

DEATH OF THE BOSS

by **Tony Baldwin***

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Tom Baker's awesome command of half a dozen instruments in virtually any listenable idiom tended to overshadow his more subtle talent of diplomatist, which made him such a terrific bandleader and, to his lasting credit, a more consistently effective ambassador for his adopted country than any Foreign Affairs bureaucrat could ever hope to be.

Life for a young 'Septic' (Tom's averred nationality) in the early 1970s meant, among other things, coming to terms with the what are-yer chippiness and petty hostility that some Sydneysiders have occasionally reserved for their foreign guests. It was partly as an antidote to this kind of experience that Tom developed the calm, humorous even-handedness that gained him such universal respect and affection over the years. Faced with bandleading situations that would have had a lesser mortal foaming at the mouth, he constantly suffered fools, sidemen and secretary-managers gladly - and (almost) never lost his temper or bore a grudge.



Tom Baker, fronting the Swing Street Orchestra at the Manly International Jazz Festival in 1984...

**Tony Baldwin, formerly a distinguished broadcaster on ABC Radio, played piano with Tom Baker's Swing Street Orchestra for four years.*

The single exception to this that I can recall provided a salutary lesson to one of the less hospitable members of Sydney's hospitality industry. One evening when the Swing Street Orchestra had been playing to a packed harbourside club audience, the management asked the band to play for an extra hour after the contracted midnight close. Tom said they would do so for some nominal extra sum, to which the manager agreed with alacrity, the finances of the place being lavishly fuelled by dozens of jangling poker machines. When Tom went to collect the band's pay soon after I am, the aforementioned paragon of clubland integrity simply gave him the original fee. With his usual courtesy Tom reminded the club official of their recent agreement, which merely elicited a sneering enquiry as to what he was going to do about it. The reply was brief and to the point. When the offending minion had picked himself up off his office floor, Tom told him that the band wouldn't be playing there again. Still, being a forgiving sort of fellow, he did go back ten years later when the club management had changed.



A version of Tom Baker's Swing Street Orchestra, L-R, Alan Geddes (drums), Marty Mooney (saxophones & clarinet), John Colborne-Veel (trombone), Baker (trumpet & saxophones), Grahame Conlon (guitar), George Hermann (piano), Paul Furniss (saxophones & clarinet).

The version of the Swing Street Orchestra that I joined in 1988 was an object lesson in Tom's sleuth-like ability to identify the specific skills of a wildly diverse sampling of humanity and then, through his sheer presence and personality, extract music from it considerably beyond the sum of the musicians' individual talents. In my case I was recruited at Sydney's Wynyard Hotel, where, as a paying customer, I occasionally plucked up enough Dutch courage to play a bit of intermission piano, though I never attempted to sit in.

One day Tom pulled up a neighbouring bar stool and asked if I'd play a set with the band, as Pat Qua was not with him that night. I said I would, on condition that they only played numbers I was familiar with. The trouble was that I only knew three tunes and I'd never seen a chord chart in my life, so I should have been more wary of Tom's easy acquiescence. After my three tunes were up I desperately tried to get off the stand, but, having physically trapped me behind the piano, Tom blithely segued straight into what was, in the most frightening and literal sense, completely uncharted territory. He yelled the harmonies at me between breaths and I finished the set with my shirt glued to my spine. I can't say I was particularly amused.

A couple of days later Tom phoned up to ask whether I'd be willing to be the band's regular pianist, as Pat wanted to concentrate on her painting and only do the Sunday jobs. This seemed a completely absurd idea to me, as the other guys were full-time musicians and I'd almost never played in a band of any description. All Tom said was, "You'll be okay." So I was his pianist for the next four years.



Another version of the Swing Street Orchestra, L-R, Pat Qua (piano), Ian Date (guitar), Tom Baker at back (trumpet & saxophones), Pat Wade (guitar), Don Heap (bass)...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

I last played with Tom in my French backyard one fine July evening this year, when he also cooked some magnificent curries for 40 of my friends. Among the musicians present were Californian trumpet player Dan Barrett and Michel Bastide, leader of France's Hot Antic Jazz Band. Typically, despite having travelled hundreds of miles out of his way to be there, Tom's parting shot was, "Thanks for the blow, Dad."

A couple of weeks before Tom's death I was listening back to a tape from that evening and was stunned yet again by the power and lyricism of his recently acquired trombone prowess. I wrote to him saying it was lucky for Bastide (by day Michel is France's top ophthalmologist) that he had opted to take up trombone and not eye surgery.



Tom Baker (centre), pictured here on trombone with Paul Finnerty (left, banjo) and Geoff Bull (right, trumpet), playing with the Olympia Jazz Band... PHOTO CREDIT MICHAEL PENNI

This is Tom's reply of the 18th of October, four days before he left us: "I am studying eye surgery as well as advanced de-clicking and also de-crackling" [a reference to my work as a restoration sound engineer]. "My marks have been above average so I have been given time off from exams to study drums and Afghani beadwork. The Pashtun lessons are expensive, but an investment in the future, I think. Regards to Bastide et al. Cheers, Tom."

Cheers, indeed, Tom. We'll miss you.
