



# meet

## KEN FIELD

### RISK AND REVOLUTION

ADAM SIMMONS

Ken Field is a renowned composer, saxophonist, flautist, and percussionist who can mesmerise an audience with his vibrant musical compositions. With much acclaim for his solo work and performances with the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble, Ken has also written compositions for the much-loved children's program, Sesame Street. Known for his ability to push boundaries, Ken's commitment to the music community is evident by his role as President of the Board of Directors of JazzBoston and his significant contribution to the HONK! Festival of Activist Street Bands and its Australian iteration. He also shares his love for creative instrumental music as the host of WMBR's radio program, *The New Edge*.

PHOTO BY BRIAN LEFGE

I have enjoyed a friendship with Ken since we first met at Jazzahead a few years ago, learning of his ongoing connection to Australia. We caught up to discuss aspects of his musical journey, his passion for jazz and improvised music, his unique approach to performances and his role in fostering the jazz community.

**Where did your musical journey begin? I'm interested to hear how you were introduced to music and what part jazz played.**

How did I start? Well, like many in my generation I started playing a band instrument in 4th grade and chose the clarinet. I practised a lot, always making sure I got to the end of my lesson before I agreed with my mum that I should come downstairs for dinner. I would always say, "Just a minute, I have to finish my lesson." I have a kind of compulsive side to me which is handy when you're a kid practising an instrument.

I got pretty good at reading music and playing the notes on the page. I knew nothing at all about jazz or improvisation but when I got to high school – still playing clarinet – I was astounded and mystified by a guy who could improvise. I had no clue. I was just: "You're a god." I didn't know what to say. At the same time – I was born in 53 so it's quite some time ago – an interesting thing happened. Our family had a TV set, but it broke and my parents didn't fix it. This was by design. They saw the evil of television before many people did; they were pretty bright. So, I would spend that time upstairs in my room listening to AM radio, which at that time was playing pop hits but also R&B, Motown and all. Basically, I listened to a lot of music that had very metronomic time. I think that's what instilled in me a good sense of time.

Fast-forward to college. I was fooling around in the hall of my freshman-year dorm. And I ran into a door chasing a guy down the hall, broke my front tooth, meaning I couldn't play clarinet. The tooth was repaired but I still couldn't really play clarinet: it pushes out on the front tooth. So, I start playing flute, learn a little by ear of how that works, how improvisation works, how simple chords work and jam with people who play folk music and blues and such. At one point, somebody just blew my mind by explaining to me diatonic harmony and I was like, "Woah, that's how it works?" It was really an eye-opener.

I started playing with some people that were playing this broad range of cool stuff: Frank Zappa, McCoy Tyner, Captain Beefheart – stuff I didn't know anything about. I picked up saxophone, eventually studying at Berkeley with Joe Viola, a really wonderful saxophone teacher, now passed. I went up once a week to study privately with him, before attending Berkeley for a couple of years. Berkeley taught me how to function in a lot of different situations and technical aspects. That served me well in terms of being at least not embarrassed to go and play with people, which is a big hurdle. And that's sort of how I got into jazz and learning about improvisation.

**HONK! Festival, held in Somerville, Massachusetts since 2006, is dedicated to presenting community street bands and has spawned similar events across the globe, including Wollongong's HONK! Oz. How did you come to be so involved with HONK!?**

The first year HONK! was presented, I was asked to participate with my band, the Revolutionary Snake Ensemble. It was interesting because the organisation was more of a "disorganisation". I was apprehensive about this festival, like, "They're not giving me information, I don't know what's going to happen, where to go ..." Then the festival happened and I was blown away. It was genius. Much in the way of the spontaneity of jazz, it was improvised in a lot of ways. And I said, "Wow, a lot of people put a lot of work into this. Here I am, playing in a band, reaping the benefit of their work. I should help." So, I offered to join the organising committee at that point, and I've been with them ever since.

HONK! Oz started in 2015. An incredible couple involved in music in Wollongong, David Rooney and Lotte Latukefu, were thinking about an event, gathering brass bands from different places in Australia. And they saw that the HONK! Festival existed. At that point, HONK! Festival had spawned many different independent festivals all over the US and around the world. And they said, this is exactly what we're thinking of doing, so we're going to put together a HONK! Oz festival. And they must have posted something on Facebook. And I must have responded said, "That's great." And they saw that I existed, that I had a band with only six people as opposed to most of the HONK! community bands with 20 or more people. And they said, we could bring this guy over with his band. It turned out there was not enough funding, so they brought me over the first year to lead a pickup band and that's what I've been doing since then, with a little pause for COVID, with the Hoot Band growing to 75-100 people who join me. It's been the honour of my life to participate in this festival, get to know the people of Wollongong and beyond, and travel around Australia.

**You mentioned your Revolutionary Snake Ensemble, which is a long-standing and popular ensemble. Can you share something of its origins and approach?**

It started out as a gathering of friends, playing for a party. We were making music with simple elements – just horns, percussion, no material – and people loved it. It started as a fluid thing, though it's been stable for the past 7-10 years with some of the best players in the Boston area that I have the

distinct honour of having in my band. One of the things I love about the band is that while we play a combination of New Orleans traditional music, original music and interesting treatments of covers in a sort of second line style often, we don't have any preset arrangements. Every time we play a tune, it's different. The musicians love the fact they're not doing the same thing every night. And sometimes they're doing things that surprise me. We've been playing together long enough so things happen and I'm like, "Woah, that was cool." It's a great fun band.

What we're trying to do with JazzBoston is advocate for the jazz community, including musicians, audiences, venues and media. And we're doing some specific things that I think are impactful. One of the major radio stations cut back significantly on their jazz programming about seven years ago. We've been able to bring jazz back to that station by working with them and they now have a significant jazz presence. It's not just JazzBoston's doing but it's been a fruitful collaboration to help them understand why this is important music.

We're also producing jam sessions that people can get involved with for free, we're doing performances and we're working with local government to make sure they're aware of what's happening. We're also helping in some ways to promote activities that other people are doing. There's kind of an explosion of what's going on with jazz; there are several jazz festivals in the Boston area that are just kind of bubbling up. Some have been around for a little while, some are just starting. There's so much interest in this music.

As long as you categorise it with a "large tent" and be inclusive in terms of what you call jazz, improvisational music, music stemming from this African American tradition, there's a huge amount of interest amongst young people and older people. It's inspiring to see the response.

**How do you juggle touring with your regular radio show, *The New Edge*? I see that you include the show in your upcoming events. How does a radio show fit in with your practice as a performing artist?**

Any musician knows that listening to other music is an important part of your creative life. I got into radio when I was in college many years ago, at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, with a radio show in the middle of the night. I loved sitting there in the quiet, 3am in the morning, fully immersing myself in music, any music I wanted to play, with these huge speakers and I'm the only one there and not bothering anybody and I just loved that. It took me a while to get back to it, but I've been doing *The New Edge* for about 15 years now. It's inspired in a way by John Schaefer's *New Sounds* on WNYC, a widely influential show. My show covers a lot of territory stylistically. I restrict it to instrumental music as that's what I do myself mostly. I get so much stuff sent to me and I try to listen to pretty much everything: classical, contemporary classical, world music and music that just seems interesting to me. I stay away from particularly aggressive work as it doesn't necessarily suit me. I call it creative instrumental music. So that's what I do and I love it.

**What continues to inspire you about jazz and improvised music?**

I think that's an important question for everyone who plays jazz or any kind of music really. What's unique about jazz? It's important to recognise always the African American heritage of jazz. As leader of JazzBoston, an organisation which advocates for the jazz community, and being a white person, it's important to recognise where this music came from originally. The improvisational nature and spontaneity of jazz is what really keeps me interested. Also, the constant challenge. When you have music that's different every time you play it, not only can you spontaneously create melodies but you can also spontaneously create arrangements with a band. You can do things differently every time. Another part that inspires me about jazz is that it is such a large tent. You can incorporate many different elements into jazz. And still, it's jazz.

A thing that I talk about sometimes is how I consider every performance of jazz to be an experiment. An experiment is something that you don't know in advance what's going to happen. The thing about that is experiments sometimes don't work. That's the nature of it. It's not always going to succeed. I feel strongly that you have to be willing to take risks, you have to be willing to fail, you have to be not playing it safe. And that counts in terms of what you play melodically, how you arrange what songs you play – you have to be willing to take that risk of failure or else you're not moving things forward.

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