

MORE THAN JAZZ



With a mentor in Serge Ermoll, jazz and creative improvisation is what David Halls knows best. As a part-time teacher at Five Dock Music School, David brings a wealth of both knowledge and practical experience to his role at the locally-based music school.

District News had the opportunity to explore the depths of David's talent and discover

his versatility in musical improvisation.

Where did you conduct your studies in jazz?

I've learnt jazz piano from a mixture of music lessons and doing gigs. I have been very fortunate to get lessons from jazz legend Serge Ermoll. Serge - who has played with international jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie, Branford Marsalis, Sonny Stitt and

many others - became my mentor in jazz. He taught me a lot from his life experiences of playing jazz. All the good stuff that happens in my playing, he brought out. Meanwhile, I also learnt a lot simply by doing lots of gigs. There's only so much that a teacher can show or guide someone, the learning has got to come from the learner putting the lessons into practise on gigs and so on.

Do you come from 'a long line' of musically gifted family members?

I've always been surrounded by music. My mother sang, my sister played the flute and one of my brothers also played piano. I started out doing AMEB grades, which is great for learning basic music and getting a solid foundation with technique, sight reading and theory. I had a teacher who shared the love of music with me, which was priceless. But then it came to a point that I really wanted to play jazz, much more so than the standard classical music learnt through the AMEB process. And I also wanted to learn in line with the jazz approach, which is quite different to the classical approach. One of my uncles, a professional jazz musician, taught me a few chords and got me started on playing jazz standards. During university I then got lessons in some jazz foundations from Gary Daley before

meeting Serge Ermoll and taking lessons from him.

When did you first start performing?

I grew up playing in student concerts, nursing homes and church. But my first professional jazz gigs were in the Blue Mountains playing Wednesday and Friday nights at a motel in the early 90s. Basically the band was to provide background music whilst hundreds of guests were served dinner by a waiter dressed up as Manuel out of *Faulty Towers*. That was a crazy gig. That later led to a residency at the Grand View Hotel in Wentworth Falls, which was great and always full of action. We were happy with that because we built up a jazz scene and had regulars week by week.

What experience do you bring to your teaching role at Five Dock music school?

Apart from going through the jazz learning process I've got a lot of performance experience, which is where the very best learning takes place. I've played in so many different places, for so many different occasions and so many different audiences. I've also recorded on a number of CDs, including my own "Walking Home". The approach I take towards teaching is that whoever is learning is learning for a reason: to perform, whether to

their family members or in a club, church or local café. So it's towards performance that I present the theory and basics. There's lots of great theory in jazz, but it's useless without practical application.

What was the best piece of musical 'advice' you've received and who from?

Serge Ermoll would tell me "when the means becomes greater than the goal, that's when true art takes place". This placed great value on the process of learning jazz and treating it respectfully as an art form.

A bit of advice I tell my students is that you've got to enjoy the music - love it! Otherwise the music you play is not going to be very good. Sure, you've got to put the hard yards into learning the music which sometimes means being a little frustrated, but in the end you've got to enjoy it, otherwise it's not worth it.

Do you have a career highlight?

There are lots of highlights. Every time I do a new recording is great because I get to hear how I am progressing musically on a personal level. Whenever I try something new on a gig - I'll never forget the sheer force of playing with a full brass section for an outdoor concert in Coogee years ago. Or playing in a Portuguese based pop band.

Launching my CD was a real buzz because it was a time when all the guys on the album came together as a collective and created music together.

Has there ever been an occasion where a performance has gone disastrously wrong?

There was an embarrassing occasion in my earlier days when I was playing in a band that was supporting the opening of an art exhibition. The exhibition was made of glass hanging from the ceiling. Due to space, the only place the band could play from was under the exhibition. Well, we managed to play successfully without the glass falling on us, and we also managed to pack up afterwards without upsetting the exhibition. It was just that later when demonstrating a few things to one of the guests that we both managed to hit one of the glass objects and the whole exhibition came crashing down. I guess you wouldn't be too clever to work out that we never played at that gallery again!

What's the most rewarding part of teaching?

Having someone play a tune and seeing that they enjoy doing it. Also knowing that you've had something to do with a person's musical development and appreciation. Music is there to be enjoyed.