

OBITUARY: ADE MONSBOURGH 1917-2006

by Diana Allen OAM*

[This obituary is based on an interview with Ade Monsbourgh which took place in 1986. A previous version of this article appeared in the magazine Australian Jazz & Blues, Volume 1, No 4, 1994. Dick Hughes's Ade Monsbourgh obituary can be read on this site at the link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-38>]

Ade 'Lazy Ade' Monsbourgh was born on the 17th February 1917 in Melbourne. He died in Nathalia, Victoria, on the 13th July, 2006. I first met him in the early '80s when he came to Glenormiston in Neville Stribling's band to perform for a concert that I had arranged during my many years in the Western District of Victoria.

After I moved back to Melbourne in the mid '80s and established Club 177, the monthly Sunday Jazz Luncheon Club that I subsequently operated for 15 years, I asked Ade if I could give him a 70th Birthday party. He agreed, and from then on his annual jazz birthday party became a ritual and we became firm friends. His "birthday bash", as we called it, opened the program each year and a great time was had by all, quite apart from the great music that resulted. These events always featured Ade's Late Hour Boys, in other words, whoever happened to be available at the time, and with whom he enjoyed performing!



Author of this obituary Diana Allen (on microphone) with Ade Monsbourgh (holding tenor sax) in 1992. Others in the background are drummer/washboard player Ian Smith (left) and Graham Coyle at the piano...PHOTO COURTESY DIANA ALLEN

**In the mid-1980s Diana Allen established Jazz Australia in order to promote, present and preserve the best Australian classic jazz, both from Melbourne and interstate. In 2018 she received the medal (OAM) of the Order of Australia in the General Division, for service to jazz music.*

Ade Monsborough was indisputably one of the founding fathers of Australian jazz. His music is easily distinguishable due to his own unique sound, something that all jazz musicians aspire to. He also had a unique stage presence. Both of these characteristics have captured the imagination of musicians and audiences alike, throughout his life. Added to this, his innate understanding of phrasing, timing, dynamics and understatement, set him apart. It's been said that most Australian classical jazz musicians have something of Ade Monsborough in their style, and his originality and ability to achieve hotness with understatement, influenced and inspired jazz musicians for 50 years.

Lazy Ade, as he was affectionately known, was a multi-instrumentalist. He was a key member of Graeme Bell's original jazz band formed in 1941 that put Australian jazz on the world map. The band's visit to Prague in 1947 instigated an enormous jazz revival in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom, as history has since documented.



A shot of the front-line players in the Graeme Bell band, circa 1947, L-R, Ian Pearce (trombone), Ade Monsborough (trumpet), Roger Bell (trumpet) and Pixie Roberts (clarinet)... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION

Ade Monsborough was the product of a musical background. His father was a singer and his mother played piano and violin. His introduction to playing music was at the age of four. When given a mouth organ, he “ripped off a tune”, as he put it. Several years of piano lessons followed at Carey Grammar in Melbourne, but were never really successful, due, as he later realized, to the fact that he was taught nothing about harmony.

Even as far back as that, he was fascinated and curious about the mechanics and intricacies of harmony. He wanted to know why certain chords went into others, and, being unable to find out such things from his teachers, he eventually became disillusioned and asked to be released from lessons. He discovered however, that as soon as the lessons stopped, he went straight back to the piano and began interpreting the 'hot' music of the day in his own way; he was a natural improviser.

It took him a long time to work out the harmony structures on his own, which he eventually realized were the key to all Western music. He discovered by experimentation that 7ths lead into majors, that there were only three diminished chords, and that the whole of western music is based on twelve notes. He also found that learning to read music off by heart didn't help him to read or to get where he wanted to go. Thomas 'Fats' Waller became a big influence, *Handful of Keys* and *Numb Fumblin'* being two great favourites, "however it took me a long time to get that swing bass going," he recalled.

By the late 1920s he was thoroughly aroused by jazz. After hearing Clarence Williams, nothing was ever the same again! He heard a recording with a trumpet and clarinet in it, playing nearly in the same register, "the trumpet was fairly high, so it could pitch against the clarinet and start 'clashing' with it". This gave him such a kick, he thought "well this is it, this is what I'm going to do." This theory always excited him, "you have to get that good sound between two instruments."



Monsbrough heard Clarence Williams (above), and nothing was ever the same again... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

During the early 1930s, one of the most active areas of interest in jazz in Australia was at Melbourne University. Whilst Ade was a student there, he led a band called The Shop Swingers in which he played piano, and later with Sam Benwell, formed the University Rhythm Club. By this time he was also playing banjo and guitar, and both valve and slide trombone. At the outbreak of war he joined the band of the Melbourne University Regiment and was handed a tenor horn which he found “surprisingly easy to play”. Before long he was also playing trumpet, clarinet, alto, recorder, and later violin.

1941 was the dawning of an extraordinary and significant era in Australian jazz. It was the birth of the Graeme Bell Jazz Band of which Ade Monsbrough was an integral part. In 1947 the Bell Band left Australia for Europe and the Eureka Youth Festival in Prague, and as a consequence became the first Australian jazz band to be heard live abroad.



Graeme Bell's Australian Jazz Band recording at the Supraphone studio, in Czechoslovakia in 1947, L-R, Russ Murphy (in rear, drums), Pixie Roberts (clarinet), Lou Silbereisen (with back to camera, bass), Roger Bell (trumpet), Ade Monsbrough, valve trombone), Jack Varney (banjo). Bell, on piano, is obscured... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION

As Bruce Johnson points out in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz*, during the second Bell Band's tour Ade was presented with a plastic alto by the manufacturer, an instrument which later became something of a Monsbrough trademark in Australia. Len Barnard recalled one of Ade's first attempts at alto with glee, "Ade came into Bob Clemens music store one day when I was there. He asked

Bob if he could try an alto, being into Eddie Shine of the Washboard Rhythm Kings at the time. After hearing the experiment, Bob enquired flippantly ‘What’s this, are you going *modern*?’ After a few honks, Ade archly replied ‘*That’s not modern!*’”

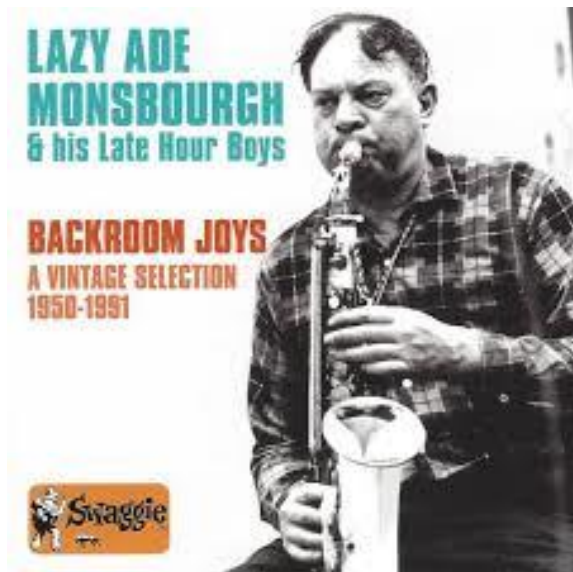
After the Bell Band’s second tour abroad in the early ‘50s, it broke up. Ade declined an offer from Humphrey Lyttelton to join his band and came home to establish the manufacture of Pan Recorders with Pixie Roberts, an interest which also manifested itself in the *Recorder in Ragtime* album made in 1956.



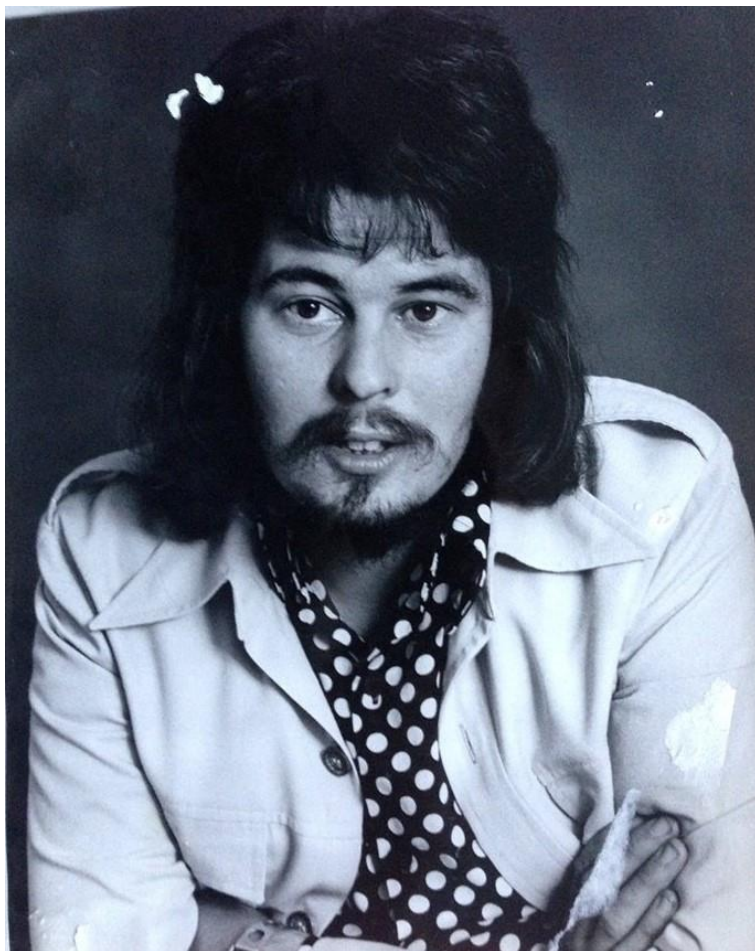
A shot of the Humphrey Lyttelton All Stars, with Lyttelton on the far left, then L-R, two unidentified musicians, then Pixie Roberts (tenor sax) and Ade Monsborough, playing his white plastic alto sax. Ade declined an offer from Lyttelton to join his band...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Ade’s own band, The Late Hour Boys, which produced many great recordings over the years, was never a working band as such. These recordings feature many of Ade’s own compositions for recorder, for which he became so well-known. This instrument remained a crowd pleaser for Ade for the rest of his life and never failed to bring the house down!

Apart from being a practicing musician, Ade was a school teacher. He also taught music at Clemens music store which was where, in the early ‘60s, he was approached by a young Allan Browne plus several other members of the original Red Onions, for guidance with their new band. Allan recalls, “I first met Ade in 1960. At that time his album *Backroom Joys* was probably the most played recording in my modest collection. It was fantastic for the Red Onion Band to actually meet and learn from such a giant. We were incredibly naïve and he gently guided the horn players and rhythm section through the intricacies of chord progressions, improvisation and



ensemble playing. He was our ‘guru’ and father figure, sorting out immature ego problems, introducing us to established musicians of the time, and helping us practically and with exposure to the significant venues, including the Melbourne Jazz Club.”



A young Allan Browne: Monsborough was the Red Onions’ ‘guru’ and father figure, sorting out immature ego problems...PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

Ade considered that musicians should go back to the roots of the music, and the masters who originally played it, and recharge their batteries from time to time. He was optimistic that there would always be a percentage of young musicians interested enough to keep traditional jazz alive, as has been the case with classical music. He thought however, that jazz courses should place more emphasis on the founders and the roots of the music. He considered that if the “passion and the pain” of that early music gets neglected or forgotten, the loss will be immeasurable. He also believed that modern jazz should be called “contemporary music”, so as not to confuse the public. He also questioned whether the advent of jazz studies courses will produce more or better musicians than in the past when no-one was *taught* jazz, “you either had it or you didn’t!”



Monsborough on clarinet: jazz is the saddest music that was ever invented. It's a cry from the heart... PHOTO COURTESY NIGEL BUESST COLLECTION

Ade’s observations about present day amplification and recordings are interesting. “The 1920s recordings of Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton sounded the way a band sounds when you walk into a room and hear it acoustically. You can’t get better than that. Everyone talks about special effects, but the human ear is the judge. Why they’ve brought in all these newfangled ideas where you hear bands coming from everywhere, I don’t know. You can’t get better than those original recordings, they can’t record like that now”.

I asked Ade some years ago whether there was anything he hadn’t achieved musically and still wanted to do... “to play better of course” was his immediate response. “I’m very disappointed in myself as a musician. The only time I’ve ever practised has been on stage. I’ve tried to practise, I’d arrange the reed, rip up and down a few scales and think, that’s OK.... I’d then go out into the garden.”

I also asked Ade the old esoteric question about his philosophy of jazz. He replied briefly “jazz is the saddest music that was ever invented. It’s a cry from the heart, like Louis. Unless you have that in your playing it’s not jazz!”