

MERV ACHESON REMEMBERED Compiled by Bill Boldiston. Bol d'Or Publishing (2015), 224pp.

Reviewed by **Bill Brown***

[This review appeared in the magazine of the Australian Jazz Museum, Ajazz 70, May 2016, and is reprinted by kind permission.]

The above title refers to one of Australia's top class jazzmen, the late Merv Acheson. In recent times I have had the privilege of reading a book about this worthy jazzer compiled by Bill Boldiston. To say that Merv was colourful is an understatement. A fine saxophone/clarinet player, his career spanned a few decades mainly in the Sydney area. As well as his musical prowess his general persona really was out there as they say. Mixing with a rather raffish night life culture, even to packing a gun on occasion. However, be that as it may, I prefer to concentrate on his musical capabilities.



Merv Acheson on tenor saxophone: his general persona really was out there as they say... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

**As a teenager in his native Scotland in the early fifties Bill Brown was bitten by the jazz bug. During eight years in the Merchant Navy his record collection grew and he visited jazz venues in London and in various overseas countries. Settling in Melbourne in 1966 he became conversant with the Australian scene. In 2004 he joined the then Victorian Jazz Archive, now the Australian Jazz Museum. Working in the sound room he has contributed various articles over the years to the quarterly magazine Ajaz.*

I suppose as part of the wartime and immediate post-war scene a lot of his playing would be in commercial dance bands. From the book I gleaned that his taste was in the swing era. He mentions his dislike of the traditional movement then prevalent in Australia and elsewhere, and his feeling that Louis Armstrong was overrated. However, by the same token, he wasn't a bopper or had much time for the more way out trends of the cool school. Solidly a member of the swing era, with the likes of Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster as his guiding lights.



The likes of Coleman Hawkins (left) and Ben Webster were Merv's guiding lights...
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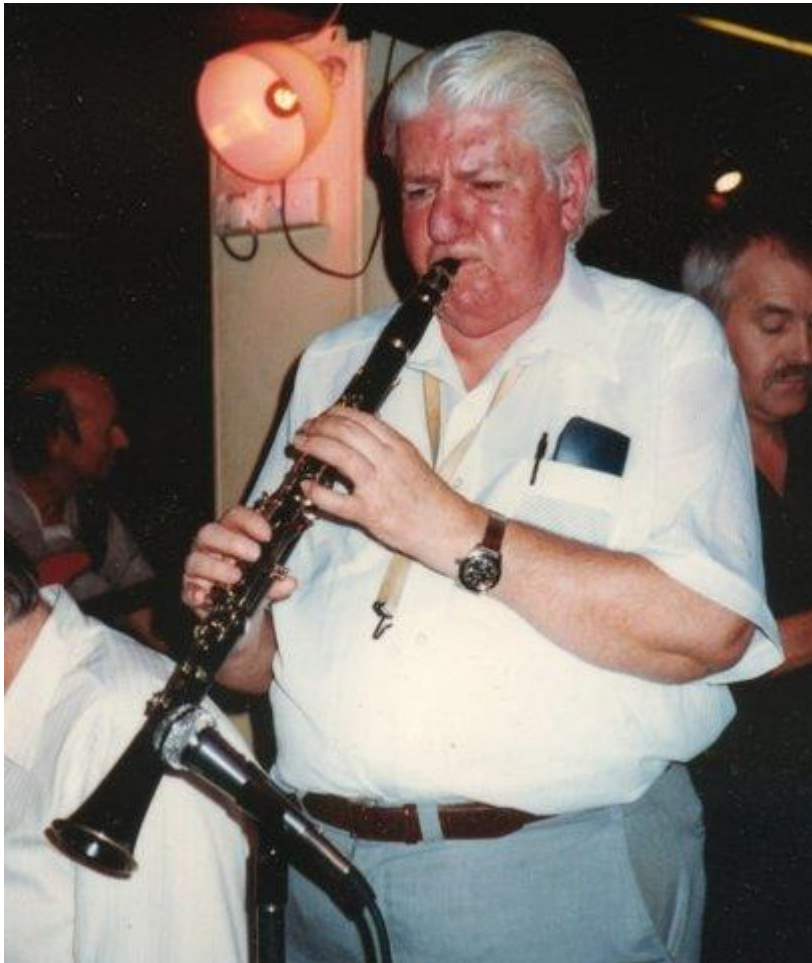
As I mentioned, a real character, no stranger to controversy, absent without leave from the army. Whilst still fulfilling his musical career. I particularly love the time he fell off the stage whilst in the middle of a solo and finding himself lying on the dance floor said to the dancers, "What are you doing dancing on the bandstand"? A sort of remark deserving of Spike Milligan at his best.

However, apart from all those happenings, I really enjoyed the CD that accompanies this book. A cross-section of Merv's playing over the years, from 1943 up until 1986. Early tracks with the 116 Rhythm Ensemble, then a 1949 quartet session with trumpet man Keith Hounslow, like Merv a man not bound by musical restrictions of idiom. A set I think from an Australian Convention session from December 1965 with fellow sax players Trevor Rippingale and John McCarthy. I was particularly impressed by a set from 1981 with Ross Collins on piano which originally wasn't released. Great tunes, *Frolic Sam*, a Barney Bigard speciality, Duke's *Things Ain't What They used to be*, and a nod to Basie with *Blue and Sentimental*.



Bill Brown was particularly impressed by a set from 1981 with Ross Collins (pictured above) on piano... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Finally for me emotionally is the set with Don Burrows when Merv plays soprano sax in a Sydney session. At this juncture Merv was quite ill. Recently at the Jazz Museum I listened to an interview with trombonist Doc Willis where he talks about how ill Merv was.



Merv on clarinet at Soup Plus with the Dick Hughes Famous Five. Trumpeter Bruce Johnson is in the background: a great night... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

From my own perspective I only saw Merv once. During a visit to Sydney in 1982 I visited the Soup Plus Restaurant and heard the Dick Hughes Famous Five including of course our hero on tenor sax. A great night. I talked to him briefly and he mentioned how he was looking forward to the upcoming visit of Kansas City pianist Jay McShann. I mentioned to Dick Hughes that I had bought his book *Daddy's Practising Again*. He said, "I wondered who bought that second copy".

Summing up I guess this book about Merv and the CD indicate that a lot was happening in Australia in those post-war times. The traditional scene of the Bells, Barnards, Frank Johnson, Pearce/Pickering has been lauded and deservedly so, but also there were other movements afoot on the jazz front. A conglomerate of jazzers like Splinter Reeves, Merv Acheson, Keith Hounslow, Don Burrows, Don Banks et al. Recent publications of CDs from the Australian Jazz Museum of Don Banks, and the *Emergence of the Cool School* and this book/CD prove this beyond doubt.