

## GREGG ARTHUR: A QUINTESSENTIAL JAZZ CLUB EXPERIENCE

by Eric Myers

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Gregg Arthur  
Foundry 616, May 7, 2021

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*Gregg Arthur: according to John Clare, a genuine jazz artist...*

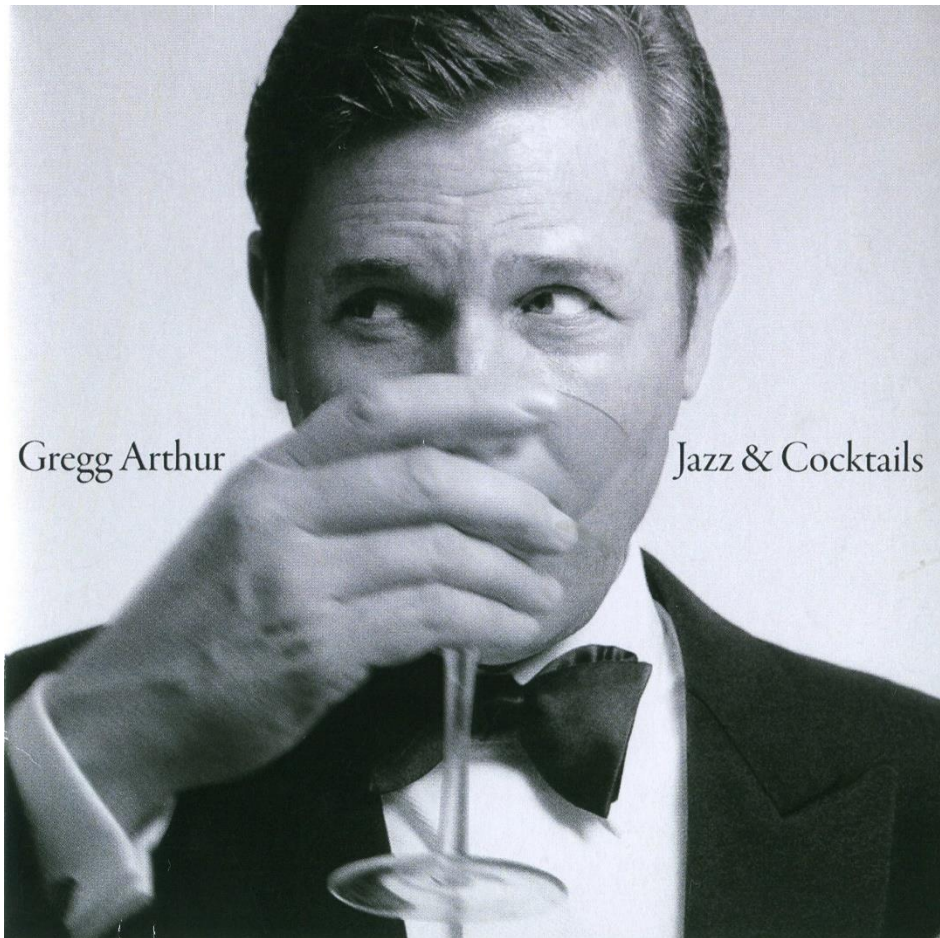
I first heard the singer Gregg Arthur on his CD *Last Call* in October, 2017\*, shortly after I succeeded the late John McBeath, reviewing albums for *The Australian*. Confronted by an unusually smooth stylist, I wondered whether he was a genuine jazz artist or merely a run-of-the-mill cabaret singer so, for an informed opinion, I consulted the writer John Clare, whom I knew had heard Arthur in live performance. Having been assured by John that we were dealing with an

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*\*This review can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-2>*

authentic jazz artist, I concluded my positive review rather pompously: “If [Arthur] has stage presence, the sky’s the limit.”

Before long, I saw Arthur for the first time at the Camelot Lounge, and found that there was no doubt about his stage presence: impressive indeed. Recently, in 2021, his latest album *Jazz & Cocktails* came my way, and in my review for *The Australian*, I praised his versions of well-known standards as highly competitive with classic versions by great jazz singers of the past.\*



*Gregg Arthur's most recent album "Jazz & Cocktails"...*

Meanwhile, one night at Johnston Street Jazz, I encountered Arthur sitting in with the John Harkins Trio, and introduced myself after the performance. He and I were innocently chatting together when an unidentified woman interrupted our conversation. Pointing her finger at Gregg, she said “sex on a stick”. She then turned and walked away. Interesting.

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\*This review can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-40>

Still, whatever preludes were in place, I was ill-prepared for the gig at Foundry 616 on May 7. A confluence of advantageous factors were in place: a club with good acoustics, a good piano and an excellent sound system; a packed house; an adoring and listening audience (one could hear a pin drop throughout two sets); a group of superb musicians; and a singer out front who, with everything going for him, is able to rise to the occasion.

Arthur's bread-and-butter is of course the Great American Songbook, the essential, immortal language of jazz. As we know, many tunes in this repertoire, when presented by lesser singers, can sound like tired workhorses. A great singer however can make each song his (or her) own, and provide an interpretation which enables the song to fly again. In a sense it's the use of improvisation to redefine a song on the spot, and it's a rare ability indeed.

Why this is so in Gregg Arthur's case is largely a matter of opinion, but I suggest one important factor: good taste. In *I Fall in Love Too Easily*, and other tunes such as *Moonlight In Vermont* and *Misty*, he showed that, in presenting the big ballad, he's never guilty of overstatement. He's a nonchalant - that's an adjective I'm wilfully using as a noun, to describe a jazz artist who is calm and relaxed, and not trying too hard. One outcome of this sort of understatement is for the singer to use his full-throated voice sparingly, so that when this happens, particularly in Arthur's upper register, his voice has maximum impact, lifting the listener's spirits.



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

Another essential quality is Arthur's ability to sell a song – that is, to capture the intimacy of a great lyric, and connect the audience to it. While there were many examples of this throughout the performance, it was especially apparent in his beautiful version of Jobim's *Corcovado* (*Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars*).

Other notable qualities in Arthur's armoury are good humour and humility. Here he's immensely assisted by his resident trio: pianist Peter Locke, bassist Craig Scott and drummer Andrew Dickeson. We're not dealing here with a mere backing group; these guys are a team of equals, and their friendship shines through.

Locke, a subtle player who is just as much at home in more traditional forms, is the sort of unobtrusive jazz pianist one might take for granted. In this setting, his nuanced solos were heard to great advantage, egged on by Arthur through verbal cues, and eye-contact. Although I've heard Locke many times in the past, I hadn't fully realized the extent of his delightful unpredictability within a classic mainstream style. Because he doesn't pound the piano keyboard, and instead uses nimble fingers to caress the keys, I was glad to be close to the stage to follow his train of thought.



*Peter Locke: a delightful unpredictability within a classic mainstream style...*  
PHOTO CREDIT  
ANASTASIA SHRITS

It appears that Craig Scott has put as much thought into the sound of his double bass as Lloyd Swanton, whom I heard at Foundry recently on March 13 - a great trio performance including singer Virna Sanzone and pianist Matt McMahon. It says something for the supreme individuality afforded by the jazz genre, to say that Scott and Swanton have radically different sounds on the bass, but are equally superb. Scott is a master of the art of accompanying a vocalist in duo mode – that is, expediting the difficult task of providing a sufficiently orchestral sound on the double

bass to keep the singer in tune, and to compensate for the absence of other instruments. Their duo version of *Nature Boy* was accordingly a memorable highlight.



*Craig Scott: he and Lloyd Swanton are equally superb...  
PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY*

Similarly drummer Andrew Dickeson. With musicians as good as this on tap, there's little wonder that Arthur wishes to feature them. How heartwarming it is to hear a drummer who is not afraid to use brushes. Arthur's bright version of *When Your Lover Has Gone* backed only by drums (with Dickeson using brushes in his solo) was a tour de force. Even in a robust, swinging version of *Days Of Wine & Roses* Dickeson stayed with brushes throughout; a lesser player might well have picked up the sticks and exploded onto the cymbals.



*Andrew Dickeson: a drummer not afraid to use his brushes... PHOTO CREDIT GSDARK*

A welcome guest was the guitarist Charlie Meadows, who came on stage half-way through the first set for Arthur's version of *Mona Lisa*, and was an indispensable presence for the rest of the performance. The extra colour that his electric instrument was able to provide, enhanced the performance absolutely, providing variety in an overall sound that, without it, might have seemed one-dimensional.



*Guitarist Charlie Meadows: he enhanced the performance absolutely, providing variety in sound...PHOTO COURTESY YOUTUBE*

I have no doubt that Arthur's having one foot in the cabaret camp does not hurt his appeal. For some of his adoring fans, perhaps this is the key to their allegiance. It was energizing on this night to experience a rare phenomenon in today's world: a jazz artist who actually has a substantial following.

But jazz is not only about commercial imperatives; it's also about artistry and musical excellence. I'm fussy when it comes to vocalists, and very hard to please. I feel that this country has only a handful of great jazz singers. This quintessential jazz club experience confirmed for me that Gregg Arthur is one of them.

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