

FOREWORD TO SEEING THE RAFTERS

by Don Burrows*

This is the Foreword to John Sangster's memoir "Seeing The Rafters: The Life and Times of an Australian Jazz Musician", published by Penguin Books Australia Ltd in 1988.

The man is unique. Then, so is his music. If you've ever been present at one of his recording sessions, as I have on so many occasions, you'll know what I mean when I say the atmosphere is special and very different — just like John himself. There is real expectation in the air, and when you start running the music through, 'for notes', it becomes apparent that he has virtually 'scripted' each part for the individual playing it —rather than for the instrument being used. You feel needed. I think there's a touch of the Duke in him in this regard.



In the studio at a John Sangster recording session, L-R, Sangster, Don Burrows, Col Loughnan, Errol Buddle, Roy Ainsworth: the atmosphere is special and very different — just like John himself... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

I first clapped eyes on John Sangster in the mid-to-late 50s. It was at a time when the ABC had the weirdest array of recording and broadcasting studios imaginable. They seemed to have a 'thing' about old churches that nobody else wanted. Anyway, a

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classic example was '226' in Bourke Street — a stylish mixture of Rome's Pantheon, a Calcutta post office and the Gents at the old Sydney Cricket Ground.

The session I was involved with followed straight after one on which John had played and as I walked in, the first thing I saw was this clean-cut, animated young bloke on all fours in front of the play-back speaker in the studio itself, chortling excitedly with unbridled delight at what he and his colleagues had recorded. He was quite oblivious to our arrival, and I was bemused enough by his genuine detachment and exhilaration to ask of somebody, 'Who's the new bloke?'



Sangster in the 1950s, before he began growing his beard, in a shot where he describes himself as “a young dandiprat”: not a whisker in sight and the cheeks actually glowed... PHOTO COURTESY SEEING THE RAFTERS

The 'new bloke' came complete with collar and tie, short back and sides and 'foreman material' white shirt. Moreover, there wasn't a whisker in sight and the cheeks actually glowed. This recollection could well make me the last remaining Sydney musician to have actually SEEN John Sangster's face. For decades now we've only had the eyes to work with.

But we've also had the open mind, the fertile imagination and the unmatched flair for getting the best out of his fellow musicians, all topped off with the Sangster zest for the job in hand — and, of course, the chortling. It's a good word that. And quite honestly, John remains my only friend who actually chortles.

All the time-worn phrases like 'paid his dues', 'been there, done that' and so on can fairly be applied to John Sangster. His contribution to and influence on Australian jazz speaks for itself and will last as long as local musicians seek to 'See the Rafters'.



L-R, Don Burrows, Mischa Kanaef (background), George Golla, John Sangster, and compere Mike Willisee on the Burrows "This is Your Life" program, Channel 7...

PHOTO COURTESY SEEING THE RAFTERS

He's tackled just about everything else, so I suppose a book was inevitable. I know John's gift for 'reportage' through his music, how he can make you experience the same emotional responses that caused him to sit down and write something on a sheet of manuscript. And that's good enough for me.
