

Harry Sutherland — BBM Youth Support Jazz Award Report

In May-August 2014 I travelled to the UK and Europe with the generous support from BBM to develop my skills as a jazz pianist. I arrived in London on the morning of 23rd May. My parents were there after holidaying for three weeks in Spain so I stayed with them in a hotel in Earls Court. Quite a few musician friends from Sydney, namely Grant Arthur and Mick Stuart, were in London as well as they were performing with a Circus Show that had a season at Southbank called 'Limbo'. There were a number of other Sydney musicians that I knew who were there for a few days, among them Matt Keegan, Eden Ottignon, Matt Ottignon and Daniel Pliner. They were performing with a number of musicians from India and drummer/composer Ben Walsh in his project 'Fearless Nadia' in which the ensemble played a live score to an old film 'Diamond Queen' (1940). I saw this on 25th June and really enjoyed it, particularly the virtuosity of the Indian musicians.

On Tuesday 27th May, after a few days sightseeing and walking around London with my parents, I travelled to Ashford to have my first lesson with legendary pianist John Taylor. I started off by playing one of my compositions 'June', which I feel fairly comfortable with. I asked him a lot about touch, tone and improvising within the language of a composition. He also spent a lot of time showing me chord voicings derived from Messiaen's modes of limited transposition. I also asked him about some of the music he has recorded, particularly with Kenny Wheeler. John generously gave me a book of music that Kenny had given to him and I played a number of these pieces of the ensuing weeks and since being back in Sydney. Over the next three lessons I learnt a lot from John (and recorded the lessons). The lesson time was divided between my compositions and music of John's and Kenny's, as well as some bits and pieces he had gathered from other students. With my compositions John would make suggestions of how to 'open up' or how to adapt them to become more viable vehicles for improvisation, which was very helpful. Also it was just good to hear firsthand about his amazing career and how his experiences have led him to where he is today.

That evening I met up with clarinetist/saxophonist David Horniblow to watch a gig at a venue called Blues Kitchen in Shoreditch. I knew David because he lived in Sydney for a year or two. David sometime in 2012 whilst I was playing in the house band at the Sydney Jazz Jam at Dome Bar. He knew I played a lot of traditional jazz with various people in Sydney and wanted me to hear two musicians in particular, clarinetist Ewan Bleach and trumpeter Pete Horsfall, who were younger musicians like myself and playing jazz in this vein. In fact Ewan didn't do the gig. A clarinetist from the US, Giacomo Smith depped for him. Also on the gig were guitarist Martin Wheatley and pianist Joe Webb. They were really amazing at what they did. There was more technical precision and a fluency at fast tempi, especially from Giacomo, that I had not often heard in Sydney.

On Wednesday 28th I went to see Kit Downes at 606. To be honest I was a little disappointed with this gig. I had expected to see Kit play his originals but it seemed to be a bit of a thrown together gig. Nevertheless, the musicians, especially Kit and bassist Conor Chaplin, were great. After this gig I went to the upstairs jazz jam at Ronnie Scotts. The trumpeter/bandleader Andy Davies was great. He had an impressive vocabulary and repertoire. But on the whole the standard of the jam wasn't that great and there was a lot of waiting around.

On Thursday 29th I went with Grant and Mick and some of their friends to watch a producer 'Quantic' at a really nice venue in Camden called Koko. I knew of Quantic because he had worked with an Ethiopian singer I sometimes play with in Sydney, Dereb Desalegn. He had a percussionist, a keyboardist and a singer with him and they played mainly a lot of Cumbia (type of Colombian music) influenced dance music, which I really enjoyed.

On Friday 30th I went to see Django a la Creole at Jamboree, a venue in a warehouse in Limehouse. I had met and played with bassist Sébastien Girardot when he had been in Sydney in the summer.

Clarinetist Evan Christopher was a friend of Geoff Bull, who I play with regularly in Sydney. It was a great experience to hear a band where everyone was a complete virtuoso (including the new addition of Danish guitarist Jacob Fischer) and also to chat with the musicians afterwards.

On Sunday 1st June I went to the Vortex Jazz Jam. This was held every week in the downstairs room of the Vortex club in Dalston and attracted some great musicians. It seemed to be of a generally more modern and less bebop approach compared to the Ronnie Scotts jams, albeit with a similar repertoire. The house band was run by guitarist Hannes Reipler and they played an opening set of standards. I spoke to him in the break and sat in on a song in the second with a band of great young musicians. Conor Chaplin was on bass, Daniel Harding on drums, Alex Haines on guitar and an alto player whose name I have forgotten. They all sounded great and seemed entirely content with playing this form of updated bebop without forcing energy on the music or 'playing out', which seemed somewhat different to how a lot of people play standards back in Sydney.

After the Vortex I went with Alex down the road to a pub called the Haggerston which had a great band, led by tenor player Mussinghi Brian Edwards. They played a lot of the more obscure hard bop repertoire by people like Horace Silver and Kenny Dorham. The pub was packed full of people listening to this bebop band which was a great experience. I went back every week.

On Monday 2nd June I booked a couple of hours at a rehearsal studio in Marylebone, where I would be having another lesson with John the day after. That evening I went to a gig at a place called the London Liquor Store in Dalston. I had heard about after talking to Pete after the gig a week earlier at the Blues Kitchen. It ended up not being so much a gig as an open rehearsal. I met Giacomo here as well as pianist Reuben James, tenor player Ruben Fox and guitarist Dave Archer. I knew of Dave through a friend in Sydney Jesse Whitney who suggested I look him up when I get to London. Anyway, I sat in with the band. It was very casual. As an open rehearsal it was okay to learn songs on the spot if someone didn't know it or to check out different changes or chord voicings.

I got in conversation with the Jack Abraham, who was the manager of the band (Kansas Smittys). He introduced me to one of the owners of the venue, Dan, who was very generous and let me practice there some days which was very convenient as it was just around the corner from the place I was staying.

3rd June another lesson with John Taylor this time in a rehearsal studio in Marylebone. That night, Sebastian had put me and a friend on the door for the Django A La Creole gig at the Pizza Express jazz club in Soho. Whilst the repertoire was pretty much the same as the gig the week at Jamboree it was still great to hear this band do their thing again.

Although I could practice at the Liquor Store it got tricky later in the day as there were a lot of people setting up everything and the holding meetings and so on. Kate Sweeney who was doing sound for Limbo put me in touch with a pianist from Perth, Glenn Hogue, who was working in London, mainly with musical theatre and choirs it seemed. He was very generous in letting me practice on his piano some afternoons when he wasn't using it, starting 4th June.

On 5th June I met up with Justin and Emile Martyn, another friend of Geoff Bull. Emile invited us to come and watch his band 'The Fallen Heroes' play at The Blue Posts that Sunday in Soho.

On 6th June I saw a great gig at an underground venue at a pub in Camden. There were two sets. First off was a quartet led by young guitarist Nick Costley-White. Second was a quartet led by drummer Jeff Williams with visiting saxophonist from New York, Chris Cheek.

On 8th June I went to the Vortex jazz jam again but this time Chris Cheek was playing the first set with Hannes. On 9th June I went to the open rehearsal for Kansas Smitty's in Dalston again but this time with Justin Fermino, a friend from Sydney. On 10th June I had another lesson with John at the Royal Academy of Music and on 12th June again had my final lesson with him at Marylebone.

On Friday 13th June I went to see Kansas Smittys play as a full band as I had been asked to perform with them that Sunday (there was no rehearsal). After watching a set I went to a concert at Wigmore Hall by 'Albert Ball's Flying Aces', a sort of mock trad band who played World War One era popular music in an authentic style. Although part of really liked the commitment in playing true to the period I think the end product wasn't that interesting and made me realise I enjoyed trad bands that aren't as pedantic about preserving the traits of the period a lot more.

On Saturday 14th June I travelled to Kit Downes' house in Walthamstow for a lesson. I was surprised that for someone of his talent and virtuosity that his piano was so rough! We began the lesson by me performing my composition of mine. We talked about compositionally reusing/expanding motifs or cells and ways to open up the composition for improvisation. He suggested that the piece sounded like it was composed more of less instead of more of a 'train of thought' process from beginning to end instead really exploring a singular idea. He said he always liked to be able to improvise an introduction to the piece using fragments of the written material, in this instance the intervallic structure of the melody. Also Kit suggested that I work on developing a big focus of the lesson was to further develop technique so that there could be a greater variety of touch, suggesting that I tend towards the same legato for all my soloing. Also a big point he made, and what I think I need to work the most on, is developing more control of dynamics within the hands so that every moment it is clear what the melody is. Overall, it was one of the best piano lessons I've ever had and I left there with some very specific things to work on.

Later that evening I met up with a young bassist from Sydney, Huntly Gordon. Even though we had never met we had played with a lot of the same musicians at home so I got in touch. We went to a lot of gigs and jam sessions (particularly downstairs at Ronnie Scotts) over the next few weeks and he seems to be playing more and more in London.

On 15th June I did a gig with Kansas Smittys at the Stables in Wavendon. This was the home of the jazz singer Cleo Laine and her late husband, saxophonist John Dankworth. The repertoire was largely Basie pieces, albeit without written charts, and some traditional jazz pieces. The band was Pete Horsfall (trumpet), Giacamo Smith (alto and clarinet), Ewan Bleech (tenor), Theon Cross (trombone and tuba), Dave Archer (guitar), Fergus Ireland (double bass) and Pedro Segundo (drums). I was filling in for Reuben James, who was on tour with Sam Smith. It was great to play with these musicians and to perform for Cleo Laine, who I met after the concert.

On the 17th I went to watch a singer that I sometimes play with in Australia, Ngaiire, play at Ronnie's Bar (the bar upstairs at Ronnie Scotts). She was accompanied by Jack Britten on keyboards and electronics. This was a relatively low-key gig that was more or less a practice for the new duo format (before it had always been with a live band) for what they would play at Glastonbury festival a week later. I caught up with Ngaiire and Jack a few times the next few days and it was good to talk, to Jack in particular, about music he was recording/producing at the moment and projects I'd like to embark on back in Sydney.

On 20th June I played at Servants Jazz Quarters, a cocktail bar in Dalston with a downstairs music room. This was a very informal sessions, mainly playing standards and bebop songs but I was amazed at how many people were there to see the music compared to Sydney.

On 22nd I got a lift with drummer James Maddren and Kit to their gig at Hert's Jazz at Welwyn Garden City. Also playing was Calum Gourlay on bass. This gig was amazing. This trio had been playing together for years and performed tricky music from memory and so cohesively. James's touch and control was amazing, as was Kit's. Curating this gig was Clark Tracey, son of the late great pianist Stan Tracey. It was good to talk to Clark as he had travelled and played in Australia a lot, albeit not for a little while.

On 23rd June my friends from Sydney, Noel Mason and Tim Geldens, arrived in London and I moved from my Airbnb accommodation in Dalston to a hostel in Camden. On 24th June did a recording with Grant in a studio in Hackney. This was an album of his originals. 'Limbo' has since moved on from London (it's in Brisbane at the moment) and we will be launching the album at The Basement in October. That evening I did a gig with David at Brewdog in Shoreditch. It was a last minute call as someone in the band had double-booked themselves. David had been really busy the last few weeks and we didn't get to catch up that much so it was really great to do a gig with him. Also playing was trumpeter Mike Henry, who David had played with in Chris Barber's band, and bassist Dakota Jim, who I think at some point also played in that band. Anyway, these players were very accomplished. Jim's impeccable sense of time and his traditional bass techniques (slapping) made it very easy to play with him.

On 25th June I had a lesson with another incredible young pianist Gwilym Simcock. Like Kit, Gwilym addressed making sure there was always a melodic focus and for technique to allow this. He talked about having a foreground and a background and honing the 'internal mixing desk'. Listening back to the recording the difference between his touch and mine is stark. It really made me realise how much work is needed to develop tone and balance to this level. Also just generally he talked about more communicating clearly to an audience through having more melodic and referential improvisations and more flexible structures in the compositions. He also introduced me to the music of Henri Dutilleux and Nikolai Kapustin and suggested that I use their music as inspiration for expanding the "textural repertoire" and making the piano sound more "complete". He also talked about developing independence between the hands with really good time. On the whole though Gwilym was very complementary of my music, particularly the compositions to which he asked if I wouldn't send him some sheet music for. But it was also a good reminder of how much work I need to do to get tone and time like he does.

On 26th June we went to see US soul band 'The Stepkids' at Bush Hall. Despite the room only being half full, I really enjoyed the mix of rhythmic energy, humour and jazz harmony.

From London I flew to Oslo with Noel and Tim. We were travelling rehearse and then play with the JM (Jeunesses Musicales) World Jazz Orchestra at the Kongsberg Jazz Festival for a week. The artistic director was Erlend Skomsvoll, who among other things has worked with the Trondheim Jazz Orchestra, Chick Corea and Pat Metheny. David Theak at the Sydney Conservatorium found out about this for us and suggested we apply. Somehow, three Australians formed the rhythm section. We stayed at Buskerud Folkehøgskole (a folk high school for heavy metal and filmmaking) in Darbu, which is about a hour southwest of Oslo. It was a great opportunity to play some varied repertoire, play at a high profile festival and most importantly to meet a lot of musicians my age from all over the world. These contacts will no doubt come in handy for future trips.

We saw some amazing music at the festival, both from touring US bands and local Norwegian bands. Among other things I saw Dave Holland's 'Prism' band (with Kevin Eubanks, Craig Taborn and Eric Harland), Joshua Redman Quartet (with Aaron Goldberg, Reuben Rogers and Gregory Hutchinson), Chick Corea/Stanley Clarke Duo (playing the music of Return To Forever), Stevie Wonder, Krokofant, a Trondheim Jazz Orchestra project and a folk trio that Ole Morton Vågan was playing in.

After Norway we took the overnight boat to Copenhagen where the Copenhagen Jazz Festival was on. The first day we saw Benjamin Koppel, a Danish alto player, in a trio with Scott Colley and Brian Blade. They did a masterclass in the afternoon and a concert in the evening. I saw lots more great music over the next few days in Copenhagen including Australian Chris Tanner's trio, US tenor legend George Garzone Quartet (twice, the second time with the addition of the equally legendary Jerry Bergonzi), Søren Møller/Ari Hoenig/Dick Oatts/Jesper Løvdal, Kenny Werner (masterclass then a trio performance with Johannes Weidmuller and Ari Hoenig) and Aaron Parks trio (with Thomas Morgan and Tyshawn Sorey).

From Copenhagen we took multiple trains to get to Rotterdam, the Netherlands. There we stayed for two nights with a friend of Tim's who lives there. We were there to see the North Sea Jazz Festival. The first concert was the Robert Glasper Experiment with guest singers Lalah Hathaway and Bilal and with the superb Metropole Orchestra with arrangements by Vince Mendoza. I also saw Jason Lindner's Now vs. Now, Derrick Hodge's band, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, Mehliana (Brad Mehldau and Mark Guiliana duo), a little bit of the Ambrose Akinmusire quintet (I would have watched the whole set but had seen it earlier in the year at the Sydney Festival), a sort of tribute concert run by Jason Moran (featuring legends Lonnie Smith and Benny Golson among others) and finally a little bit of Christian McBride's 'Inside Straight'. It was an amazing afternoon/night of music. Louder 'gospel'-style drums and synthesizers were prevalent in a lot of the concerts I saw there. I was especially blown away by Derrick Hodge's set (with keyboardists Michael Aaberg and Federico Pena) but to be honest I really enjoy everything I saw there.

After Rotterdam we spent two nights in Amsterdam at Australian ex-pat trombonist Lucian McGuinness' house. From there we took a train to Berlin. The first night we were there we met a guitarist friend, Will Henderson, from Sydney (Bellingen originally) who showed us a great Blues Jam. After a week, Tim and Noel went on a holiday to Italy and Spain but I stayed in Berlin to practice a bit and check out some music. I found a place on Airbnb in Neukölln with a keyboard I could practice on (I felt I had to a bit after seeing so getting the lessons in London and seeing so much great music over the past few weeks).

I played quite a bit in Berlin. I met a singer, Katia Demeester, bass player, Morgyn Quinn, and Marco Mingarelli, through Will. We played two gigs of Katia's original songs, once at Lowe Rein and then at Ut Ut Ut. The music was basically reggae/soul but the drummer, Marco, played mostly jazz. He organised a couple of other gigs. One was at a place called Shangl Hangl. This was with a great young bass player, Martin Buhl. We played a set then opened up the stage for people to sit in and play. Many great young musicians came down and played including Igor Osypov (guitar), Thomas Walter (guitar), Kuba Gudz (drums) and Jonas Friese (drums). Elias Stemeseder, who I knew of as the pianist in US drummer Jim Black's trio and had been introduced on an email from a friend in Sydney Finn Ryan, came down as well. It was great to meet him and hear about all the exciting things he's doing. Unfortunately I didn't get to hear Elias play at all as he was suffering from tennis elbow (too much practice!). Marco also organised another gig at Lowe Rein with Igor and a young Russian bassist Fyodor Stepanov. This was a really great experience, although there was not as good a turn out as Shangl Hangl and we needed to play very quietly to avoid noise complaints from the neighbours, a seemingly common occurrence in Berlin.

I also played a few times with Naomi Jean, an Australian singer/percussionist I had met whilst in London. Also playing with her were Carola Ortiz (visiting from Barcelona), Aurélien Landy Gana (also from Barcelona) and Justin Kimmel (from New York). They were exceptional musicians. Their music was accessible yet very complex, with a lot of it written in odd times. I saw them play a set of their originals the first week I was in Berlin and then a number of times after, usually sitting in on a few tunes. They were rehearsing a lot as well and on a couple of occasions I played along.

As well I played once with pianist Stephan Paul and violinist Brianne Curran at Stephan's house, of which he recorded and gave me a CD. I also saw a number of great gigs in Berlin, including the Greg Cohen/Eldar Tsalikov duo, Tony Buck duo (I forgot the name of the trumpeter but he was amazing), Slavin-Kowatsch-Hoopengardner-Leipnitz Quartet at B Flat, an open air concert with a triple bill at Lohlmühlenstraße, Eyal Lowett Trio (with Aidan Lowe from Canberra on drums), a modular synth free jazz band in Mitte and the 'Swag' band at Badehaus.

Overall, during the two months I was away I feel like I had a great variety of musical experiences. In London I had a lot of time to myself to practice and to reflect on the lessons. Studying with John, Kit and Gwilym really made me rethink some compositional ideas and also just what it takes to become fluent on the piano in terms of control of touch. Seeing so much music at the Kongsberg, Copenhagen and North Sea jazz festivals was inspiring. I truly saw many of the world's greatest jazz musicians. Also just making contacts in all these places is very valuable for the future. Jack, the Kansas Smittys manager, asked me just recently to play two nights at Ronnie Scotts with the band for the London Jazz Festival. I have some commitments here in Sydney for the next little while so I decided not to go back just yet but I would definitely consider emigrating or touring in the future. I would like to thank everyone at Big Brother Movement Youth Support for this incredible opportunity further my musical career through this exposure to so much great music and through making these contacts that will no doubt prove invaluable for future travel. Hopefully I can use these experiences to offer new perspectives on how to enrich the local jazz scene and also to assist Australian musicians travelling to the UK and Europe.