

3:23 am

By Mark Simeon Ferguson
For the UNESCO Cities of Music Jazz Relay 2025

My name is Mark Simeon Ferguson. I am a composer, arranger, pianist and I am currently the Head of Jazz at the Elder Conservatorium in the University of Adelaide, which is situated on beautiful (but unceded) Kaurna land.

I have been involved with the UNESCO Cities of Music Jazz relay since 2023, co-ordinating and arranging the music for Adelaide's contributions. I was honoured to be asked to provide a piece of music for the 2025 relay.

I wrote 3:23 am a few months ago while I was leading a 3-day tour with five of our 3rd year Jazz students in the regional city of Port Augusta. The group featured an all-female frontline and was in part designed to give these young women a safe place to continue to develop their skills and to be role models for younger women. *If you watch the Adelaide section of the 2024 relay you can see them!* In three days we drove nearly 600 kms, held 13 workshops and concerts across primary schools, high schools and in the community and with worked with general music classes, choirs, rock bands, percussion groups, and random ensembles—like you get in most schools!

Early in the morning in the middle of the tour a tune came into my head and I opened my computer at 3:23 am to write it down.

I had been pondering how so many of the themes of the 2025 UNESCO International Day of Education, “Learning for Lasting Peace” seemed be relevant on that tour—like gender equity, the ‘transformative power of learning’, sustainability, the need for greater racial equity...

We were experiencing the ‘transformative process of learning’ all day: many students were seeing their very first musical concert, let alone jazz concert. In workshops, myself and my students were engaging the local students in activities where they had to learn new skills, accept that they might fail a bit, and work and perform alongside us. I was really pleased to see our students being such excellent role models, nurturing and encouraging the students.

Port Augusta is at the centre of the pivot towards renewable energy with massive solar farms, a concentrated solar thermal plant and 50 windmills. The city used to house our state's coal-fired power station, so it is wonderful to see how things are changing. While renewable energy has provided new industry and employment, it is not at the scale of the previous coal industry, so the area is not thriving yet.

Geographically and culturally Port Augusta is a cross-roads town. The city is on the land of the Nukunu and Barngarla people. We workshoped with many first nations students, and the region is also quite ethnically diverse with a high number of immigrants from South Asia and other countries.

And being a regional city there are significantly less opportunities full stop...

Daisy one of the saxophone players on the tour is from Port Augusta and we were able to visit her family there — it was a beautiful homecoming for her, especially in the community concert. I was also born an hour further away on Barngarla land in Whyalla so the trip was meaningful for me on other levels (especially on my morning run on the red dirt with the Flinders Ranges in sight).

So basically the piece tries to reflect a lot of the 2025 Education themes. The odd phrase lengths (3-bar, 7-bar and 5-bar sections) were designed to make the piece feel slightly uneasy and to create a sense of urgency: urgency for action on gender issues, urgency for cultural and racial equality, urgency for greater access to quality education (and music education in particular) and urgency for climate action.

This performance video is also trying to capture an essential jazz educational experience — **young players** (here represented by current students and recent graduates) **playing alongside older players** (staff members!).

I wrote it as a light, open, contemporary jazz waltz with a potential back beat. We played it with an understated swing feel at first but in the version on the video recording we used more of a straight approach, especially in the rhythm section. It could also work as a 12/8 gospel vibe (technically 9/8 a lot of the time).

If your group prefers you could flatten out the sections, making each section 4 or 8 bars long (just add bars where relevant): this may work better for some younger bands, especially when improvising over the form.

I wrote the arrangement featured on the video for my band Marmalade Circus and we performed it a few weeks ago in the Queen Street Jazz Festival here in Adelaide.

I have included as an xml file of the tune so can create your arrangements more quickly.

I am hoping to finish a big band chart for it soon (I have an orchestral commission due in a nine days so hopefully I can finish it after that).

I hope you enjoy playing this piece!

Mferguson