

ESSAY

“Tell you vot baby: ze band voss svingink und groovink!”¹ Horst Liepolt and the Australian Jazz boom of the 1970s

Andrew W Hurley

.....

*Horst Liepolt was the producer of jazz in this country. There's nobody who produced as much jazz.*²

I first heard of Horst Liepolt when I read about him in the liner notes for *Heading in the Right Direction*, a compilation of 1970s' Australian soul, jazz and funk that was released in 1995. Horst, I read, had produced quite a few of the tunes on *Heading in the Right Direction*. I was taken by the music and it in turn, led me to other Australian jazz from the era of the LP—as were many 'dancefloor jazz' enthusiasts from around the world, who likewise set about trying to locate the original recordings. Although *Heading in the Right Direction* was compiled by two Australians—Melbourne's Johnny Topper and Takse—it was issued not only in Australia but also in the USA, and was very much the result of a more widespread renewed interest in soul jazz, particularly on the part of young British and American DJs. This worldwide revival involved old jazz, funk and soul records being sought out for 'rare groove' nights, for drum breaks that could be sampled for hiphop productions, or as inspiration for the 'acid jazz' bands then in vogue.

While my interest in Australian jazz continued and I attended concerts by musicians who had featured on *Heading in the Right Direction*, it would not be until some years later that I would again have cause to think about Horst. In 2002 I commenced a PhD on jazz in postwar Germany, and began reflecting on that expatriate German who had migrated to Australia and acted as something of a dynamo within our own jazz scene. Might Horst's love of jazz also have been motivated by some of those factors which I was learning about that had driven young Germans to the music in the 1950s, as they sought out new identities far removed from the Nazi past? By 2006 my dissertation was complete, and an essay

competition run by the German embassy and the Australian National University on the contribution of German migrants to Australia offered the opportunity to return to Horst. I hunted down telephone numbers for him—by now he was living in New York—as well as for many of the Australian jazz musicians with whom he had worked. Unless otherwise noted, the sources for this biographical essay include those interviews as well as Mike Williams' *The Australian Jazz Explosion* (1981); Andrew Bissett's *Black Roots, White Flowers* (1987); Bruce Johnson's *The Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz* (1987); Jack Mitchell's discography *Australian Jazz on Record, 1925–80* (1988); John Clare's *Bodgie Dada and the Cult of the Cool* (1995); Peter Boothman's *A Story of Jazz in Sydney* (2007), as well as contemporary articles about Horst in the *Jazz Down Under* magazine, including 'Birth of a Jazz Label: Jazz Down Under interviews Horst Liepolt' and 'Mike Murphy recalls Melbourne Jazz Centre 44' (both in the November 1975 edition), and numerous other clippings from both Horst's and Ted Vining's personal archives, copies of which are in the possession of the author.

At this point I would like to extend my thanks to Horst and to those musicians (among them Brian Brown, Serge Ermoll, Alan Lee, David Martin and, especially, Ted Vining who trusted me with his private archive) for agreeing to the interview, as well as to Eurydice Aroney from the ABC and UTS for drawing my attention to an inaccuracy in an earlier version of the essay.³

• • • •

The record producer, promoter and publicist Horst Liepolt (born 1927) spent 30 years of his life in Australia. Between his arrival in 1951 and his departure for New York in 1981, he established himself as the most important jazz producer in the country. An energetic man who never shied away from following his musical passion, he saw to it that Australian jazz (and particularly more modern varieties of it) was presented live and on record. That many of his 1970s' record productions—which range from the avant-garde free jazz of pianist Serge Ermoll's Free Kata to the pop-jazz of Galapagos Duck—are highly regarded by critics and now change hands among collectors for high sums is testament to his vision and skill. In an environment where jazz only commanded a small following—at least by comparison with rock and pop—Liepolt insisted that it did matter. Even today, over 25 years since he left Australia, many of his productions are in print and his legacy may still be felt within the domestic jazz scene.

Liepolt was born in Berlin into a family of musicians, writers and artists during the 'golden twenties'—so-called because they fell between the hyperinflation of the early 1920s' and the great depression and Hitler years that followed. His father was a writer associated with the Bauhaus movement, his mother a concert pianist of Swedish extraction. The young Horst enjoyed growing up in this creative milieu and, for the most part, was oblivious to the storm clouds gathering over his country during the 1930s. He recalls that the spectre of National Socialism did not enter into family life and that he did not even take much notice of the turns in WWII... until the Russians arrived to liberate the capital in 1945. Peter

.....

‘... 1944 marks a special date in Liepolt’s biography and one which was repeatedly commemorated in his later work as an impresario: it was the year that he first heard jazz (in the form of a 78 RPM Louis Armstrong recording). “It was like being hit by a car going at 2000 miles an hour,” he remembers today.’

.....

Boothman reports that Horst even managed to make the most of the confusion in Berlin towards the end of the war to evade conscription into the *Wehrmacht* when he turned 17 years old. On a more personal level, however, something *did* happen during those years that really caused him to prick up his ears.

Indeed, 1944 marks a special date in Liepolt’s biography and one which was repeatedly commemorated in his later work as an impresario: it was the year that he first heard jazz (in the form of a 78 RPM Louis Armstrong recording). ‘It was like being hit by a car going at 2000 miles an hour,’ he remembers today. An eccentric friend played ‘Savoy Blues’ on a gramophone player, and the 17-year-old Horst wouldn’t let him pack it away until the song had been replayed ‘about twenty times’. Hooked, he set out to try to find a copy for himself—no mean task in wartime Berlin. Once established, Liepolt’s passion for the music never abated. Not that he knew much about it initially, only that it came from America. He was vaguely aware that the Nazis ideologically opposed it—as so-called ‘Nigger-Jew-Music’—but since his enthusiasm was directed towards the ‘hot jazz’ which record collectors played for each other in the privacy of their own homes, rather than the swing to which other young Germans liked to dance, he had less exposure to the Nazi repression to which swing enthusiasts—the so-called ‘Swing Jugend’—were sometimes exposed. In other words, Horst’s passion for jazz does not appear to have been especially driven by the repression which some German swing enthusiasts suffered during the ‘Third Reich’.

In the *Hungerjahre* (‘hunger years’) following Germany’s defeat, Horst honed his skills as an entrepreneur by working the black market in Berlin. Over time, however, he formulated the plan of seeking his fortune overseas instead. When an administrative error prevented him from gaining a green card for the United States, it was suggested that he look in at the Australian mission, as they were about to ‘open the gates’ to migrants. Horst recalls his first encounter with Australians as being very casual: ‘They said “Don’t worry about the paperwork, the US mission will send it over. Can you go next week?”’ His response is telling about his disposition towards the improvised essence of jazz. On the spur of the moment, he said ‘yes’. ‘It is the fifth continent. It is in Asia but it is white. Something is bound to happen there,’ he remembers thinking. And so, within a week, he had packed his possessions and was flying towards Tasmania and a job working on the hydroelectric scheme.

Although Liepolt had signed a two-year contract in 1951 to work on the ‘Hydro’, only six months passed before he realised that, as pretty as Tasmania might be, he was really ‘a big city cat’. He decided to head for Melbourne, which, with its English charms, he soon found to his liking. By 1957 he was married and had made lasting friends with the jazz and artistic community, contacts that would provide a foundation for his work as a producer in the 1970s. It dawned on him that he was not going to return to Germany, and as a result he decided to naturalise. The year 1957 also marked the start of Liepolt’s career as a jazz impresario .

During the mid-1950s he had attended various dance parties with live R’n’B music at St Kilda’s Palais de Danse, but he was increasingly convinced that modern jazz and dancing did not go together. At his wife’s prompting, he approached the owner of the Acland Street Katherina Café, with the idea that he run a dedicated jazz night there at which modern jazz musicians might perform live and enthusiasts might congregate. The owner of the Café agreed to lease the premises to Liepolt on Sunday afternoons for the sum of five pounds. Jazz Centre 44 (a reference to the fateful year of Liepolt’s first exposure to jazz) was duly born. It quickly became *the* jazz venue in Melbourne, and gave many musicians a valuable forum at which to perform and develop their ‘chops’. As Bruce Johnson observes in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz*, the core of musicians who performed regularly at Jazz Centre 44 (from the saxophonist Brian Brown and the trumpeter Keith Hounslow to the vibraphonist Alan Lee and the drummer Stewie Speer) continued to dominate the Australian jazz scene until well into the 1980s (184–5). Some are still performing today. The venue operated under Liepolt’s auspices until the end of the decade, when he departed for Sydney; it continued to exist as a venue until well into the 1960s.

Liepolt also debuted as a jazz publicist and record producer in Melbourne in the late 1950s. He began editing the publication *More Jazz* in 1957, and it was at his instigation that the Brian Brown Quintet (regulars at the Jazz Centre) entered the recording studio the following year. While their 1958 recordings had to wait almost 20 years for public release, they have considerable historic significance today, given that they mark the LP debut of Brown who has gone on to enjoy a long career, is regarded as a major Australian jazz stylist and innovator, and who headed up the jazz improvisation course at the Victorian College of the Arts for many years. Brown’s LP also featured Stewie Speer who would become known outside the jazz scene—as the drummer with the rock band, Max Merritt and the Meteors.

Liepolt’s move to Sydney in 1960 was motivated both by the breakdown of his marriage and by a sense that the ‘grass was greener’ there for modern jazz; a situation that, unfortunately, does not pertain now—at least from the perspective of live venues. He recalls that, at this time, many artists and jazz players were moving to the harbour city. Liepolt soon opened a jazz club ,and, in the ensuing years was involved in putting on concerts and events at a range of venues. His activities also diversified. By the beginning of the 1970s he had experience managing several rock groups, including Max Merritt and the Meteors and the

.....

‘In August 1973 Liepolt had a hand in establishing the Basement, a Sydney CBD club which, although it no longer focuses exclusively on jazz, continues to operate as a venue. Under Liepolt’s music direction and publicity the Basement soon became the foremost jazz club in town.’

.....

renowned Australian soul singer Renee Geyer’s first band, Sun. During the 1970s he was again active as a publicist, contributing regularly to the *Jazz Down Under* periodical (of which he was also managing and then associate editor for a time) and hand-delivering his own roneoed jazz newsletter.

In August 1973 Liepolt had a hand in establishing the Basement, a Sydney CBD club which, although it no longer focuses exclusively on jazz, continues to operate as a venue. Under Liepolt’s music direction and publicity the Basement soon became the foremost jazz club in town—just like Melbourne’s Jazz Centre 44 before it. It was significant for three reasons: it was dedicated to jazz and therefore gave the music a public presence; it provided a venue at which students enrolled at the Sydney Conservatorium could perform for an audience; and it did not shy away from presenting, under the catchy title ‘Music is an open sky’, more challenging forms of jazz (including Free Kata, which as John Shand observed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, ripped open the heart of music aesthetics in Australia³⁴). It was the popularity of the Basement’s stalwarts Galapagos Duck, who performed there as the house band, that allowed Liepolt to program this more experimental music on the off-peak nights. As Bruce Johnson notes, the Basement ‘played a particularly significant role during the mid-’70s burgeoning of contemporary groups’ in Australia (98). Liepolt did not restrict his activities to the club, however. He also organised other engagements and larger events including, between 1978 and 1981, a jazz festival as part of the Festival of Sydney. He used the larger budget of such events as an avenue through which to present overseas musicians, such as Dave Liebman or the Art Ensemble of Chicago, whom he thought might have something to offer the Australian jazz scene.

During the 1970s Liepolt also became more and more active as a record producer. This was the flip side of the live jazz boom of the 1970s. An early production was of the pianist Col Nolan’s *Soul Syndicate* (1973), another mainstay of the Sydney jazz scene. However, when Nolan’s record was released on a small independent label, *Avan-guard*, Liepolt was approached by the major label Philips and asked why he had not offered the production to them. At this point, Liepolt formed a working relationship with Philips and, as a freelancer, produced several significant Australian jazz recordings for the label, including debuts by Galapagos Duck (*Ebony Quill*, 1973), Free Kata (*Spontaneous Improvisations*, 1974) and the Jazz Co-Op, a group including the expatriate American saxophonist Howie Smith (who

was director of the jazz course at the Sydney Conservatorium) and the important Australian pianist Roger Frampton.

It was the success of these recordings (and that upswing of interest in jazz during the mid 1970s) which persuaded Philips to now launch a specialist jazz label with Liepolt as its producer. Again, the title of this label (44) referred to Horst's Savoy Blues experience. Between 1974 and 1979 he produced almost 30 records for the label; and each was given a distinctive cover in keeping with 44's house style. Together with Horst's dedicated publicity efforts, these records collectively established a brand for Australian jazz—even if their distribution was largely restricted to this country.⁵ 44's recordings document the spectrum of Australian jazz during the 1970s and are Liepolt's most obvious legacy: in addition to highly regarded albums by modernists such as Brian Brown and Ted Vining, he produced both trad jazz (including the veteran Dick Hughes) and jazz-fusion (including Peter Boothman). In the interests of fostering emerging talent, he produced records featuring up-and-coming players (such as the Young Northside Big Band, which included a young Dale Barlow). He also negotiated the re-issue of various milestones of modern Australian jazz, including—in addition to the 1958 Brian Brown Quintet recordings—the saxophonist Charlie Munro's 1967 landmark *Eastern Horizons* and equally important 1960s recordings by the pianist Bryce Rohde. Nor did Liepolt neglect to record Australasian expatriate jazz musicians, such as the New Zealand-born pianist Mike Nock, who had left for Britain and then the United States in the early 1960s. Nock participated in two 1979 44 recordings—one with Dave Liebman's Quintet (invitees to the Festival of Sydney) and one solo album. These two productions were to count among Liepolt's last direct contributions to the Australian jazz scene.

In the late 1970s Liepolt decided to visit the United States, the country to which he had initially wished to emigrate. Horst was now in his early 50s and was motivated by a desire to see as many as possible of the great American jazz musicians before they died. Liking what he saw in New York, he resolved to stay, finally emigrating in 1981. This was another case of the grass being greener elsewhere for the jazz impresario. It was also a considerable risk; but he landed flat on his feet. He befriended a Jewish couple and together they decided to run a jazz club (the famed Sweet Basil). Liepolt's extensive knowledge of jazz, his flair for publicity, and his experience booking American groups for the Festival of Sydney stood him in good stead in New York, and Sweet Basil was soon thriving. In the course of his eight-year involvement with the club he produced numerous live albums, including award-winning works by Gil Evans. To give a proper account of his contribution to the New York jazz scene would double the length of this article and must, unfortunately, wait for another day. While Liepolt is nowadays no longer active as a jazz impresario—he paints abstract canvases and is involved with a small New York gallery—the octagenarian is still passionate about jazz.

The New York jazz scene's gain during the 1980s was definitely Australia's loss, but Liepolt's 30-year-long efforts in this country were not soon forgotten.

As Serge Ermoll has recently observed in a tribute to Horst: ‘Horst had done just about everything he could do on the Australian jazz scene. I believe that by laying the groundwork for jazz promotion in this country, he made it more accessible for those who are reaping its benefits to this day.’ In this respect, and through the many productions and events that he facilitated, Germany’s original loss in 1951 continues to be Australia’s gain—even if most of the younger musicians associated with the current Australian jazz boom, documented recently by John Shand in *Jazz: The Australian Accent* (2009), will have no personal knowledge of Horst’s verve, distinctive idiom or heavy German accent.

• • • •

Some of Liepolt’s best—a subjective list, in no particular order

A handful of Horst’s productions are still available (as indicated in the following list). For those keen to hear more, the easiest starting point is still the *Heading in the Right Direction* compilation, available from www.ubiquityrecords.com.

1. **Col Nolan Soul Syndicate *Live At Jason’s* (1973) Avan-guard**
One of Horst’s first productions, and predating the 44label, this album features the keyboard player Col Nolan, who was well known on the Sydney scene in the 1960s and 1970s. Nolan’s background was in both trad jazz (including in Ray Price’s groups) and modern soul jazz (as on this recording). In addition to this album—which features originals such as ‘What’s the use’ as well as covers of soul staples—t his version of the Soul Syndicate released an outstanding single (‘What’s the use’ b/w ‘Buckingham Palace’), also produced by Horst. That single is currently available on Votary records (www.votarydisk.com)
2. **Johnny Nicol *Touch of Blue* (1975) 44/Phonogram**
Nicol is a guitarist of Aboriginal heritage (who originally pretended to be a Maori to avoid having to deal with racial discrimination!). He was a member of the Soul Syndicate and also recorded this LP for 44.
3. **Galapagos Duck *Ebony Quill* (1973) Philips**
Galapagos Duck was *the* Australian jazz group of the 1970s, certainly if record sales are anything to go by. During the 1970s they were the house band at Sydney’s Basement—it was co-owned by one of the group’s members. The membership of Galapagos Duck changed many times over the years and they released numerous records, on Horst’s 44 label and for others. This was their debut (and, in my opinion, best) album and features a great cover of Hugh Masekela’s ‘Grazing in the Grass’ as well as originals including the side-long title track which was greeted by one enthusiastic concert music critic of the day as being the artistic equivalent of Edgar Varese’s ‘Integrales’.

4. **Jazz Co-Op *Jazz Co-Op* (1974) Philips**
 Jazz Co-Op was a modern quartet featuring the late Australian pianist Roger Frampton and the American reedsman Howie Smith, who had been headhunted to teach at Sydney's Conservatorium of Music when it started its jazz course in 1974. Their fine debut double album features the great soul jazz 'Pyramid Piece' as well as 'A la Coltrane' and various other originals. They subsequently recorded an excellent live album for 44 too. The group's drummer Phil Treloar is still active as a recording artist.⁶ *Jazz Co-Op* has recently been reissued and is available from www.votarydisk.com

5. **Brian Brown *Upward* (1977) 44/Phonogram**
 If the Sydney jazz scene was thriving in the 1970s, Melbourne certainly had much to show for itself too. Tenor saxophonist Brian Brown had been a central member of the collective of musicians associated with Melbourne's Jazz Centre 44 in the late 1950s. He recorded an album in 1958 which was inexplicably shelved until the late 1970s when it saw the light of day as a 44 release. After a hiatus during the 1960s—when Brown worked as an architect—he was devoting more of his time to music by the mid-1970s. *Upward* was his quartet's second release for 44, the first being the landmark *Carlton Streets*, which by incorporating, inter alia, a spoken word excerpt from Katharine Susannah Prichard's novel *Coonardoo*, sought to advance the notion of 'Australian jazz'. On the basis of these two 44 records, Brown's quartet was funded to tour Europe in the late 1970s. The 1958 recordings, *Carlton Streets* (another Votary reissue) and many other more recent albums are available from Brian's website (www.brianbrown.com.au).

6. **The Ted Vining Trio *Number 1* (1978) 44/Phonogram**
 The title 'Number 1' is a bit misleading—this was actually the group's second record, after it made a split LP together with the fusion group Plant in 1972 for that other major 1970s' Australian jazz label, Melbourne's Jazznote. Drummer Vining's Trio was also three quarters of the Brian Brown Quartet (and Brown guests on two tracks here). This album is currently available as a CD re-issue on Birdland Records (birdland.com.au) and Vining continues to perform regularly in Melbourne.

7. **The Charlie Munro Quartet *Eastern Horizons* (1976 [1967]) 44/Phonogram [Philips]**
 This was actually not a Horst Liepolt production, but rather an album recorded in 1967 by Sydney's Charlie Munro Quartet for Arthur Major and Philips. It contains a number of pieces reflecting Munro's impressions of Eastern musics (from the lengthy 'Islamic Suite' to 'Malahari Raga' and 'Japanese Love Song'). One of John Clare's personal favourites and John Shand has also recently observed: 'One of the great albums of the 1960s [...] Magnificent' (2009). Horst did a great service by reissuing it on 44. It has again been reissued and is currently available on Votary Records

8. Bryce Rohde *The Bryce Rohde Story Volume 2* (1977 [1963–65])

44/Phonogram [CBS]

Another re-issue negotiated by Liepolt, this time of the pianist Bryce Rohde's Quartet/Quintet (originally produced in the mid-1960s by another European expatriate who worked as a producer in Australia, Sven Libaek). Rohde grew up in Adelaide and gained attention in the mid-late 1950s when he and the Australian Jazz Quartet toured extensively in the United States. It was there that he was introduced to the principles of modal jazz. By the early 1960s, Rohde was back in Australia, performing in Sydney with Charlie Munro and others. This 44 re-issue contains the long 'Came a Ballerina' (with Munro and Syd Powell on saxophones), a beautiful modal piece. It deserves to be in print. Unfortunately for Australia, Rohde returned to the USA after recording these albums. He is still performing there.

9. Joyce Hurley *Joyce* (1978) 44/Phonogram

Joyce Hurley (no relative of this writer's!) is an African-American who won a Rotary scholarship to study concert piano for six months at the Conservatorium in Sydney. Upon visiting the Basement one evening, she soon found herself singing with the band. Joyce is backed here by the pianist David Martin's group and performs Herbie Hancock's 'Maiden Voyage' among others. The record also features a couple of instrumentals by the Martin group, including the wonderful 'Sambale'. Hurley is also still performing in the USA.

10. Free Kata *Spontaneous Improvisations* (1974) Philips

Free jazz performed by the maverick Sydney pianist Serge Ermoll, together with Eddie Bronson (saxophone) and Louis Burdett (drums). Ermoll has continued to record for Liepolt and others, if not always in such a challenging style. He still performs occasionally in Sydney. For an account of his own adventures touring and performing with Free Kata in the 1970s, see John Clare's *Bodgie Dada* (1995).

•

SOURCES

- 'A Heart Ripped Open.' *ABC Radio National* 19 June 2004. Prod. E Aroney and K Lee; pres. B Clough. www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/radioeye/stories/s1335539.htm.
- 'Birth of a Jazz Label: Jazz Down Under interviews Horst Liepolt' *Jazz Down Under* November 1975: 12, 14.
- Bisset, Andrew. *Black Roots, White Flowers: A History of Jazz in Australia*. Sydney: ABC, 1987.
- Boothman, Peter. *A Story of Jazz in Sydney*. Online publication. 22 December 2007. <<http://blogs.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuesaction=blog.view&friendID=93714490&blogID=340371470>>
- Brown, Brian. Telephone interview. 6 April 2006.
- Clare, John. *Bodgie Dada and the Cult of Cool*. Kensington, NSW: UNSW Press, 1995.
- Ermoll, Serge. 'Horst Liepolt: On a Jazz Pedestal.' *News and Views from JazzChord and across Australia*. 30 March 2006.
- Johnson, Bruce. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz*. Melbourne, Oxford, Auckland, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

- Lee, Alan. Telephone interview. 5 April 2006.
- Liepolt, Horst. Telephone interviews. 31 March & 6 April 2006.
- Mitchell, Jack. *Australian Jazz on Record, 1925–80*. Canberra: Australian Govt. Publishing Service, 1988.
- Murphy, Mike. 'Mike Murphy recalls Melbourne Jazz Centre 44' *Jazz Down Under* November 1975: 14–15.
- Myers, Eric. 'Review of John Clare's *Bodgie Dada* and the Cult of Cool' *Jazzchord* October/November 1995: 18–19.
- Shand, John. *Jazz: The Australian Accent*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009.
- ——. 'Review of the Charlie Munro Quartet's *Eastern Horizons*' *The Sydney Morning Herald Spectrum* 7–8 March 2009.
- Vining, Ted. Telephone interview. 4 April 2006.
- Williams, Mike. *The Australian Jazz Explosion*. London: Angus and Robertson, 1981.

NOTES

- 1 This title is borrowed from John Clare's impersonation of Liepolt's idiom and accent.
- 2 Serge Ermoll quoted in 'A Heart Ripped Open'.
- 3 An earlier version of this article was published online by ANU.
- 4 Quoted in "A Heart Ripped Open".
- 5 To my knowledge, only two 44 albums gained local release in the USA. They were, in any event, by musicians already well-known in the USA—Dave Liebman and Mike Nock.
- 6 For more about Treloar, see Shand 2009.

Small Presses, Big Books

Introducing the Small Press Underground Networking Community, dedicated to bringing you the best of Australia's independent publishers.

SPUNC represents a growing list of more than fifty small publishers. From prize-winning fiction, to acclaimed journals, non-fiction and chap books, see the website for new releases, events, news and more.



spunc.com.au

SPUNC