

GREGG ARTHUR: ANOTHER TOUR DE FORCE

by Eric Myers

Gregg Arthur
Foundry 616, January 11, 2024



Gregg Arthur: this great singer has unusual drawing-power for a jazz artist in the city where he is based...

As usual Gregg Arthur's concert at Foundry 616, on this occasion sub-titled "Sinatra – The Early Years" was sold out, confirming that this great singer has unusual drawing-power for a jazz artist in the city where he is based. These days I attend performances only intermittently, so have no idea how large normal audiences are at Foundry but the only comparable packed house I have previously experienced there, other than Arthur's fairly regular gigs, which I try not to miss, was that given by Australia's leading drawcard James Morrison and his quartet in April, 2023.

So, at least at the jazz club level, one has to assume that Arthur's drawing-power is considerable indeed. Whether he can move out of the jazz club milieu where he is a supreme performer, and pull an audience in the larger concert hall is soon to be tested. He's been booked for the prestigious venue City Recital Hall on Saturday, April 13, 2024 along with his working group, the Peter Locke Trio.

Speaking of that trio, this performance was a salutary reminder of how essential his three accompanying musicians are to Gregg Arthur's artistry: other than Locke on

piano, they are Craig Scott (bass) and Andrew Dickeson (drums). Many jazz singers are lone wolves out front as the star of the show, and it may not be particularly important which musicians are in the backing group, even if they get the occasional solo. The best Australian jazz singers (Gregg Arthur, Vince Jones, Michelle Nicolle, Tina Harrod, for example), present not just a lone singer out-front, but a package that includes thoughtful input from talented jazz musicians who are regular members of the group.



L-R, Andrew Dickeson, Gregg Arthur, Craig Scott, Peter Locke: a team of equals...
PHOTO CREDIT SALLY GLASS

It is now inconceivable to think of Arthur without thinking also of the three musicians Locke, Scott and Dickeson, who are part of the package. I have written before about their role: “We’re not dealing here with a mere backing group; these guys are a team of equals, and their friendship shines through.”

Arthur opened the performance with the first number that Sinatra, then a relatively unknown 23-year-old crooner from Hoboken, New Jersey, recorded in 1939: *All or Nothing At All*, with the Harry James Orchestra. A truly great song but of course regarded then as a flop, as it sold only 8,000 copies at a time when popular success was measured in terms of records sold.



Frank Sinatra, performing with Harry James's orchestra in 1943... PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA

Later, given Sinatra's rise to stardom, it was revived often down the years, with Sinatra replacing the smooth, crooning style that distinguished his early work with more hard-hitting versions, where he rode the pulse of the rhythm section with the characteristic more jazz-oriented swing-feel that became his trademark, and which was the key to Sinatra's popularity with jazz aficionados.

Arthur's approach at Foundry was reminiscent of the later Sinatra versions, and I suggest that Arthur's appeal to jazz fans is based on similar qualities which he shares with Sinatra: not only immaculate phrasing of the lyrics, but also an ability to swing, and feel the groove in the music, and how to ride on the pulse of a great rhythm section ready made behind him.

In a long career Sinatra recorded virtually every quality popular song of the 20th Century, including many immortal ballads from the Great American Songbook. So it must have been devilishly difficult for Arthur to select which songs to present from the hundreds available. As a lifetime Sinatra aficionado I believe Arthur chose well; I found the program enthralling, and immensely pleasurable; Arthur hit us with wave after wave of great Sinatra tunes.

Interestingly, there was one song I don't ever remember hearing before, and I wondered why I've missed out on such a great tune: *From Here To Eternity*, which was sung beautifully by Arthur. It was apparently written by a relatively obscure

American composer Robert Wells and obviously comes from the 1953 film of the same name which enabled Sinatra's career, then in the doldrums, to be resurrected with the assistance of the Mafia.

Arthur presented two sets, each containing ten compositions indelibly associated with Sinatra. As an inveterate documentationist, I fully list them here: The first set contained *All or Nothing At All*; *I Fall in Love Too Easily*; *I've Got The World On a String*; *April in Paris*; *Night & Day*; *Witchcraft*; *It Was a Very Good Year*; *The Way You Look Tonight*; *All The Way*; and *I've Got You Under My Skin*. The second featured *One For My Baby*; *Young at Heart*; *You Make Me Feel So Young*; *From Here To Eternity*; *In The Wee Small Hours*; *Come Fly With Me*; *Moonlight in Vermont*; *I Get a Kick Out of You*; *I'll be Seeing You*; and *My Kind of Town*.

The signature performance conventions which I now associate with Arthur were on display, built around the mastery of Peter Locke's accompaniment and solos on the piano. The contributions of Locke, Scott and Dickeson serve to render an Arthur concert a truly genuine jazz experience.

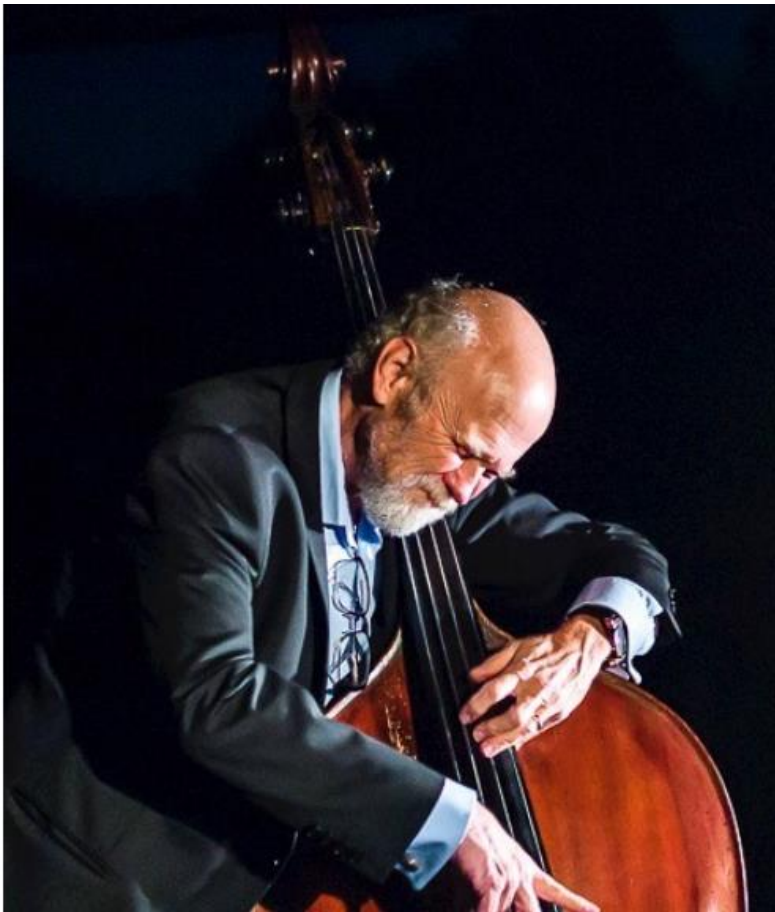
Arthur uses the availability of these three fine musicians in several clever ways, creating the sort of variety essential to a rounded performance. Take for example how he uses drummer Andrew Dickeson: In *I've Got The World on a String*, Arthur called for four-bar breaks with the drums; in *April in Paris*, there was a long piano solo – if my memory serves me well, Arthur called on Locke to take an additional chorus – and he (Arthur) then called for a drum solo. Significantly, Dickeson changed from sticks to brushes for that solo, evidence of not only his good taste but also his ability to provide sound variety in Arthur's performance.



Andrew Dickeson, using brushes: good taste and ability to provide variety in Arthur's performance...

In *I've Got You Under My Skin*, after the piano solo, Arthur did a chorus with Dickeson again using brushes; and in the second set he did at least the first half of *You Make Me Feel So Young* two-out with Dickeson who this time used sticks. These devices may appear simple and pedestrian when analysed, but they serve an important purpose at the subliminal level in the audience. When the warmth of the ensemble re-enters after these episodes the audience's spirits are invariably lifted.

Similarly, consider the role of Craig Scott, one of Australia's great double bassists. I don't know the technical details of how he has achieved such a great sound but it is a sound that is uniquely round and full – I cannot think of any Australian bassist who articulates more clearly every note in his solos – but at the same time that sound in my experience is never too loud. After singing the head of the tune *Witchcraft*, said to be Scott's favourite Sinatra song, Arthur immediately called for a bass solo, which was a lovely treatment of the tune's harmonic changes. It was almost as if one could hear the tune in Scott's mind as his extemporisation expertly varied the song's melody. In such moments, one knows we are hearing great jazz.



Craig Scott: a sound that is uniquely round and full... a bassist who articulates clearly every note in his solos... PHOTO COURTESY VIKTOR ZAPPNER

Similarly, Arthur opened his version of *It Was a Very Good Year*, with bass only accompaniment by Scott. Here I was struck once again by the orchestral sound of Scott's double bass which renders him a master of the art of accompanying a vocalist

in duo mode – that is, providing a sufficiently orchestral sound on the double bass to keep the singer in tune, and to compensate for the absence of other instruments. Subsequently Scott’s solo in the tune which is one of my own all-time favourites *In The Wee Small Hours* was similarly memorable.

I was somewhat concerned, particularly during the first set, by Arthur’s use, from time to time, of what might be described as “the big ending” – what I’ve referred to in previous reviews as “the unexpected use of full-throated phrases for dramatic effect”. This is part of Arthur’s armoury of vocal techniques, as much as it is of Tony Bennett’s, and is designed, I gather, to lift the audience’s desire to applaud.

As a sensible singer, Arthur uses this technique sparingly but my notes indicate he employed this device at the end of *April in Paris*, *Night & Day*, and *All or Nothing At All* (emulating the original 1939 version when Sinatra took the last note up a fifth to create a big ending). I suspect there may have been other instances of this which I failed to document. Knowing that Arthur had complicated back surgery on December 6, 2023, I wondered if this expenditure of energy at Foundry was prudent. I was not surprised to hear the following day that Gregg had been in considerable pain during the performance, and was exhausted at the end of the night.



Arthur, still recovering from back surgery undertaken in early December, 2023...

Still, Arthur was true to the spirit of Sinatra’s great showstoppers. I’m thinking here of tunes like *I’ve Got You Under My Skin*, *Come Fly With Me*, *I Get a Kick Out of You* and the unforgettable coup de grace *My Kind of Town*. Arthur’s powerful versions of these classics were truly inspiring. Once again my intuition was that Arthur might be overdoing it, given his fragile physical condition, but that was something I only sensed, being seated close to the stage. That fragility was not visible in Arthur’s

persona on stage, I believe. A lesser performer might well have sought the audience's sympathy – you're lucky to have me tonight, as I'm recovering from surgery - but Arthur, a consummate professional, displayed no visible evidence of that fragility, and I believe that few in the audience would have noticed the difficulties under which he was performing. To all intents and purpose, January 11, 2024 at Foundry 616 could only be considered as another triumph for one of Australia's great jazz singers.

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

John Clare, "Gregg Arthur: Certainly a Jazz Singer", Foundry 616, 21 October, 2016 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/john-clare-14>

Eric Myers, review of Gregg Arthur's album "Last Call", The Weekend Australian October 14, 2017, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-2>

Eric Myers, review of Gregg Arthur's album "Jazz & Cocktails", The Weekend Australian, February 27, 2021, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-40>

Eric Myers, "Gregg Arthur: A Quintessential Jazz Club Experience", Foundry 616, May 7, 2021, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/miscellaneous-postings-6>

Eric Myers, review of Gregg Arthur's album "The Ballad Collection", The Weekend Australian, February 12, 2022, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-52-1>

Eric Myers, "Gregg Arthur's Tribute to Tony Bennett", Foundry 616, March 4, 2023, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/miscellaneous-postings-11>