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Oh, it's a jazz story

In August 2003, Jamie Oehlers, a young Australian musician based in Melbourne, landed in Sydney to play at the Side On Café, then the city's main contemporary jazz venue. Oehlers, a tenor saxophonist, performed with a local rhythm section before an enthusiastic crowd and flew home the following day. Another gig, another few dollars and satisfied fans. The performance wasn't reviewed, but perhaps it stayed in the memories of those who heard it and the local musicians who performed it. It would have taken a very observant reader to notice a tiny item in the same day's *Sydney Morning Herald*, telling us that Oehlers had just won the White Foundation World Saxophone Competition at Montreux, Switzerland, held during the Montreux Jazz Festival. In Melbourne, the *Age* also felt the event deserved similar coverage.

Such an achievement might have been thought worthy of at least a small feature, perhaps with a photograph. Indeed, if arts editors had shown a little more curiosity, they would have discovered something even more significant about the 2003 competition—one

that sign-posted important developments in the Australian jazz scene itself.

Jamie Oehlers had come second in the same competition the previous year. Winning showed that he was not only talented, but also determined. Going against the trend of pop culture trivia and celebrity gossip that often passes for arts news in the Australian press, here was an opportunity to run something substantial, a deserving story about talent and determination finally winning out. But there was more to the story: not only had one Australian won, but another, Willow Neilson, had come third, while yet another, David Rex, had been placed among the twelve finalists.

I can find no evidence of any other international music competition in which Australians have made up a quarter of the finalists, let alone provided two of the three place-getters, including the winner. There was a modest feature in the *Australian* and in Oehlers' birth city of Perth, the *West Australian* also ran a piece.¹ The occasion should have been celebrated, not only on the arts pages of our newspapers, but also on ABC arts programs, and on *The 7.30 Report*. It should have been, but it wasn't—because the art form was jazz, the music you can dismiss or ignore if, as an editor or executive producer, you are short of space, reporters, time or money, or if you simply don't like jazz.

Of course, the Australian triumph at Montreux in 2003 could be seen as a mere coincidence that said little about the state of contemporary jazz in Australia, a matter of three talented musicians being in the same place at the same time, playing their best

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and impressing the judges. However, the media silence makes one wonder about the range of interests of most of the arts-reporting community. Had anyone been interested, they could have determined, without much effort, that a new wave of creativity and energy was transforming the Australian jazz scene, and that these three musicians were contributing to it.

There are a number of remarkable aspects to the Australian contemporary jazz scene that should warrant at least modest, but on-going coverage in our print media. Yet, while review coverage is limited, non-review coverage of jazz seems destined to be restricted to occasional special jazz 'editions' of the what's-on supplements of newspapers, the kind of overview that appears every three or four years. A serious magazine like *The Monthly*, while covering opera and rock/pop, has ignored jazz from the very beginning, even though Melbourne, the magazine's home, can boast a jazz scene with the highest profile of any Australian city. Very occasionally, a 'jazz piece' might find its way into a fashion magazine: a bunch of fresh-faced young musicians modelling some modish gear, the backdrop to a fashion story. Sad to say, this might be the only way jazz can find exposure: our arts editors are either uninterested or struggling with increasingly tight budgets. Since most jazz writers are freelance, saving on their contributions remains a tempting option.

The lack of interest in jazz in the domestic media is shameful, because the growing impact of Australian modern and contemporary jazz is widely acknowledged overseas. How many arts editors/writers know