

OBITUARY: MERV ACHESON 1922-1987

by Bill Haesler OAM*

[This article was written for the now-disconnected “Jazz In Australia” website following the death of Merv Acheson in August, 1987, but has remained unpublished until now.]

Mervyn [Merv] Fletcher Acheson (tenor sax/soprano sax/clarinet/bandleader/journalist) was born in Sydney NSW on 31 March 1922. He died in Sydney NSW on 11 August 1987.

A legend in his own lifetime, Merv studied violin with his professional musician father at an early age. He was educated at Fort Street Boys’ High School and took up tenor sax at age 11 after breaking his arm playing football. He was self-taught and at 15 played his first professional job at the Cairo Ballroom in Drummoyne. He joined the suburban ballroom circuit, until inducted into the vibrant music scene playing in illegal after-hours nightclubs, at parties and jam sessions.



Merv Acheson: a legend in his own lifetime...

**Bill Haesler OAM, based in Sydney, is one of Australia’s foremost jazz writers, collectors, historians and documentationists.*

At 16 he became a cadet journalist at the *Labor Daily* newspaper for which he wrote a regular jazz column, all the while playing one-nighters in dance halls and afterhours gigs.



Merv Acheson in 1939, outside Mark Foy's in Sydney, aged 17. He was then a cadet journalist with the Labor Daily...

He volunteered as a musician for the army in October 1941 and joined the 17th Battalion Military Band where he taught himself to play clarinet and soprano sax. It was a great training ground with parades, war bond rallies, receptions for dignitaries, hospital fetes, changing of the guard and the dance band formed within its ranks. It was also a daytime commitment that gave Merv time to play casual civilian gigs at night.

In November 1942 he was transferred to the large 116 Rhythm Ensemble entertainment unit and eventually led its small jazz combo. In 1942 when the US military came to Australia and required music for its troops, the Australian army obliged with musicians from its entertainment units. In Sydney the US Army set up officers' and sergeants' messes, opened the Booker T Washington Club in Darlinghurst for use by black American servicemen and merchant seamen using civilian musicians, requisitioned members (including Merv) from the 116 Ensemble and used visiting US musicians.



What was the Booker T Washington Club for negro servicemen and merchant seamen in Albion Street, Surry Hills. It is now called Durham Hall...

With the escalation of the war in the Pacific the 116 Ensemble unit was broken up and in April 1943 Merv was transferred to a jungle warfare training camp in Canungra, Queensland. He immediately went AWL, returned to Sydney and for about ten months hid from the authorities while working at the 2KY Radio Auditorium, for the US army at the Booker T Washington Club and with the Bondi US Officers' Club band led by Les Welch. His army file had been mislaid and no one knew he was missing.



Merv often worked with groups led by bandleader George Trevare (with trombone, third from left). Others here are, L-R, Pat Lynch (piano), Wally Norman (trumpet), Al Vincer (drums), Don Burrows (clarinet), Morgan McGree (guitar), Rolf Pommer (alto saxophone), Horrie Bissell (bass). This shot was taken on July 19, 1945... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

As the result of a shooting incident he was arrested by the military police, served time in gaol and on a prison farm (where he formed a band) and discharged from the army in mid-1945. With the war almost over he joined George Trevare's group at Ciro's nightclub, led his own 7-piece band at the Maxine Club in Woollahra, played clubs including the Roosevelt, the Stork and the Golden Key until late 1947, worked at the Tivoli Theatre with George Trevare and at the State Theatre.

In 1948 he moved to Melbourne and played at the Empress coffee lounge, an illegal gambling club and the Galleon with Stan Bourne's band. At this time Merv, ever fascinated with guns and criminals, became the trusted minder for a colourful jazz-loving gambler and returned to Sydney, its nightclub scene and the George Trevare band.



Comedian Stan Bourne: in Melbourne Merv played at the Galleon with his band...

As a journalist, Merv was invited in 1950 to become editor of the monthly music magazine *Tempo* for which, over the years (along with its rivals *Music Maker* and *Syncopation*) he had provided freelance jazz articles. It was a part-time position that left plenty of time for playing music at the Embassy Club and elsewhere.

He left *Tempo* to work as the *Music Box* jazz columnist for the *Telegraph's* new show business magazine, *Pictorial Show*. With the emergence in NSW of licensed clubs in 1954 and the introduction of ten o'clock closing in hotels in February 1955 there was a need for entertainment and it became a boom time for musicians. Sydney's shadowy nightclub era was over.

Merv took a band into the Balaclava Hotel in Alexandria, played with the Doc Willis band at the Port Jackson Hotel in the city, worked at Stone's Cabaret in Coogee Bay for four years, the Ling Nam restaurant, the Figtree Bridge Hotel and from 1955 led his Mainstreamers at the Criterion Hotel for an unexpected ten-year engagement.



Merv played with Doc Willis (above) at the Port Jackson Hotel...PHOTO CREDIT AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM. Below is the Criterion Hotel in Sydney, where Merv led his Mainstreamers for an unexpected ten-year engagement...



In 1959 he became Vice-President and public relations officer of the Musicians' Union Sydney, initiated and edited its *Staccato* newssheet and in the early 1960s was a director and Vice-President of the Musicians' Club. During the 1960s Merv held long residencies at the Stage Club in Redfern, the Windsor Castle, Bellevue and Canberra hotels in Paddington, the Mansions in Kings Cross and could also be found at the Canberra and other hotels in the area.

He worked with Adrian Ford's Unity Jazz Band at the Old Push Restaurant in the Rocks during 1973, was with Bill Haesler's Washboard Band and played with Dick Hughes' Famous Five at Soup Plus from 1979 to 1985. Merv had joined Alan Geddes' Sextet at the Bondi Icebergs' Club in 1984 but ill health curtailed his activities until a series of medical operations forced his musical retirement.



Acheson on tenor sax is snapped here, while working with Dick Hughes Famous Five at Soup Plus restaurant in Sydney... PHOTO COURTESY BILL BOLDISTON

Bill Haesler OAM writes: Acknowledgement is made to the 13-part "The Merv Acheson Story" serialised in "Jazz: The Australian Contemporary Music Magazine", March/April 1982 to Summer/Autumn 1986.

Eric Myers writes: Merv Acheson's autobiographical "Merv Acheson Story" can be read on this site at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-56>. Bill Brown's review of the book "Merv Acheson Remembered", a tribute to Merv compiled by Bill Boldiston, can be read here <https://ericmyersjazz.com/book-reviews-16>. Two other obituaries, by Frank Crook and Norman Linehan, are at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-36>.