

Adler launches local authors book

One of Australia's most ambitious and comprehensive music history projects has been completed and is to be launched in Sydney in May by the world renowned harmonica virtuoso, Larry Adler, at the start of his fifth Australian tour.

Blue Mountains musician and music historian, Ray Grieve, has spent 10 years researching and writing on the history of the harmonica in Australia, with the finished work comprising a book title, "A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket".

Part of this project included the compilation of rare Australian harmonica recordings dating back to 1908. This music will be made available on double CD through Larrikin Records, while a four volume cassette set of limited edition will be available from Ray Grieve.

"A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket" traces the harmonica's path from the gold rush era through the vaudeville years and includes the recording pioneers in the fields of jazz, folk, classical and country music.

Previously unknown facts on the role of the instrument in the Australian education system and the story of the many men's, women's and children's mouth organ bands of the past are included.

Larry Adler viewed the manuscript in England and agreed to launch the book, an event that will see a welcome reunion of many of Australia's great players, such as Horrie Dargie at the national media launch event on May 9.

Ray Grieve said: "Despite the brilliance of Adler, the harmonica was not always taken seriously as a musical instrument by historians or publishers.

"Currency Press took a serious approach to the way this work should finally be presented, the result being an impressive book of over 100 pages with around 100 photographs, champion-



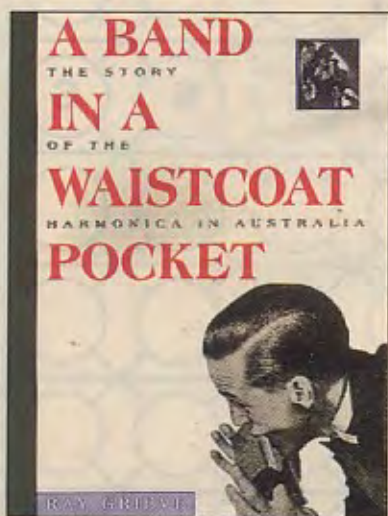
Ray Grieve

ship results and a discography.

"The harmonica is one of the most popular instruments ever, in Australia's history. It has played a big role in our social life for well over a century or more."

Information about the launch of "A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket" can be had by contacting Sandra Gorman at Currency Press on (02) 332-1300.

BLOWING IN THE WIND



RAY GRIEVE'S book on the history of the harmonica.

on the early recording artists. "It was quite a piece of detection tracking these old musicians down," Grieve admitted. "Many of them had been forgotten; no one knew who they were."

One accomplished muso Grieve interviewed was Nellie Collier, a former Australian mouth organ champion ("1937 or 1938, I think"), who was an active member of the Melbourne Ladies' Crackerjack Mouth Organ Band.

"They were really big time, the top women's band in Australia," said Grieve.

Nellie recalled: "I joined the band in 1932. We played on 3KZ every Sunday night for half an hour. We played at the zoo, we played at Pentridge jail. We took over a whole church service. We even led a funeral."

As to the popularity of the mouth organ, Nellie believes the answer is simple. "It cost two shillings and sixpence," she said.

Band leader Horrie Dargie, who Grieve describes as "Australia's most successful harmonica player", agreed.

"It was small and cheap. Most of us couldn't afford any other musical instrument," Dargie said. "But it was as much a social thing as musical."

A pioneer of the harmonica in Australia, Dargie played with Larry Adler, John Mills, Ella Fitzgerald and Oscar



AUSTRALIA'S most successful harmonica player Horrie Dargie.

"Mouth organ bands were quite distinctive to Australia," Dargie said.

"But the man who changed everything was Larry Adler. When his first record, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, was released in the early '30s we were stunned. When we realised it was a mouth organ we were astonished."

Dargie, who is semi-retired but can't resist playing occasional guest spots at RSL clubs, recalls playing with Larry Adler in Papua New Guinea during World War 2.

"He stopped in the middle of his act and said, 'There's an Australian kid in the audience and I'd like him to come up.'"

"I made an unsuccessful attempt to

persisted and I found myself on stage beside him. It was like being in the presence of God."

The mouth organ remains popular today, and Grieve's book includes the current careers and activities of "harmonica people" who originally became established outside of mainstream or pop music.

"It's one of the most egalitarian musical instruments ever created," Grieve said.

A Band In A Waistcoat Pocket: The Story Of The Harmonica In Australia, by Ray Grieve. Published by Currency Press. Rrp \$19.91

Story: DENISE KENNY

Classic Adler gives Gershwin tunes a

By SUSAN HORSBURGH

LARRY Adler calls composer George Gershwin a "sexual addiction" so you'd expect him to have a feeling for his music.

Yesterday, the world's best harmonica player gave a haunting rendition of Summertime, his heavily lidded eyes closed, his nimble hands fluttering before his face.

"Every time I play Gershwin I get a sexual frisson," he said afterwards.

"I can't tell you why — what makes a man attracted to one woman and not another?"

In Sydney for his first Australian tour in 25 years, the octogenarian is enjoying a renaissance with the success of his *Glory of Gershwin* album — which features Adler and a Who's Who of pop, including Elton John, Sinead O'Connor and Jon Bon Jovi.

He was initially reluctant to try pop.

"I told Sting 'I'm an old man, I'm not in your world.'"

But the CD, he says, has changed his life.

Adler will gleefully tell you the CD — which went gold in Australia and sold 1.2 million worldwide — has put him in the Guinness Book of Records as the oldest artist to reach top 10 in the pop charts.

At the launch yesterday of Ray Grieve's book, *A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket — The Story of the Harmonica in Australia*, the self-described ham and consummate self-promoter was wisecracking and namedropping with great gusto.

"I'm at the age where whoever I meet I've met their father," he said.

"At a party in London recently Rupert Murdoch told me, 'My nanny took me to see you when I was 8 years old'. Now that's an ageing remark."

Adler, who recorded with Duke Ellington and Stephane Grappelli, is credited with turning the harmonica into a classical instrument.

He worked closely with George and Ira Gershwin and has played as a soloist with the New York Philharmonic.

The beauty of the mouth organ, as he calls it, is that it isn't a "gimmick instrument".

"What you put into it comes out," he says.

"It's right up against you so it has to play what you put into it."

Yesterday Australian harmonica player, Horrie Dargie — who says "nobody's an answer to Larry Adler" — recounted his first meeting with the master.

Fighting in New Guinea during World War II, Dargie and his mates made their way to the American base to see Adler and Jack Benny in concert.

He was stunned when Adler invited him on stage to accompany him.

"It's an experience I've never forgotten," Dargie said.

"It's a bit like God telling a parish priest to say grace."



Larry Adler performs yesterday . . . 'Every time I play Gershwin I get a sexual frisson'

o still keep a band in their waistcoat pocket



By BRUCE ELDER

All the legends were there. They came from as far away as Rockhampton and Melbourne. And it was all because of the humble mouth organ.

There was the band leader Horrie Dargie and the great blues player Jim Conway. There was Richard Brooks, who played harmonica on Gary Shearston's early records, showing off his \$6,000 solid silver chromatica and his mint-condition Larry Adler 78s. There was Kurt Jacob, who fled Germany in the 1930s and set up a branch of the Hohner company in Australia. And there was 84-year-old Nellie Collier, who had flown up from Melbourne, a special early Mother's Day present from her family.

They had all gathered for the launch of Ray Grieve's *A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket: The Story of the Harmonica in Australia*, a fascinating oral history which focuses on the years between the wars, when it seems as though every town and suburb in Australia had its own mouth organ band.

Nellie Collier, a former Australian mouth organ champion ("1937 or 1938 I think"), an active member of the Melbourne Ladies' Crackerjack Mouth Organ Band, recalled: "I joined the band in 1932. We used to practise once a week. We played on 3KZ every Sunday night for half an hour. We played at the Zoo. We played at the ladies' section of Pentridge jail. We took over a whole church service. We even led a funeral."

The launch of *A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket* is the first joint venture between the "performance publishers" Currency Press and the record company

Larrikin Entertainment. Chief Larrikin, Warren Fahey, offered a potted history of the mouth organ in Australia from its "sounds that calmed the animals" origins with drovers and shearers to its melancholy function in the trenches during the two world wars and its blues-folk revival in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was left to Larry Adler, the mouth organ's greatest exponent, to launch the book. He did so with typical humour, telling a range of amusing jokes, recounting witty anecdotes and performing a spine-tingling version of *Summertime* from *Porgy and Bess*.

The 81-year-old Adler, a wonderful mixture of raconteur and unreconstructed *roué*, talked of his "sexual addiction" for the music of George Gershwin, his memories of the poet Maya Angelou as a young chorus girl and his admiration for the way blues harmonica players such as Sonny Terry "played out of their life".

He described Currency Press's publisher, Katharine Brisbane, as having "an unfortunate name" for a Sydneysider and asked if he could rename her "Adelaide". He recalled meeting Cher and, seduced by her charms, telling her: "I wish I was 79 again." In the end, when Adler was swamped by admiring autograph seekers, it was the melancholy, sentimental sounds of the "band in the waistcoat pocket" which endured.

"Why was the mouth organ so popular?" I asked Nellie Collier. "It cost two shillings and sixpence," she replied.

It was truly the most egalitarian musical instrument ever created, which is probably why the composer Alfred Hill described it, in 1935, as "Australia's national instrument".

Boomerangs and Crackajacks

Ray Grieve, *A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket: The Story of the Harmonica in Australia* (Sydney: Currency, 1995)

While the heyday of the harmonica has undoubtedly passed, the instrument retains popularity in Australia in many spheres and at all levels, from beginner to virtuoso. Its best known exponent, American octogenarian Larry Adler, could still hold audiences in thrall during his concert tour "The Glory of Gershwin" earlier this year: he also launched this book in Sydney.

Ray Grieve's delightful book, a mixture of oral history and documentary research, explores a previously unrecorded aspect of music's role in the social fabric of Australian life. There are parallels however with fascinating work already done by Kay Dreyfus on all-female dance bands of the 1920s and 30s—women were also active in mouth organ bands—and John Whiteoak and Duncan Bythell on the brass band movement. The sheer portability of the mouth organ—as implied by the title—gives Grieve's research an extra dimension.

In the book's five "parts", Grieve covers the history of importation and manufacture of the instrument, focussing on Allan's, Albert's and the German firm Hohne; the mouth organ band movement from the 1920s on; championships and competitions; the harmonica in vaudeville and on record; and folk music and virtuosi. Grieve does not trace the use of the harmonica in recent mainstream popular music. An appendix lists results and adjudicator comments from major championships, and there is also a discography.

The adjudicator's comments contain an oft-quoted gem from composer Alfred Hill, who stated in 1935 that he regarded the mouth organ as "Australia's national instrument" (pp. 13, 53, 108, back cover). Whatever we might make of this claim, Hill is also

pivotal in a glorious anecdote. In awarding top prizes on this occasion to P.C. Spouse, a frequent winner and employee of event sponsor Albert's, Hill caused an outcry. The event was re-run in the men's dressing room, with competitors sitting in judgement on place-getters; Spouse put in such a performance that Hill's original judgement was upheld.

The photographs are plentiful, many restored by Raema Grieve. Superb shots of impeccably uniformed mouth organ bands elaborately posed behind rows of trophies are in stark contrast to the motley crew of an all-boy primary school band from Sydney's Redfern; the instrument was nothing if not egalitarian! There are also wonderful early photographs of music retail establishments, some with their owners posed outside in a suitably proprietorial manner. Appendix 3 reproduces images of harmonicas marketed here from 1879 to the 1980s, such as the Boomerang and Crackajack brands.

The book design is attractive, although the text placement—close to the bound edge on both sides—is less than ideal for the type of binding used. There is also a sprinkling of literals. A source of frustration for me is the book's lack of documentation. There is a generous page and a half of "Acknowledgements and References" which certainly help, but no footnotes, nor a list of published or unpublished print sources such as local histories. The material in the book which derives from the author's interviews can usually be deduced from the context. Also available to accompany *A Band* is a commercially released eponymous double CD on the Larrikin label: a commendable joint venture with Currency Press.

newsletter

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The man with the golden hum

James Cockington shares tales of the tin sandwich with an Australian harmonica buff and hears the legend of Percy Spouse.

This story begins with a coincidence. In the early 1970s, when Ray Grieve was playing with Sydney folkband the Rouseabouts, the group's harmonica player brought along tapes of some old 78rpm records he had found. They featured a man called P. C.

Spouse, described on the labels as Australasian Mouth Organ Champion. The name seemed vaguely familiar. Grieve's wife had mentioned that her late step-grandfather had also been a pretty handy harmonica player. His name was Percy Spouse. It couldn't be, could it?

Percy and P. C. Spouse were the same man. Grieve listened to the records with renewed interest and through the scratches he could tell that this man was an extraordinary musician. "Every note he plays is perfect, bell-like, no matter how fast he plays," says Grieve.

This surprise personal involvement led Grieve into an odyssey to preserve Australia's forgotten harmonica history. In 1995 he published the book, *A Band In A Waistcoat Pocket*, detailing the importance of this most humble of instruments in our social history. He has also collected, and remastered, as many of the original records as possible, releasing a selection on CD and tapes.

In his book, Grieve writes that the mouth organ craze began here with the arrival during the gold rush of Germans, many bringing along their "harmonicons". By WWI just about every digger was packing a tin sandwich, as harmonicas were popularly known, in his kit. This was music for the masses, predominantly the working class.

The peak of popularity came in the Depression era, when J. Albert & Son (Albert's), the company that was to later give us the Easybeats



Harp on: clockwise from above, the Boomerang Grand, Ray Grieve, the Silvabelles in 1930, and Percy Spouse en route to England in 1922.

and AC/DC, was producing a massive range of harmonicas.

Frank Albert had a gift for names. Early models were called the Woolloomooloo Warbler and the Kangaroo Charmer, later versions were released as the Wallaroo and Coo-ee, but his most popular brand was the Boomerang. "Everyone had a Boomerang," says Grieve. "They must have made a fortune out of them".

Cheap mouth organs could be bought for threepence and Albert's shrewdly promoted its product by sponsoring school bands, including the Cleveland Street Boomerang Primary School Band. In 1927, this band was featured on 2BL's *Children's Hour* playing their theme song, *Clevo*. A photo suggests that some of the boys either couldn't afford shoes or preferred to played barefoot.

For Albert's, there were huge profits in harmonicas. For proof, you need only walk past Boomerang, the Billyard Avenue, Elizabeth Bay, waterfront mansion built for Frank Albert and his family in 1926. The Boomerang logo adorns the front gates and there's a 40-seat cinema inside. It was then Australia's most expensive house and last changed hands for a record \$15 million in 1996. That's a lot of harmonicas (and sheet music, the other money-spinner for Albert's during that period).

The company's main rival was Allan and Co in Melbourne, makers of the Crackajack harmonica.

Such was the popularity of harmonicas during the 1920s and

'30s that mouth-organ band competitions were held throughout Australia, with participants judged on presentation as well as musical ability. "On all occasions, stage discipline was carried through to a high degree of perfection," wrote Doug Wallace, a member of the 25-man Rockhampton Mouth Organ Band in the 1930s. "Our bearing was brisk as we appeared from behind the curtains and took up our appointed position. A smart turn to face the audience was followed by positioning the mouth organ [in the left hand] just above the belt buckle and then covered by the right."

To add to the theatrics, Wallace noted, the conductor would give a secret signal. All instruments would be raised to the performers' mouths - "the top of the tongue touching hole number four or perhaps five". Such moves would be rehearsed in church halls throughout the land in those sepia-coloured days.

Top bands were as well-known as football teams. Harmonica groups were formed by workers in department stores, post office branches and tram depots. At one stage, Grieve notes, there were more than 30 harmonica bands in Victoria alone. Competition was fierce and audiences flocked to see them play.

"It is my experience that in any organ band competition where the house was packed with a few friends," no competition will be held in the presence of the judge. "The choice of a few friends," no *The Road To Gu* 1931. The choice of competitions was and Scottish airs, waltzes and hymns like jazz, appeared

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TRADESMEN'S ENTRANCE



"It is my experience that a mouth organ band contest will draw a packed house where a jazz competition will be held in the presence of the judge, the players and a few friends," noted Jack O'Hagan, *The Road To Gundagai* composer, in 1931. The choice of songs at such competitions was traditional - Irish and Scottish airs, military marches, waltzes and hymns. Modern music, like jazz, appeared to be treated with

Spouse certainly didn't end up living in a waterfront mansion. He visited Boomerang only once.



suspicion by mouth organists. The blues style was unheard of.

A few all-female orchestras were popular, notably the Silvabelles, the Suttonias and the Dahlia Harmonica Band. Best known of all was the 30-strong Melbourne Ladies Crackajack Mouth Organ Band, sponsored by Allan's, and uniformly decked out in pink and white or orange and white.

In this climate the best performers were treated as demigods. After winning the first Australasian championship at the Ballarat Coliseum in 1925, Percy Spouse, a Sydney shoe salesman, was hired by J. Albert & Son to tour the country promoting Boomerangs in schools and stores. It was an early example of celebrity endorsement, although Spouse certainly didn't end up living in a waterfront mansion with a built-in cinema. He got to visit the Boomerang mansion only once.

When the harmonica craze ended in the late '30s, he went back to selling shoes. If he had been exploited by the company there was no indication of it in the man himself. His family remembers him as a happy-go-lucky man, happiest when playing with his grandkids.

Ray Grieve regrets that Percy Spouse died before they had a chance to meet. He has tried to track

down a box of Percy's personal harmonicas but they have disappeared along with his collection of the 10 records he had made in his lifetime. It has taken Grieve more than a decade to track down copies. He went to New Zealand to find one.

His book is very much a tribute to Spouse - the man and the musical climate that made him, briefly, a national star. It has also made Grieve a walking, talking museum of harmonicas. The power of the amazing tin sandwich lives on, and there appears to be renewed interest in the instrument.

The irony is that Grieve does not play harmonica. He was a guitarist with R&B bands in the '60s and '70s, the best-known being the Elliot Gordon Union. These days he prefers to play the flute. His reluctance to even try the mouth organ is understandable. He knows he will never be half as good as old Perce.

Ray Grieve will speak and play selections from his collection of rare grooves at 10am today at the 20th Sydney Harmonica Festival at the Fitzroy Concert Hall, Woodstock House, Church Street, Burwood. There will also be workshops, lunch and, from 2pm, Sydney's first modern championship competition. Entry \$45, until 5pm.