

MUSEUMS AREN'T JUST FOR DEAD THINGS

Words by Kinch Kinski

The history of Australian jazz isn't just in the past; it's still being made every day. The Australian Jazz Museum (AJM) is keeping the genre alive, creating a fruitful network with young jazz musicians.

In Australia, Billy Romaine debuted his jazz group at Fuller's National Theatre back in 1918. Ever since, Australia has had a lively jazz scene, from the heady days of Graeme Bell and Ade Monsborough in the 30s and 40s to Melbourne's Bennetts Lane and Sydney's The Basement today.

That's not to mention all the bands influenced by jazz theory and improvisation: Hiatus Kaiyote, Sex on Toast and Ainslie Wills to name a few.

AJM, a volunteer organisation in the east Melbourne suburb of Wantirna, has been documenting that history since 1996. Now, as they transition from a Victorian to a national archive, they are hoping young jazz musicians will get involved by contributing to their collection.

"We're really interested to get young musicians involved with us," says museum president Terry Norman.

"We've collected the history of Australian jazz, but these young musicians are creating that history day-by-day and we'd like to get more of their music in the museum."

The museum is seeking recordings, sheet music and memberships from younger musicians to keep their collection a living one and to help with the costs of digitising and expanding their collection. The museum provides a connection to the past through rare and important vinyls, CDs, sheet music, scrapbooks, even instruments, and young musicians can provide a connection to the present and the future by enriching the collection with their own works.

AJM's location – far from the central musical hubs of Melbourne – make this engagement somewhat difficult at the moment, but the museum is in the process of making its collection more accessible. It will take time, but they plan to have a globally searchable catalogue of documents, books, photographs, and music. This will be a vast improvement on the current system, in which people seeking copies of rare recordings must come in and have them made to order.

"We're working on increasing our coverage with the website, Facebook, and other media," says Norman. "To get us into the digital age, and gear up because . . . now we're starting to get large collections from interstate."

Even with most of their collection still confined to the realm of hard copies, the unique scope of their collection means AJM has had some interesting visitors.

A German researcher looking for obscure recordings German-Jewish guitarist Coco Schumann made while in Melbourne was able to find them here. People also come searching for echoes of their family history.

"We'll have artists' grandchildren say 'oh, would you have this recording by my grandfather — he was a performer,'" says Ralph Powell who works in collection and research.

"We can find it and actually offer them a digital copy . . . one woman was in tears because of what we were able to provide her."

Mel Blachford – the collections manager at AJM – says they make a concerted effort to be generous with their collection: "We're trying, as part of our philosophy, to be an open and welcoming museum that's happy to support people and make stuff available to them — what's the point of having stuff in the archive here if we say 'well, we've got it but you can't have it?'"

As well as providing access to history AJM also helps teach people of all ages how to actually play, giving them a grounding in jazz theory and improvisation. Marina Pollard runs courses with teachers such as Graeme Pender, Ian Smith and Viv Doolan plus a large number of guest tutors. AJM's twelve week courses range in price from \$75 for under-25s to \$230 for over-25s, and include a year's membership with the museum.

"The workshops are going very well. I took a group of eleven young people to Swan Hill just recently for the Australian jazz convention and they had a whale of a time and wowed the public," says Pollard.

One of AJM's students – Jennifer McCluskey – was recently accepted to the James Morrison Academy of Music in Mount Gambier. "She's just turned eighteen!" beams Pollard.

As part of their push for engagement with new and younger musicians and music-lovers AJM is revamping their rather 90s website and offering a special membership deal for musicians. A standard 'bronze' membership is usually \$50 for twelve months and accrues a range of benefits including access to the collection, subscription to AJM's magazine, a free CD, and – strangely – free entry to Louis Armstrong House in New York City.

The museum is certainly a niche operation, but as its collection becomes more easily available online I suspect more people within that niche will be drawn to it. There's something comforting about the knowledge that a small group of dedicated men and women are toiling away in Wantirna simultaneously preserving such a rich history and helping to create the next chapter in the process.