

BURNING TIME

Sydney jazz musician and composer Dave Halls has been playing piano for over fifteen years and has recently released the highly acclaimed *Burning Time* album, a diverse mix of original compositions. **Chris Ruhle** asks Dave about his musical inspirations.

CR: What were your early musical influences?

DH: I grew up in the Blue Mountains as part of a musical family. My grandfather was a violinist in cinema orchestras for silent films. My uncle was a composer and trombonist and performed through the 70s and 80s with local and international jazz artists including Tony Bennett and Louis Bellson. My sister played and taught the flute and was a member of the Sydney Youth Orchestra.

CR: How did your interest in jazz begin?

DH: At an open day for the Con High, where my sister went to school, I heard a traditional jazz band playing in the Joseph Post auditorium. I was blown away with the excitement and fun the musicians were having and generating on stage. I remember thinking that if I was to get into music, I wanted to play jazz.

CR: Serge Ermoll was one of your mentors. Tell us more.

DH: At first I was pretty scared. I had heard all about him being a private eye for twenty years, with three black belts in karate, and with the reputation of being the *enfant terrible* of jazz. But I was also inspired by the prolific work he had done as a pianist, composer and recording artist. I really wanted to meet him and learn from him as well. I am glad I did as it became not only a great mentorship but a lasting friendship.

Serge would often come to my place to give me a piano lesson and afterwards we would talk about music for hours. He would teach me the musical theory behind a piece, and then share with me invaluable experiences that he had gathered throughout his amazing music career in Australia and overseas. Serge has collaborated with jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie, Richie Cole, Ray Brown, Lester Bowie, John Scofield and many more. He taught me lessons that you can't find in text books, such as dealing with nerves and the pressure of being on stage – inner game stuff – through to planning a concert and dealing with musicians.

I would listen to his records and live performances and get him to explain what he was doing in the solos and why. We would listen to recordings of the jazz greats and he would talk about what was going on behind the music. He would recall what he had learnt playing on gigs with Dizzy Gillespie, Branford Marsalis, Jimmy Witherspoon, Ernestine Anderson and all the other great

musicians he had worked with. He would also share some of the mind games that go on during a performance. I also got to sit in with his band on a regular basis, receiving hands-on practical experience.

CR: What other musicians have influenced you?

DH: Besides Serge there are many jazz greats who have influenced my style as a pianist, composer and band leader. I admire George Duke's freedom, spontaneity and creativity as he plays through his different musical styles, drawing on elements of his jazz and blues heritage. I love the attitude and feel in Thelonious Monk's music which I adopt in my music and piano playing. I have always appreciated Cannonball Alderley's live concert recordings because of the amazing rapport and fun he has with his audience without compromising the musical integrity.

CR: What's the inspiration behind *Burning Time*?

DH: The title itself evokes an experience of timelessness – when the pressures of the world and the limits of time become irrelevant as you enjoy a great moment. It was through moments of 'burning time' that I was inspired to write the music on this album.


CR: In your music you incorporate the GuZheng. Can you tell us about it?

DH: It all grew out of a meeting with Amy Cheung who plays this ancient Chinese instrument.



The GuZheng is a plucked, half-tube zither with 21 strings in the D pentatonic scale. Harmonically it works really well with jazz and blues. I was excited with the creative potential of incorporating this beautifully sounding instrument into some unique jazz fusion compositions. *Yangtze* from the *Burning Time* album was very well received.

CR: What's next?

DH: I am bursting with new ideas and inspiration to write more music. I would like to establish my own signature voice with a diverse mix of jazz-influenced contemporary music. My band will continue to perform in Australia whilst we plan for an overseas tour to share music from the *Burning Time* album and other new compositions I am currently working on. 

Dave Halls performs at The Basement on Thursday 19 August.
www.davehalls.com