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# Wangaratta Jazz and Blues Festival review: Wet weather doesn't dampen spirits

November 2, 2015

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US trumpeter Dave Douglas put his versatility on show. *Photo: Roger Mitchell*

## MUSIC

### WANGARATTA JAZZ AND BLUES FESTIVAL

★★★★

**October 30 - November 1**

Just after 4pm on Sunday afternoon, as Linda Oh's agile basslines were spiralling around Gian Slater's exquisite vocals in the Holy Trinity Cathedral, the heavens opened on Wangaratta. Inside the cathedral, the effect was beautiful, the sound of the rain reverberating softly through the hall. Outside, though, the brief but apocalyptic downpour was creating chaos for organisers of the Wangaratta Jazz and Blues Festival.

The Garden Stage – the festival's newly unveiled outdoor venue – was instantly flooded, forcing impromptu schedule changes for the rest of the day. Fortunately, artistic director Adrian Jackson and his festival team are seasoned improvisers, juggling performance times and venues to accommodate stranded bands (including James Morrison and his entire 47-piece Academy Jazz Orchestra).

Apart from the rain, and the glacial conditions in the main theatre (I think the thermostat must have been set to "Arctic"), this year's festival was brimming with pleasurable experiences. The international component of the program has shrunk considerably in recent years – presumably due to budget constraints – but the overseas acts that did appear all made strong impressions.

The international headliner, US trumpeter Dave Douglas, demonstrated his supreme versatility in three different settings. He guided the Monash Art Ensemble through his masterful new *Fabliaux* suite, and was clearly delighted by the skill with which the players negotiated his intricate writing, intersecting parts and shifting time signatures.

In quintet mode, Douglas and his superb band demonstrated a collective focus that lent most pieces a powerful forward-momentum, even when they bristled with complex harmonic and rhythmic structures. And while the mood was often fierce and feisty, the players evoked a soulful and tender lyricism on traditional spirituals like *Deep River*.

The quintet's bassist, Linda Oh, also presented a compelling concert of her own compositions, as well as the entrancing duo encounter with Slater. Two other duo collaborations were memorable for their spirit of in-the-moment exploration: Douglas's set with pianist Paul Grabowsky, and Mike Nock's meeting with US bassist David Friesen.

Friesen also gave a beguiling solo performance in the cathedral, using loops to add rhythmic depth to his subtle musical stories. Canadian saxophonist and flautist Jane Bunnett brought her new band Maqueque to the festival, featuring five young female Cuban musicians. Bunnett's abiding passion for Afro-Cuban music coursed through every note she played, her phrases often melding with the vocal harmonies employed by her youthful colleagues to enrich their ebullient tunes and instantly infectious rhythms.

There were many other highlights, ranging from Lloyd Swanton's heart-rending (and deeply personal) *Ambon* suite to TNT's effortlessly uplifting trio performance. Bassist Sam Anning won the festival's prestigious National Jazz Awards, and was back on stage on Sunday evening as part of Daniel Susnjar's Afro-Peruvian band. Susnjar radiated a joyful energy that infected not just his fellow bandmembers but the entire auditorium, and sent us out into the still-damp night air with smiles on our faces, a syncopated spring in our step and a renewed appreciation for the musical riches this festival provides year after year.

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