hours on my paper delivery route..... the choice to start doing gigs wasn't difficult. From around the age of 16 I was regularly playing in local pop and rock'n roll bands in pubs and clubs around Bathurst and Orange and being paid well at the time. Some pub gigs in Sydney still pay the same amount nowtwenty years latér.!

You were obviously doing extremely well at your career in Australia as one of the highlights was as a finalist in the 1993 and 1994 Australian National Jazz Awards at the Wangarratta Festival of Jazz in Victoria. Then you went overseas to New York to study with many amazing US jazz legends including Bob Mintzer, Ralph Moore, Barry Harris, Gary Dial and Gary Foster. What made you want to go overseas when you were obviously carving quite a solid career path in Australia, and what was your impression of New York in comparison to Australia particularly in relation to the jazz scene and the general musical work environment?

The choice to travel to New York to study and live seemed natural to me. Even though gigs were plentiful in Australia and I was doing pretty well, I understood that New York was really the cutting edge when it came to jazz and jazz saxophone. To grow and develop more I felt I would need to be surrounded by all that New York offers in these areas. I had visited there for a two weeks in 1992 but I decided that to really benefit as a musician, I would have to stay for

several months. My girlfriend and I found a sublet apartment and had an unforgettable time there in 1994. It is still probably the single most influential experience in my musical development thus far. I learnt some great things from being one on one with the musicians you listed, but overall I feel that what impacts one the most about New York is its energy, its intensity and its artistic diversity. This is what has stayed with me. I did loads of jamming and busking with bands on the street and in the subway which was a blast and proved particularly great for stamina and chops. And there are of course the obvious things like being able to walk out your door at any given moment and be able to hear the world's best performers do what they do on any night of the week.....experiences that we don't get to absorb as frequently and in as short a time frame here in Australia. However, as a musician who plays jazz and is influenced heavily by jazz music I guess what I really gained from being in New York City was a far deeper understanding and greater respect towards the jazz tradition and to the art form that is jazz. Stylistically for me that would be represented by the post-bebop and post-Coltrane periods of jazz. I should also add though that having spent that time in New York and later in London I do feel that from a working professional musician's point of view, we do have a world class standard of performers and performances here in Australia, be it in jazz, classical, musical theatre or commercial and creative music scenes. I'm very appreciative of this and proud to be involved in it.

Upon your return did you find it hard assimilating back into the Australian lifestyle?

Not so much, although that being said, I moved back to inner city Sydney (Darlinghurst/Kings Cross) which is about as close as you would really get anywhere in Australia to the pace and diversity of New York City, albeit on a smaller scale. I also fortunately came back and slotted straight back into playing and gigging a lot and writing material that I recorded on my CD "Shakedown" which is very evocative of my time in New York. I have been back to New York a few times since and continue to love it,

though I now live by the beach in Sydney and I do love the lifestyle here.

You have performed for a colossal amount of high profile international artists in shows, musicals, touring and recording sessions. Do you have any particularly memorable events or stories to tell?

Yes...certainly some very memorable events and tours. The Royal Albert Hall season in London as a soloist alongside Sir Cliff Richard is high on the list. Another great highlight recently was performing with The Sydney All Star Big Band with one of my heroes ...the great US tenor sax player and composer/arranger Bob Mintzer. Early in my career I did some great concerts with the wonderful US jazz vocalist Lou Rawls that has always been very memorable.

I always love sharing the bandstand with James Morrison. That occus quite frequently for me and it's always loads of fun and very exciting being next to him, hearing him play so amazingly and swinging as hard as he does.

In 2002 I performed in Toronto Canada with Tom Burlinson's show "Frank-A Life in Song" with a big band made up of Canada's top jazz players. From this I was asked to travel to Moscow to perform in the orchestra for a US touring production of the Broadway show '42nd Street'. It was the first English speaking musical ever performed in Russia. More significant perhaps was the timing....whilst we were performing there another theatre a couple of miles away in Moscow was attacked by Chechen Rebel terrorists and the audience and cast taken hostage for three days. It made worldwide news and the incident of course drastically impacted our show and our mental state...! Actually, several of the Russian musicians I was playing with had close acquaintances killed in those attacks. It was an extremely testing time for all.

The range of styles required of you in your employment seems incredibly broad, and your schedule must be very full to have achieved all you have thus far - do you have a technique or method to get your mind 'in gear' for the demands of your music?

Yes. Often, depending on the style I'll be playing, I might put on a CD before the gig during my warm-up or in the car to listen to someone who plays in the way I might be having to play on the upcoming performance, eg. If it's an R & B or pop gig, I might stick on some Mike Brecker, Kirk Whalum or David Sanborn and get into their head space. This is particularly helpful prior to a recording session where I might have to put down a solo. If it's a jazz blowing gig perhaps a Cannonball Adderley recording or Hank Mobley, Sonny Rollins etc. I find that extremely helpful. It's not about copying them, but more about concept. I love to check out big band recordings before a big band gig and listen to a great lead alto player like Dan Higgins from LA or an older recording with Marshall Royal from the Count Basie Band. I try and get into that head space. Woodwind-wise I might stick on a Mozart Clarinet or Flute Concerto

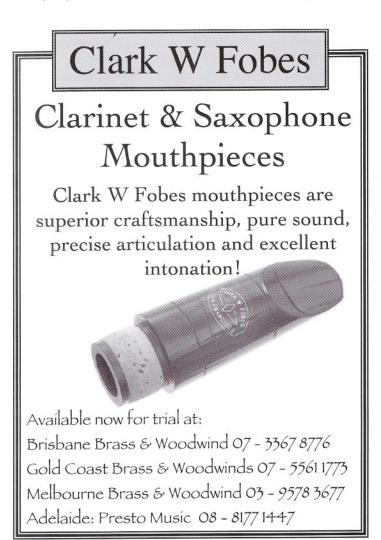
recording to get the tonal concept strong in my head, or listen to Eddie Daniels do his thing on clarinet. It's really helpful. I am also very aware of the importance of breath and relaxation when it comes to playing the instruments, so I find practicing meditation/yoga and doing physical exercise like swimming and walking to be of great benefit, to body and mind, particularly when I have a full week of performances.

You have played as a featured saxophone soloist for amongst other things - Sir Cliff Richard for his 40th Anniversary Concerts in the UK, John Farnham, and The Boy From Oz Australian Tour thus you are no stranger to large and critical audiences. Do you get nervous being in such a high profile position? If so - how do you combat this?

Interestingly, I find the big arena shows not too bad for nerves. It's other circumstances like being thrown into a deputy or subbing situation in a pit for a show that can be really challenging.....when you have to slot in and sound strong when the rest of the players are well-rehearsed and comfortable with all the material and direction. Live TV can be a real test also, but the more I've done over the years, the more comfortable and confident I've become. I guess some experience certainly helps. Once again, being in good shape and understanding how to keep relaxed is very beneficial. Funnily enough, I sometimes find the presence of my musical peers and mentors to be the catalyst for any nerves rather than a large audience. I guess that's normal to some extent.

You also play a variety of instruments - do you have a preferred saxophone, a preferred instrument to double?

My preferred double would be the flute. As far as saxophone goes, it depends on the style and music I'm going to be playing. I feel equally at home on tenor and alto. I have certain preferences in



given situations. Big band and show work it's alto. Small group jazz,..... tenor. On a pop gig....alto. R&B/funk horn section..... tenor. If I had to take one on a desert island.....probably the tenor.

For aspiring doublers out there - do you have any particular foolproof techniques to share that make the changes from instrument to instrument any 'safer', any methods for practice, embouchure hints?

Tonal concept is probably the most important element when switching between instruments quickly. Hearing in your head how you want the instrument to sound is a large part of getting in the right zone. It's funny, the brain is able to subconsciously make all the throat muscles, embouchure and air stream etc. do the correct thing if it has a strong reference....in this case, how you think and pre-hear the way you want the instrument to sound. This also ties in with the stylistic concept that I mentioned earlier when it comes to certain players that one may want to emulate. If you have their style and sound embedded in your mind, it's only natural that their approach will come through in your playing. Of course, having a comfortable setup and good reeds are important. If I'm playing a small amount of clarinet amongst the other horns, I might put on a softer reed, whereas if there is going to be loads of clarinet to play, I prefer to have more resistance. A little buzzing of the lips and cheeks prior to playing the flute after a lot of sax or clarinet can help in a few bars rest before playing. Long tones and overtone practice on all the instruments is an essential part of my warm-up and this is very helpful. Keeping an open and relaxed oral cavity on all the horns is highly effective as is of course keeping the body free of tension and always breathing correctly. I think James Morrsion is able to do what he does so well because he has an extremely clear idea of how all his instruments will sound and he's generally always relaxed when doing what he does. (And of course....he's a freak....).

What is your set up?

Soprano Saxophone Yamaha YSS-62R Selmer Super Session "J" Hard Rubber Mouthpiece "Olegature" Ligature Rico Strength 3 Reeds

Alto Saxophone

Selmer Mark VI, 1961. (Serial No. 96XXX) Meyer Hard Rubber Mouthpiece Refaced (between Med 7 & 8) "Olegature" Ligature Vandoren V16 Strength 3 Reeds

Tenor Saxophone

Selmer Mark VI 1957. (Serial No 70XXX) metal Otto Link 8* tenor sax mouthpiece, customised by Mark Spencer. It's a silver plated piece, with a baffle. Vandoren V16 #3 Reeds.) "Olegature" Ligature, Vandoren

Baritone Saxophone

John Lehner "Don Burrows" Model. Low A Berg Larsen Hard Rubber Mouthpiece 105/2 Refaced "Olegature" Ligature Rico Jazz Select Strength 3S Reeds

Piccolo

Jeff Weissman Model Wooden with Custom Made Headjoint

Flute

Muramatsu DS Handmade Solid Silver OpenHole, Low B, Offset G

Alto Flute

Armstrong

Bb Clarinet

Buffet R₁₃ Vandoren B₄₅. or Leblanc "Eddie Daniels" Mouthpiece (refaced) Vandoren V₁₂ Strength 3.5 or 4 Reeds

Bass Clarinet

Leblanc Esprit-Low Eb Selmer C85/120 Mouthpiece Vandoren 'Traditional' Strength 2.5 Reeds

Do you have any recording projects coming up?

Yes, this year I plan to do another CD of my ownit's well overdue. It will likely be a jazz project made of originals and standards, some acoustic tracks and perhaps with some electric bass or organ. Also, there are always the regular recording dates for other artists that come up during the year.

What are your future goals in your music career and/or life?

I always want to play....that's a given, though I'm becoming more selective in the choice of situations that I play in. I'd like to compose more and release more of my own music. I'd like to perhaps write for film eventually someday. I'm a avid listener of film soundtracks and love the work of people like Terence Blanchard and how he utilises jazz styles into

motion picture. I don't have kids yet but that will change... I do plan to have a family. Oh, and travel wise, another extended New York visit, as well as perhaps a European tour with a group or artist. I've never been to South America..... I'd love to visit and play in Brazil, Peru, Chile etc and also Cuba. That will happen too I'm sure.

Do you have any advice for undergrad students looking forward to a career in saxophone?

From my experience, being versatile and adaptable to many situations and styles is essential. I hear many great young jazz improvisers or wonderful classical saxophonists who don't play outside a certain style. That may be by choice, however if you are looking to a career and generating some sort of living, it can be limiting....(unless you are able to create a lucrative solo recording and concert tour career). The job opportunities are much smaller when locked into one or two styles of music or playing. If you are a great sight reader but don't improvise, I'd suggest developing that skill in order to increase performing opportunities, and vice versa, if you can improvise a great jazz or pop solo but don't sight read well, work on that area. There's plenty to gain. Also, most importantly, listen to as many great saxophone players in a wide variety of styles as possible. So much is available nowadays via the web - downloads etc and the ability to buy CDs worldwide and share files at the click of a button. Understanding and learning the wide vocabulary of the instrument is probably the most important thing, and for me it is extremely enjoyable.

Did you dabble in classical music?

Certainly when studying the flute. I also like to work through classical etudes and exercises on all the instruments when I practice. I'm often in situations that definitely require a classical approach and discipline, be it a commercial orchestral recording session or performance and also in several of the Broadway-style scores that I've played.

- Interview by Diana Tolmie