(Re)Valuing Australian Jazz

Unlocking the legitimisation of a culture through digital curation, presentation and availability of the Australian Jazz Real Book.

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ABSTRACT

In an Australian jazz context, many motivated individuals have forged a unique pathway of musically distinct creation to establish a particular sonic flavour not found elsewhere. The drive of many Australian musicians to create, explore and tell Australian stories is admirable considering the numerous challenges faced including geographic isolation. The Australian Jazz Real Book is a digitally curated ever-expanding collection of Australian jazz-related music, which makes available for the next generation of musicians to *act/react* to. The act of unlocking the availability of this music "Prevents it if from sinking into the waters of invisibility" as the late Graeme Bell put it, as well as creating a culturally significant document. The value has been created by establishing a substantial body of work that is distinct from other streams of Jazz. The momentum is constantly stoked in the community by monthly newsletters featuring new additions to the resource (often new album releases), which also provide ongoing value to subscribers. This paper seeks to illustrate how the AJRB has increased awareness and access.

KEYWORDS

Jazz, Australia, Education, Real Book, Digital Curationp

1 The Australian Jazz Real Book

The Australian Jazz Real Book is dedicated to the preservation and distribution of Australian Jazz in both digital and print. The aim with this site is to digitally curate the definitive collection of Australian jazz tunes from Australian composers. It is also designed for practising and performing musicians, educators and curriculum designers with the opportunity to integrate Australian jazz into music curricula. The idea of it is to create a resource that students can turn to for repertoire that is uniquely Australian; containing tunes that are 'gig-ready' and also representative of the Australian Jazz Sound.

Presently, the AJRB contains more than 1100 compositions from around 250 Australian musicians. Every month, an email newsletter is sent to subscribers typically featuring 6-20 new composition additions. In addition to the leadsheets; Artist photos, bio, links to YouTube, Bandcamp, iTunes, reviews, interviews as well as artist websites are provided. To assist educators, professionally recorded backing tracks and composition analysis are included on several tracks.

Figure 1: The Australian Jazz Real Book.

The physical edition of the AJRB contains 417 compositions. The development of the AJRB was the topic of my PhD thesis, where I undertook an extensive analysis of existing Real Books, as well as developing a methodology for developing a Real Book. This included key informant interviews, and data analysis from the Australian Jazz community via a web survey.

1.1 AJRB Organisation

Physically, the AJRB is organised alphabetically by title. Indexes include Title, Alphabetically by Last Name, and Alphabetically by First Name. Digitally, the AJRB is navigable through a number of different methods. Users can search directly for a specific piece if title is known. Users can also browse via Artist, organised alphabetically by first name. The rationale for this is to align with iTunes library organisation protocols, which organises by first name.

On each artist's page, there is space allocated for a scrolling image gallery; list of tunes by artist with active links and a summary of style, date composed, difficulty, type, key and time signature; biography, discography, review quotes; active url links including artist website, record company, iTunes, Bandcamp, and YouTube links.

There are 8 refinement tools in which the user can select Style, Year Composed, Difficulty, Tempo, Key, Tonality, Time Signature, as well as whether the composition is vocal or instrumental.

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An educator can select a tune for their student to learn based on a combination of parameters. For instance, selecting a tune that has the attributes of straight quavers, medium tempo, medium difficulty, in 4/4 time, in C minor; yields 12 tunes resulting from those parameter selections. Any number of these refinements can be toggled on/off for greater/lesser customisation.

1.2 Selection Process

The course of my research took a right hand turn when the respected Australian jazz writer Bruce Johnson informed me "The only way to effectively do something like this (develop an AJRB) is to do some kind of online database." What Johnson was implying here is constructing a democratisation of the music that every participant is (more or less) equal, and deserves to be represented. Johnson refers to the possibilities inherent in the Internet, where space is virtually unlimited and there exists scope to add relevant content and supporting documentation to the music. Johnson also refers to the difficult decision making process that happens when deciding what compositions should go in a culturally significant (but ultimately limited) document such as the AJRB, and what is left out.

One of the significant reasons why an AJRB did not get finished more than 25 years ago was due to the frayed relationships between the members of the editorial board charged with putting the book together. With an online portal delivering the music (and associated content) through digital subscription, there would be a reduced need to make politically difficult decisions as to what would be left out. This does not mean that I have accepted all submitted works – a level of curation still needs to be practised.

The selection process to determine the composition of the AJRB with definitive physical limitations due to available binding technology proved to be more discriminate. For more details on the methodology used to determine this composition, please refer to "The development of an Australian Jazz Real Book" (Nikolsky, 2012). In summary, a combination of quantitative and qualitative data was balanced in determining the composition of the AJRB.
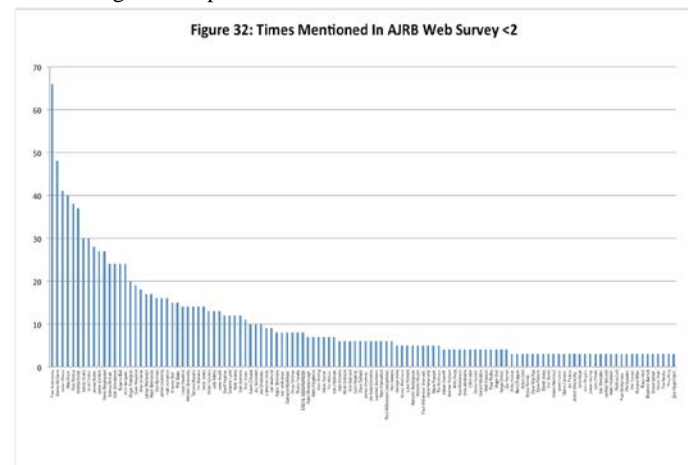

Figure 6: Frequency of artists mentioned in AJRB web survey.

For instance, an "importanceometer" chart was produced as part of the quantitative data gathering process, demonstrating the number of times particular artists were mentioned in the web survey when asked "What Artists would you like to see in an AJRB?" This data was balanced further with key informant interviews in which feedback was sought from industry insiders, educational institutions and elder statespeople with many decades of experience teaching and performing in Australia as well as internationally.

It is interesting to note that previous attempts to create an AJRB had methodologies that were questioned by the artists due to be represented. These involved a blindfold selection process with the aim to achieve non-biased selections from the chosen panel. Ultimately this effort failed, however it does illustrate the difficulty to try and find consensus amongst a group of people with diverse preferences, allegiances, values and perspectives. Further detail on this can be found in "The development of an Australian Jazz Real Book" (Nikolsky, 2012). An analysis of the previously used methodology was used to inform my approach in developing the AJRB.

1.5 Accessibility

Availability of the physical book can be obtained by purchasing from the AJRB website. As it can also be found in many educational institutions libraries, the resource often gets used in conjunction with other available Real Books in the reference section. However with the increasing mobility of students and musicians as well as the changing nature of libraries and resource centers, the digital resource is favoured. Individual digital subscriptions can be purchased.

In an effort to provide ease of access, tertiary educational institutions that subscribe to the AJRB have unrestricted access via IP range access for every campus. Students and teachers are able to access the resource on any device without login whilst on campus; as well as off campus through their institution's library portal.

2 Conclusions

Digital curation enables the dissemination of Australian jazz by making it available, and delivering it in an accessible, dynamic format. The AJRB is delivered both digitally and physically, to meet the different needs, preferences and expectations of multiple generations. The AJRB has been well received by the Australian jazz community, particularly in education circles. With continued involvement, digitally curating the AJRB has the capacity for changing the future, hopefully guiding it in a positive direction and promoting education, recognition, awareness and understanding of Australian jazz. Digital curation of the AJRB has influenced the direction of Australian jazz education even in its infancy, simply by being available in formats that are easily accessible.

In attempting to measure the impact of the AJRB, it is too early to tell whether there has been (or will be) a measurable musicological impact on the making and development of Australian jazz. Whether Australian jazz is unique and/or identifiable is beyond the scope of this paper and is challenging to answer definitively. With a critical mass of aspiring students learning and interacting with their peers; and interacting with resources provided by the AJRB, then this may influence the creation of new works. Perhaps the notion of a unique and identifiable Australian Jazz sound will emerge from the sustained interaction of these elements. In the meantime, the AJRB will continue to expand, represent and celebrate artists; as well as preserve and distribute the definitive collection of Australian Jazz.