

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

BILL LEITHHEAD

Music and Me, by Bill Leithhead



Being the only child of a dance-band pianist mother meant that for me there was no escape: I was destined for it whether I liked it or not. And I did. My Kalgoorlie childhood was punctuated by lessons from mum on playing chords. I did one year of music lessons, got 98%; Mum reckoned that was enough. I made it up from then on.

Expert on pots and pans, I was thrilled when mum bought me an old drum kit. The tom-tom had Chinese dragons on it - you don't see that nowadays! Then I got a better kit when we moved to Melbourne and so for 30 years I played the drums for small dance bands, usually with mum at the helm; especially around the bayside and Mornington Peninsula. In my teens she put me on the mike and told me to get the reluctant dancers onto the floor. So we did Jolly Millers to get 'em up and mix 'em up. We played everything from rock'n'roll, barn dances, Zorba, the Mexican Hat Dance, and the Alberts. A speciality was a two-piece rendition of Golden Wedding (we did a lot of 2-piece jobs). The listener just wanted to hear the drum solo.

Next, I got religion, and often played the piano accordion at open-air evangelism, and the organ in church. I even did some preaching! By the time I was 27 I dropped religion and enjoyed myself. When fatherhood and scientific career intervened I vaguely kept up the piano, playing music for my own pleasure. At the chemistry department in later years I often wrote parody songs about chemistry for the Xmas socials. Over these years I never really got to listen to the live jazz scene in Melbourne, so I was a bit wet behind the ears.

Some years ago I started to suffer severe depression and in 1988 had to leave my lecturing career early, which was a bitter blow, but beneficial in the long run: I'm still alive and still married. So I thought to brush up the piano and play in pubs or something, which I did do, but I realised that I wasn't playing with a good "jazz sound", which remained a bit of a mystery. In 1994 I did some workshops with Stephen Sedergreen, who pointed me in the right direction for the proper chord "voicings". I'm still working on that!

About 1995 I met Janet Arndt, with whom I performed in the 1995 Australian Jazz Convention at Melbourne Uni as "Side by Side". That was a huge buzz, and I heard lots of good bands. It was then that I realised that playing with singers was not easy but very character-forming. I've played in two other such conventions. Janet and I again played as "Side by Side" at Latrobe in 2009.

In 1997 I played the piano in a small band for a 10-performance season of The Good Old Days music hall show with Encore Theatre, Clayton. Boy, was that a learning experience! I had to re-write so much music to different keys!! Later on I played with them for a season of a pantomime, Cinderella - also hard work. In that one I distinguished myself by playing slightly stoned from a bit of cannabis cookie that I was using to try to cope with severe back pain. I played fantastically - better than ever - until the reprise, for which I played the wrong tune! The clown, Buttons, then came forward and set me straight, to great applause! No-one ever knew.

Also in 1997 I got into a small trad band and learned how to play with other musicians in a jazz band. The main lesson was to play less notes, using a simple "comping" technique. I am still liable to play too many notes, and to my shame I tread on the bass lines! We got a regular pub gig in Fitzroy and became the Clare Castle Jazz Band, to whom I introduced Janet Arndt. I still play with them sometimes. In 1998 I started to get involved with various trad bands in country jazz festivals - the kind where they let anyone in! I'm still doing that.

In the noughties I wanted to play more "mainstream" jazz and dreamed up the name Jazz Travellers to reflect journeys involved in playing jazz. I've had various musicians in it over time, and we're still going strong. Courtesy of Pippa Wilson, from 2000 I also got involved with the Showbiz Club for several years. I did some playing with Janet Arndt and others during this time, too.

Then I dropped out for 19 months to try to re-invent my piano playing, and just played at home, most of the time without music; that was quite beneficial. And so I popped back into the scene, came back to the Showbiz Club, and re-formed the Jazz Travellers with tenor sax Colin Garrett, who was at a loose end in the hiatus between marriages. I also involved mates I'd met through trad and the Sedergreens.

Several years ago I met Annie Smith at the time where she was wanting to get with a jazz band for the first time, and we coalesced into the new improved Jazz Travellers. Now I'm enjoying the Showbiz Club, the country jazz festivals, a few paid and charity gigs with various people, and loving it more and more. I also enjoy playing with my Bill Leithhead Trio, too.

At home, I'll play anything for my own pleasure in any style that I can manage, despite the "jazz police". Music is bigger than any individual, and I enjoy listening to and trying to play the widest range of styles and tunes possible. I've played in churches and even a synagogue, in cramped places and in the open air. I don't have perfect pitch, find it a bit of a struggle to transpose on the fly, and play best with a few chords and a lead line in front of me. But I seem to do alright, and it's a very satisfying activity, punctuated by periods of frustration, neurosis and sheer terror. And I'll even play the drums, given half a chance. So Let the Good Times Roll!!