

## TRIBUTE TO JACK MITCHELL

by Graeme Bell MBE\*

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*[This the FOREWORD to Jack Mitchell's book "Australian Jazz On Record 1925-80", published by the National Film & Sound Archive, published in 1988.\*\**



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*\*Graeme Bell began performing as a jazz musician during the late 1930s and, by 1940, was leading a jazz quartet, the Portsea Four. Four years later he formed his Dixieland Jazz Band, later called his Australian Jazz Band, with which he toured Europe in 1947-8 and again in 1950-52. Subsequently he organised and led groups and played widely in Australia, Papua New Guinea, Korea and Japan. For a brief few years Graeme played commercially, until his return to jazz in 1962 with the Graeme Bell All Stars, playing and recording for some thirty-five years, in many venues at home and overseas, both with the group and as a frequent guest artist.*

*\*\*Eric Myers writes: This was sent to me in late 2019 by Clarita Liepolt, based in New York, the widow of the promoter Horst Liepolt, who died in NY in January, 2019. Graeme Bell had sent Jack Mitchell's book to Horst on 20/9/88, writing as follows on the Foreword page: "To Horst, you did so much for Australian jazz that I feel you must take this back to New York with you. Jack Mitchell is a very old friend of mine."*

Jack Mitchell first heard my original Melbourne band in the late forties, but my friendship with him did not take hold until the early sixties when, after a gig in the mountains with my Sydney band we called at the Mitchell's Lithgow home to talk about jazz and records over a few drinks. We ended up spending the night on couches and other make-shift beds.

Ever after that it became *de rigueur* when appearing in Lithgow or nearby towns to call in on Jack Mitchell, before or after playing, to listen to records, have a few drinks and partake of his wife Jan's excellent cooking. Other bands visiting the Blue Mountains region fell into the same habit.



*Graeme Bell (left) and bassist Lou Silbereisen in Dubbo in 1970...*

Jack's knowledge of Australian jazz recordings had already become legendary in jazz circles throughout Australia, and even abroad. Finally, with some assistance from the 13th Australian Jazz Convention Committee, he published his first discography, which ran to two limited editions, the last of which appeared in 1960. These were in roneoed form.



I remember well when Festival Records wanted to issue a compilation of various tracks I had recorded for their label, and package them together as a 'Best of Bell' album. Few of these albums, from which the titles were being taken, supplied cover notes giving recording dates, personnel and so on. The company agreed with me when I suggested that, as there would be a variety of musicians on these tracks, complete information of names and dates would be greatly appreciated by the purchaser. Unfortunately, neither they nor myself had kept complete records. I phoned Jack Mitchell and in my letterbox the very next day, neatly typed out, was all the information we were seeking — he had even listed one of the musicians as having gone to the studio the morning after a recording to overdub maracas. I took it all into Noel Brown, the creative director at Festival, and he said, 'Who is this bloke?' I replied. 'A dentist in Lithgow'. He said. 'You've got to be kidding—but give me his name and address immediately, we need people like him'.



*Jack Mitchell (third from left) pictured here after Mick Fowler's funeral in August, 1979. Others L-R, Duke Farrell, Jim Young & Bill Boldiston: if it were not for people like Jack, these priceless details could be lost forever...PHOTO COURTESY BILL BOLDISTON*

Those last words, 'We need people like him', sum it all up, and should dispel the idea some people hold that a discography is some quaint piece of musical history to be filed away in a museum for posterity. It is a living and indispensable source of reference for any writer, broadcaster or jazz musician, and I have used Jack's early incomplete publications on countless occasions. Let's face it, the musicians themselves are too busy creating and performing this music to be bothered keeping complete information of their recording activities, and if it were not for people like Jack Mitchell these priceless details could be lost forever.

In the late seventies I acted as one of the referees for Jack's application to the Music Board [of the Australia Council] for a grant to attend one of the annual conferences on discographical research organised by the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, New Jersey. This was knocked back.



*Graeme Bell in 1962: Australian Jazz On Record 1925-80, comprising 12,000 entries and three major indexes of tune titles, artists, record labels and catalogue numbers, is not only a discography, it is almost a history of Australian jazz...*

In 1964 he applied for a Churchill Fellowship to visit California to research, from that end, the relationship between Australian and Californian jazz. This was also knocked back. Jack Mitchell is indisputably the top man in his field in this country, and had he held this position in any other country, such as Japan, Germany or the USA, he would most certainly have received these grants.

It is rather appropriate that Jack Mitchell should, at last, be rewarded with the publication of his definitive work of Australian jazz on record by an organisation devoted to the preservation of Australia's heritage in film and sound. This sorely needed work, comprising 12,000 entries and three major indexes of tune titles, artists, record labels and catalogue numbers, is not only a discography, it is almost a history of Australian jazz.