

Perth pianist Konrad Paszkudzki has keys to castle of American jazz

By ERIC MYERS

12:00AM MAY 23, 2019 • 2 COMMENTS

Perth has a tiny jazz community compared with Melbourne and Sydney, but its musicians are punching above their weight internationally. Saxophonist Troy Roberts plays with American keyboardist Joey DeFrancesco and is featured on the latest Van Morrison album, *The Prophet Speaks*. Bassist Dane Alderson is with legendary US fusion outfit the Yellowjackets. Guitarist Tim Van Der Kuil is the musical director for pop singer Adele.

A young pianist with a hard-to-pronounce name — Konrad Paszkudzki — may well be the best of this impressive group. Paszkudzki's fascinating odyssey across the past decade has landed him in the top echelons of American jazz.

Paszkudzki has been a member of the John Pizzarelli Quartet for five years. Pizzarelli, 59, son of legendary American guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli and an acknowledged master of swing guitar in his own right, has more than 20 albums to his credit. Paszkudzki first joined Pizzarelli in 2013 for the latter's regular four-week season at New York's Carlyle Hotel.

The young Australian, now 30, plays about 150 concerts annually with Pizzarelli. "That means six months out on the road per year," Paszkudzki says. "Usually four weeks per year in Brazil, Europe and Japan, and the rest is all over the US and Canada. One month at the Carlyle, one month at Birdland in New York. I could go on."

Paszkudzki lives in New York but has another gig that takes him to the other side of the country. In 2017 he became artistic director of Jazz at the Ballroom, a non-profit project in San Francisco in the former residence of Bing Crosby. "Whenever I'm not on the road with Pizzarelli," says

Pasz kudzki, “I jet between New York and San Francisco every week.”

More on this later, but let’s return to Western Australia, where it all began. Paszkudzki was born in Bunbury in 1988. His parents, Ala Paszkudzka and Jurek Paszkudzki, left Poland in 1981 shortly before the communist regime declared martial law, when there were fears of Soviet military intervention. After a year as refugees in Germany, the parents and two infant daughters arrived in Melbourne. Three months later they moved to Bunbury, where Jurek found work as a chemical engineer. Konrad was born there in 1988.

A piano prodigy, Paszkudzki was 14 when named Young West Australian Instrumentalist of the Year. At 15, he was a student at the Western Australian Academy of the Performing Arts. He turned 19 just before graduating in 2007.

He has since been showered with awards, including the \$3000 Melville Toyota Jazz Scholarship, awarded for the “most outstanding graduating student” through the WAAPA jazz department. In 2008 he received the \$10,000 James Morrison Scholarship and spent a year touring with Morrison.

In 2010 he received a \$30,000 West Australian Young People and the Arts International Scholarship, funded by the state’s Department of Culture and the Arts.

Of Paszkudzki, Morrison says: “To put it simply, he is jazz.” Morrison is only one of a procession of influential patrons to have contributed to Paszkudzki’s rise.

American musician and academic Shelly Berg, dean of the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami, passed through Perth in 2007. He subsequently arranged for Paszkudzki to be offered a scholarship for two years’ study, tuition free, to complete a master of music degree. Paszkudzki moved to Miami in 2009. Paszkudzki’s interest in the scholarship was enlivened by the fact his childhood hero, drummer Jeff Hamilton, was the artist-in-residence at the institution. Hamilton is known in Australia for his work with Canadian singer Diana Krall, but some will know him best as the drummer on two extraordinary Morrison albums, *Snappy Doo* (1989) and *Snappy Two* (2012).

In Miami, Paszkudzki was not backward in cultivating his hero. Performing at a function where Hamilton was in the audience, the young Australian chose a repertoire that would catch the drummer's ear.

"I absolutely loved and knew a lot of the Ray Brown Trio, Jeff Hamilton Trio and Oscar Peterson repertoire, so that's what my trio played all night," Paszkudzki says.

"Jeff and bassist John Clayton listened throughout the night, and that was how the relationship started. A few weeks later Jeff asked me to play a concert with the Clayton-Hamilton Orchestra. We rehearsed some trio at his house, then he asked me to move to LA, and I did that just two months after graduating in 2011."

Paszkudzki spent a year in Los Angeles with Hamilton's groups but soon felt the inevitable pull of New York.

His dream run continued, this time courtesy of real estate mogul Adam Rose, an expert in the design and construction of high-rise apartment buildings, but also a jazz pianist and aficionado. Rose was the executive producer of Paszkudzki's first album — the first of seven albums — and facilitated a one-year residency for the pianist at New York's 54 Below, the cabaret venue underneath Studio 54.

Performing in San Francisco in 2017 Paszkudzki met Suzanne Roche, owner of Crosby's former home. After he performed in the Crosby ballroom with Pizzarelli, Paszkudzki spoke to Roche, who offered him the job of artistic director with Jazz at the Ballroom.

"My role as artistic director and board member is to oversee the bookings of the artists, take care of logistics, bring in new board members and donors, to raise the awareness of the scholarship program and workshops in schools, and help the brand expand and grow into a jazz force in the coming years," Paszkudzki says.

His own piano style is reminiscent of several of the great pianists of the past, moulded into an intoxicating amalgam.

“He exhibits the blues foundation of Erroll Garner, the touch of Ahmad Jamal, and the fleet fingers of Oscar Peterson,” a reviewer wrote in *Jazz & Blues Florida* magazine. “Konrad has a pearly touch, a sense of history, a sense of drama, and a love of the blues,” says Wynton Marsalis, “and an elegance which is borne of high-minded dedication.”