

MY STORY ON MY DAD'S LIFE & DEATH: SOME THINGS WE DID

by Rebecca Clare

Rebecca Clare's father John Clare, the Australian writer best-known in the jazz community over some 50 years as a perceptive music critic, died aged 80 on December 24, 2020 in Concord Hospital after a series of catastrophic brain haemorrhages. John's son and Rebecca's brother Mathew Clare, born on March 22, 1966, died on March 3, 2014 aged 47, of lung cancer which travelled to his brain. Before his death John had been in a nursing home in Croydon, Sydney, for two-and-a-half years, suffering from a form of dementia. Rebecca flew from Brisbane on Wed Dec 23, in time for John to pass away peacefully in her arms. On January 1 2021, Rebecca cast John's ashes into the sea off Maroubra Beach after a ceremony attended by more than a dozen of John's friends and colleagues. Dave Sampson acted as emcee, and provided a eulogy, and Peter Rechniewski spoke in tribute. Paul Cutlan played John Coltrane's "Psalm" from the album "A Love Supreme" as Rebecca cast John's ashes into the Maroubra surf.



Rebecca Clare pictured with her Dad John Clare, shortly after he went into the Holy Spirit nursing home in Croydon, Sydney... PHOTO CREDIT BARBARA CLEARY

We were on the far wing, on the seventh floor of the Concord Hospital. The view from the window captured the Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House far off in the distance. We could not have asked for a more significant setting. Although of course Dad was completely unaware.

The room itself was rather desolate. Christmas songs were playing merrily in the background. *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* hammering out from the speaker perpetuated the oncoming gloom. It did not feel much like Christmas and it was as if the songs were mocking us. We had sung Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* in our finest voices only two weeks earlier, as we wandered together through the grounds of the Holy Spirit.



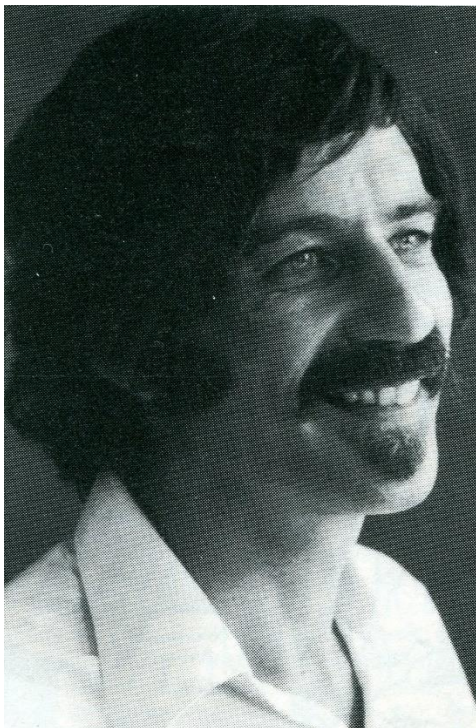
An unusual shot of John Clare's son Mathew Clare, pictured here with his son Macey, an estimated 18 months before Mathew died at the age of 47... PHOTO COURTESY REBECCA CLARE

Mathew entered the room the day before Dad's death and gave us a gentle embrace. Mathew returned as Dad was taking his final breaths and Mathew's outstretched hand gracefully took Dad from me. I looked up to see the beautiful grin on Mathew's face as he stood face to face with his father. Dad exclaimed with outstretched arms, 'Mathew, is that you?', and the heavy burden Dad had been carrying all these years dissipated as he once again wrapped his arms around his beloved son.

They came to me in my dreams. I was a little girl again running with Mathew along the laneway besides Dad's house in Mitchell Street, Glebe. Dad followed with great enthusiasm. We were his 'angels in the first degree'. We stopped for a swing in the park and continued our journey onto Broadway to catch a bus. Sometimes we would call in at the *Sydney Morning Herald* where Dad would take us to view the machinery of the printing room before heading to his desk. Then we would head off on our adventure.



The Fairfax building in Sydney (left) where John Clare had an office when he was writing for Fairfax publications. Below is a shot of John as he looked in those years...



Once again it was the three of us. We visited the Harbour, Bondi, Coogee, Tamarama, Bronte, the Blue Mountains, Kiama, the list was endless. We visited art galleries, museums, Taronga Zoo, Manly, Luna Park, and watched movies beyond our years. We marched against the Vietnam War, we joined the picket line against the developers in Kings Cross, we fought for women's liberation and the rights of gays and lesbians. Splashing's of 'Stop Yellow Cake' was graffitied against large concrete walls.



Joining the picket line against the developers in Kings Cross: John Clare is crouching at the front of the crowd, pictured near to the legendary unionist Jack Mundy (foreground, hands in pockets)...

The nights were long as I grew weary. We frequented jazz clubs, saw churches burning, witches dancing, played with friends in Drummoyne until the last ferry, watched in awe Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. We were still incredibly young. Eventually we would begin our long journey home.

During our quiet times together, if he were not reading children's stories such as *The Magic Pudding* or *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepoot*, he would have us on his lap creating his own stories where Mathew and I were the main characters. Our eyes would light up with glee as we heard our names, and we would almost hold our breath waiting to hear what we were going to do next. We would squeal in excitement as we went on an adventure of his imagination.

As the dreams ended each night, Mathew and Dad resumed their older, healthy, magnificent selves. They would wave goodbye and turn to leave. I would

chase after them, 'Don't leave me here', I would cry. They continued to walk away until they eventually vanished.

I would wake up alone. I preferred the nights to the days. I had moved in with my mother in Nundah for a few weeks after returning to Brisbane and being released from quarantine. Every morning I would tell her of my dreams and try to convince her it was my time to leave also. I wanted to join Dad and Mathew. My time here on this earthly plane was finished. It was unbearable. I was done. Mum would stand firm. 'No Rebecca, you are needed here. You have three sons here that need you.' She was instrumental in my recovery from the dark hole I found myself in, and bit by bit helped me to regain my strength.



*John Clare, in brown jacket (left), pictured here with three of his grandsons, L-R, Rebecca's children James Panochini, Alexander Panochini & Serge Panochini...
PHOTO COURTESY REBECCA CLARE*

One day I dragged my weary self back on my bike. I would cycle through the Boondall Wetlands which felt desolate and lonely. I then would make my way to Nudgee Beach. On the very first day I rounded a corner and encountered an old man masturbating on a park bench hidden by trees overlooking the water. I stopped and quietly turned back before he noticed. The feelings of loneliness on his part perturbed me more than the act itself.

I would race like mad along the stretch of road that took me from Nudgee Beach to Kedron Brook Bike Path. As I turned onto the bike path, I would enter a beautiful, serene part of the world. To my left was the perceived stillness of the river and to my

right was the uncontrolled, seemingly endless, grassland. As the days passed and I continued my ride, tiny pinpricks of sunlight came seeping into my brain. As the pinpricks of light grew bigger and bigger, so did the brightness of my days. One day as I raced my bike faster and faster, I found myself back in Spain surrounded by sunflowers. The smile returned to my face as I saw not one but now two angels smiling down at me.

Do not be mistaken. The grief did not end there. It still catches me off guard as I remember the enthusiasm with which Dad lived his life. His pure joy at the sound of played notes; his excitement in retelling the lives of artists and their style - Miro, Picasso, de Chirico, just to name a few - as we would sit on the streets in bus stops in Fitzroy, West End, Glebe, sharing a cigarette; racing him up the sandstone stairs in Glebe just months before going into his nursing home.



Rebecca Clare: the grief did not end there. It still catches me off guard as I remember the enthusiasm with which Dad lived his life... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

His visit to Melbourne when Serge was born and marching down Brunswick Street, Fitzroy with Serge held high above his head shouting “grandfather of the year”. His relentless energy on the trips to the beach with his grandsons, Serge, Alex, James and later Macey, teaching them to body surf, to snorkel, and making them laugh out loud.



*John Clare, holding his grandchild, Rebecca's son Serge Panochini... PHOTO
COURTESY REBECCA CLARE*

It is the longing for something that will never be again. The missing of calling him in his nursing home from London as he would retell his tales of Hampstead Heath and Ronnie Scott's jazz club, and the regular appearance of Spike Milligan. The missing of calling him from Spain and France as I would retell my amazing adventures on my bike. His acute recollection of Aberystwyth as I phoned him from the shorefront. His telling repeatedly of his interview with Miles Davis, his imitation of Miles's voice and the giving of the drawing from Miles*; his retelling over and over the story of Frank Sinatra singing *Ebb Tide* because he was Frank Sinatra and therefore could reach the high note. The singing of *Penny Lane* over the phone and laughing at the lyrics. His teasing me whenever I'd call with, "is this my favourite daughter?". No, the grief is far from over.

*John Clare's interview with Miles Davis appears in John's piece "Meeting Miles" on this site at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/john-clare-5>

Sitting in the hospital, holding Dad's hand, and watching his every breath, I was beginning to think he would be sharing a significant day with another great JC, but he did not quite make it. He died just hours short of Christmas Day. Nonetheless, he did laughingly call himself "The Great JC" and that is who he will always be to me.

Sadly, my mother died suddenly in Brisbane exactly four months later.



In the JOHN CLARE folder on this website, over 100 of John Clare's articles and reviews are posted. See this link for a list of those pieces
<https://ericmyersjazz.com/index-for-john-clare>

Other articles which may be of interest are:

John Shand, "John Clare, 1940-2020" in the OBITUARIES folder at this link
<https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-45>

Eric Myers, "John Clare, 1940-2020: A Personal Memoir" in the OBITUARIES folder at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-45>