



Photo by Diverze Photography

Back in the swing of things

Perhaps; but more likely than not, if you stick around long enough you'll hear the newly established sounds of jazz that have crept from the past into our sleepy little suburbs. If you hadn't already noticed, jazz is fast becoming a signature sound of Sydney. From daylight to dark, no one can escape the distinctive sounds of Swing and Blues in the inner west. From walking down the main street of Balmain on a Sunday afternoon, to Saturday night where both the music and people are pouring from the pubs and clubs, to sitting inside a café in Rozelle for Friday lunch – the music is there.

Not convinced at first, I went in search of this city sound – only to find that the experts and musicians alike were more than happy to confirm my suspicions, if not to agree with me. Balmain resident and jazz Producer, Danny Ward, said he believed people were catching onto the jazz scene. "I don't know that I'm holding my breath for the trend to last, but there's certainly a greater interest in jazz now than there was ten years ago," he said. "Jazz is a very earthy and inter responsive kind of music; it has got a very social element."

Not something entirely new, jazz has always had a place within Balmain. Now with the added help of a dash of media here, and a recording studio there – jazz has taken on a new meaning says Danny.

"Every second pub in Paddington right down to Balmain had it when I was a kid. Jazz was everywhere, but now it's changed. It's not in as many places but it's commercially viable," he said. "With jazz now, to make your own

recording is as easy as changing your answering machine."

According to Danny, listeners are simply more attracted to the live element jazz offers. "There's so much electronic music out there - it's almost to the point of overload. Everyone everywhere has gone through the stage of big screen entertainment, television, radio - people have just had enough of it," he said.

Not the only one to notice the change, Rozelle jazz pianist Gary Walford said he too could see that jazz had become popular amongst even the younger crowd who were just looking to hear something a little different.

"We play regularly on Friday and Sunday afternoons and it's packed out every week," he said. "I've seen jazz come and go a bit. It's always been there, but it's quite popular at the moment."

An experienced player and hearsay on the music scene, Gary says he's revelled in the jazz sounds of Rozelle and Balmain for some 35 years. Part of the well known Unity Hall Jazz Band, Gary is proud to say he is part of one of Australia's oldest jazz groups.

"We would probably be one of the longest serving jazz bands in NSW, if not Australia," he said. "I started out there at the Unity Hall Hotel in 1972, and I've been playing there ever since."

Jazz has been Gary's passion since he was 21. Little do many know says Gary, the Unity Hall's initial family owners wanted jazz to forever be a part of the pub. Now a whole generation later – the beat is still alive. Somewhat the trend in Balmain, Gary says even the younger generation are getting into the swing of things. "All of us are in our 50's and early 60's, but we get a lot of work out of the unity for weddings and 21sts and younger people's parties."

"With everything from dixie land boogie, to swinging type of jazz, they love it, and we're playing songs they've grown up listening to that their parents have played," he said. "It's simple, easy to listen to and they love it," explained Gary.

"I think it's music they can understand, the music we play is so straight forward," he said. "With so much other music, the only thing really appreciated is the vocals; here they can take in the music too."

According to Balmain High School music teacher Alex West, big kids aren't the only ones taking an interest in jazz.

"It's an unusual microcosm of Sydney suburbs, in that jazz has a very strong hold on Balmain and Rozelle," he said. "I think the children here seem to be less concerned with categorising music; rather, if it appeals to them, they like it." "There's even been a big renaissance in swing dancing, and they're being exposed to a lot more sounds via the commercial side of things. What they find in it is action and dancing, they're not there to listen to the saxophone player." The perfect embodiment of this new sound is local band, The Smooth jazz Café. Monkey Bar regulars, they have been drawing in crowds with their contemporary modern Café Del-Mar style jazz. A far cry from the sounds of the Unity Hall, they're still just as popular for jazz attuned audiences of the inner west.

"The audience, I feel is very sophisticated. I feel Balmain is very classy, very sleek, but also at the same time very artistic," said the Band's Saxophonist Jamie Gibson. "It's really the perfect environment for a jazz audience. If you're out and about in Balmain, you can find jazz groups like The Smooth Jazz Café at The Monkey Bar on the first Sunday of every month or the Unity Hall Jazz Band every Friday night between 9-12pm and Sunday afternoon between 3-6pm at the Unity Hall Hotel in Balmain. As little as five minutes down the road, you can visit the Commercial Hotel and hear jazz there too, as well as the Exchange Hotel in Balmain, and the Bridge Hotel in Rozelle.

WHAT'S THE ONE THING YOU CAN EXPECT TO HEAR WHILE WALKING DOWN DARLING STREET BALMAIN? THE SOUNDS OF TRAFFIC, THE CLINK OF COFFEE CUPS, OR THE LAUGHTER OF FRIENDS CATCHING UP FOR LUNCH?

BY REBECCA FLOOD

