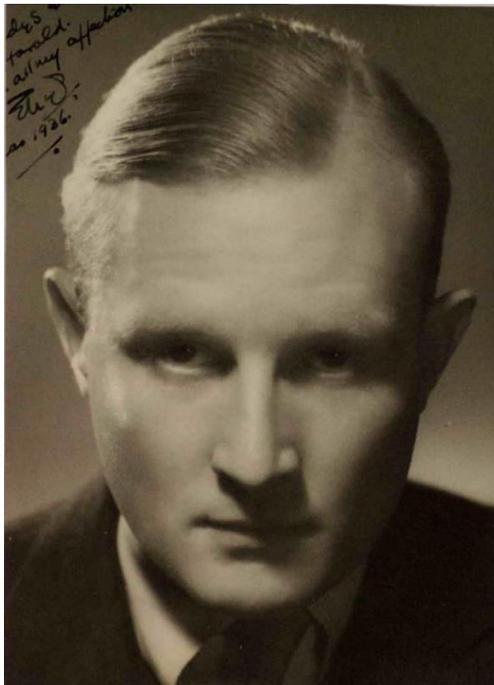


OBITUARY: ERIC CHILD 1910-1995

by Dick Hughes*

[Editor's note: Eric Child was born in London on 27/4/10 and died in Sydney on 23/4/95, aged 84. This obituary first appeared in the magazine *Australian Jazz And Blues*, Vol 2, No 3, in 1995.]

Eric Child, the ABC's man in jazz for more than 30 years, has died. He would have been 85 on April 27, 1995. An expert announcer (news, features, instant reporting, such as the arrival in Sydney of the Queen in 1963), Eric Child was 17 when he bought his first record, *Buddy's Habit*, by Red Nichols and His Five Pennies - the same Red Nichols who crops up most irregularly on late-hour television, improbably portrayed by Danny Kaye in the film called *The Five Pennies*.



Eric Child: the ABC's man in jazz for more than 30 years...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Red Nichols was a white trumpeter who emulated the style of Bix Beiderbecke, possibly the greatest white jazz trumpeter (cornet player, correctly). The arch rival of Bix Beiderbecke for jazz lovers of the late '20s and early '30s was Louis Armstrong, the true king of jazz.

An Englishman, Eric Child lived in London in the early '30s and played drums in dance bands in Kent before joining the merchant navy. For most of the '30s, thanks

**When this was written in 1995, Dick Hughes was a Sydney jazz pianist and journalist.*

to a ridiculous ruling by the British Musicians' Union, American jazz musicians were forbidden to play in Great Britain. Like other British lovers of jazz, Eric Child contented himself with his records - and going to see and hear the American stage shows which were still permitted to visit and perform in Britain.

One of these stage shows was called the Lew Leslie Blackbirds of 1936. A remarkably stately and statuesque black beauty by the name of Lucille Buchanan-Wilson caught the eye of Eric Child. Eric never made any secret of the fact that he was a stage-door Johnny, but he was impelled not by reasons of casual flirtation, but for the purpose of spreading the hot gospel of jazz. Eric Child took young Lucille Buchanan-Wilson to the London after-hours jazz spots, where he would play drums, and talk to her lightly, politely but authoritatively about jazz music.

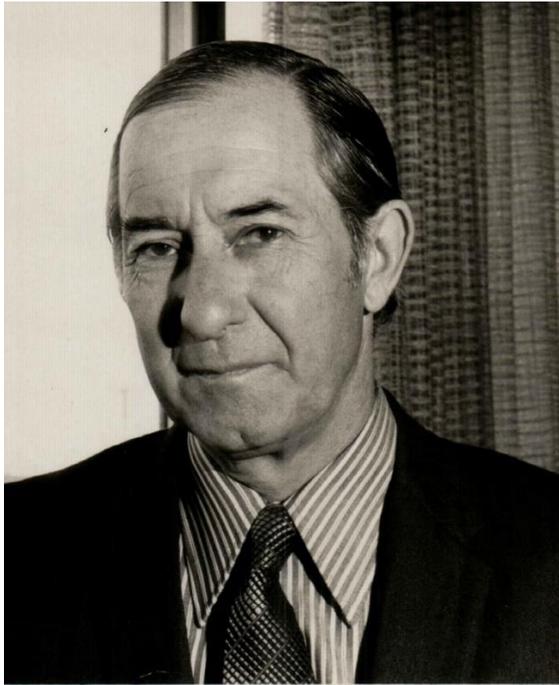


The statuesque black beauty Lucille Buchanan-Wilson, who was later married to Louis Armstrong: in London she dated Eric Child... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Lucille Buchanan-Wilson knew a smattering of jazz. She liked - she told Eric Child - Jimmie Lunceford, leader of one of the great big bands of the '30s. "Yes, he's very good," said Eric. "But have you heard the best - the king - Louis Armstrong?" Lucille Buchanan-Wilson told Eric she'd never heard of Louis Armstrong, this king whom he proceeded to rave about.

Eric Child continued to rave about Louis Armstrong in subsequent sporadic correspondence to Ms Buchanan-Wilson after she returned to America. As a radio officer in the merchant navy, he picked up the Morse-code signal that Britain had declared war on Germany. For the next two years, Eric Child sailed four or five of the seven seas until his ship - after a brief stop-over in Melbourne in December, 1941 - was assigned to bring back Australian soldiers from Singapore.

The ship was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in the Java Sea on Friday, February 13, 1942. Eric Child was floating - on a drum, appropriately - when he was picked up and taken on board an Australian ship with, among others, John Gorton, future prime minister, who had made it to a raft. That year, Eric Child, who rose to the rank of lieutenant, was mentioned in despatches for bravery. He stayed in Australia, finished serving in the war with the Royal Australian Navy and then joined 2GZ in Orange as an announcer. Then he joined the ABC, first in Brisbane, then, in 1957, in Sydney.



*Dr Clem Semmler: he gave Eric Child a regular coast-to-coast program on the ABC called *Rhythm Unlimited*, which began on March 1, 1952... PHOTO COURTESY PETER SEMMLER*

Dr Clem Semmler, then head of ABC programmes and later deputy manager of the ABC and still a jazz aficionado and authority, discovered that Eric Child was a jazz buff and gave him a regular coast-to-coast program called *Rhythm Unlimited*, which began on March 1, 1952. It was prime-time listening on Saturday morning from 10.15 to 11, and was later extended to an hour under the title of *The World Of Jazz*.

Thanks, as Dr Semmler said, mourning the death of his friend, to "the professional presentation and instantly agreeable personality" of Eric Child, the program became part of the Saturday way of life for thousands of Australians who would otherwise never had given jazz a second thought.

Later, to give them the chance of giving it a third, fourth and fifth thought, Eric Child began to conduct evening programs as well, while continuing his regular duties as one of the ABC's most distinguished announcers.

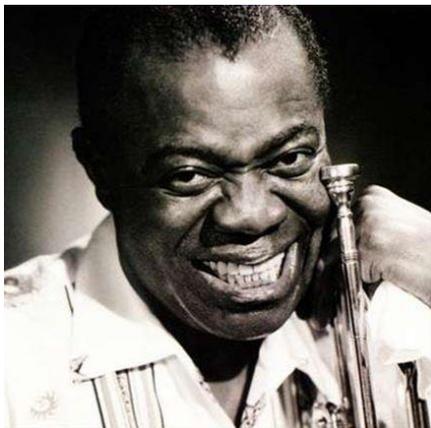
Jazz, like the life of Eric Child, is a matter of varying times and tempo. So we jump back in time to November, 1942, when Eric Child was stationed at HMAS Rushcutter, Sydney. It was just before Christmas that Lieutenant Child received a letter from

Lucille Buchanan-Wilson, the gist of which was: "Dear Eric, I've met your king and married him. Love, Mrs Louis Armstrong (your old Lucille)".



L-R, Angela Child, Louis Armstrong, Eric Child, Lucille Armstrong: Eric's wife Angela prepared for Louis his favourite dish, red beans and rice... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Thanks to the man who was to become king of Australian radio jazz, the instrumental and vocal king of jazz met and married his fourth and last wife. A little over five years later, Eric Child married Red Cross librarian Angela Phillips, who survives him.



Armstrong: To Eric, you are truly the greatest... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Louis Armstrong played in Brisbane in April, 1956. Between shows, Angela Child prepared for him his favourite dish: red beans and rice. Eight years later, on his last visit to Australia, Louis Armstrong was still waxing hot, strong and eloquent about the virtues of Angela Child as devoted wife, helpmate and soulmate - and chef extraordinaire - to Eric Child. And on one his own albums, Louis Armstrong wrote this inscription: "To Eric, You are truly the greatest." And he possibly thought of the apt title of a Billie Holiday composition called *God Bless The Child*. A Child is born. The Child is dead. Forever live the Child.