

## OBITUARY: DOC WILLIS 1926-1995

by Dick Hughes\*

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*[This obituary was published in the Summer 1995/96 edition of JazzChord. This is an edited version of the obituary that appeared in The Australian on December 29, 1995.]*

**F**rancis John (Doc) Willis was born in Melbourne on May 23, 1926, and died in Sydney on December 8, 1995, aged 69. Not many musicians appear at their own benefit concerts for obviously painful and distressing reasons. Doc Willis, who was one of the nation's most gregarious and popular musicians and an exceptionally gifted trombonist, went one better. Within two months of his 67th birthday and a quintuple bypass operation, he played on stage at his own benefit concert. "I think I should help myself, too," he told us deadpan, "us" being the Port Jackson Jazz Band, which Doc Willis first joined in 1955.

One of Doc Willis's greatest ambitions was to play with the band at the 50th Australian Jazz Convention, held during the last week of December, 1995 at Melbourne University. Doc was on the committee of the first Australian Jazz Convention, which was held in Melbourne in 1946.



*Doc Willis, pictured in 1958... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

It was in Melbourne that he got his start in jazz, graduating from the Bluebird Harmonica Band in 1934 to study cornet, then switching to trombone in 1943. He studied trombone with Frank Coughlan, Australia's earliest great jazz musician, and became involved in the Melbourne jazz revival, which centred on the Graeme Bell band. Doc organised jazz nights at the St Silas Hall in his home suburb of South Melbourne and formed a band, Doc's Syncopators, which played at the first jazz convention. He also played with Bell and other leading Melbourne bands, such as those of Frank Johnson and Tony Newstead. In 1949, Doc Willis joined the band of Len Barnard, a magnificent drummer who had a young brother who played sensational cornet and trumpet - Bob Barnard.

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*\* At time of writing, in 1996, Dick Hughes was a Sydney journalist and pianist who, like Doc Willis, joined the Port Jackson Jazz Band some 40 years ago.*

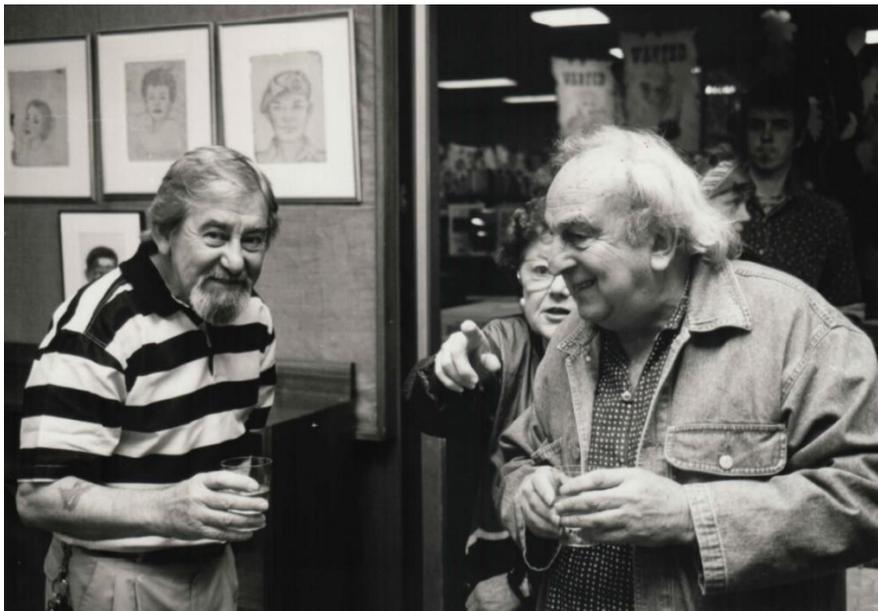
In 1955, the Barnard band came to Sydney and broke up after a disastrous country tour. Most of them returned to Melbourne, but Doc Willis stayed on in Sydney, where he worked with the Merv Acheson jump group and the Port Jackson Jazz Band, which had been formed by another trombonist, the late Jack Parkes, in 1944.



*Bob Barnard, a young brother of Len Barnard who played sensational cornet and trumpet...*  
PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

It was a notable year for the propagation of Sydney jazz, because in February 1955 pub drinking hours were extended to 10pm and there were consequently more working opportunities for jazz musicians.

Doc Willis was one of the first to realise the potential and, with the late Mick Fowler, the itinerant seaman and drummer who was to become a legendary hero of the Greens, operated first from the Commercial Travellers' Hotel in George Street, then crossed the road to play at the Port Jackson Hotel (which had no connection with the Port Jackson Jazz Band).



*Doc Willis (left) pictured with Harry Stein. Willis was one of the nation's most gregarious and popular musicians and an exceptionally gifted trombonist...*



*Doc Willis had such command of the trombone as to enable him to work with small jazz groups, big bands and pit bands... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

But Doc, who had the gypsy in his soul and such command of the trombone as to enable him to work with small jazz groups, big bands and pit bands, joined the Eastern Command Band. He later moved to Brisbane, where he took over leadership of the Varsity Five, a long-established Brisbane band that was chosen to play at the reception for the jazz-loving ruler of Thailand, King Bhumibol, when he visited Australia in 1962. Not many Australian jazz musicians have played for royalty.

Returning to Sydney, Doc Willis formed another band - the Duke's Men (he was a devotee of the music of Duke Ellington) - leading them first at the Albury Hotel in Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, and later at the Thurles Hotel, Chippendale. In between times, he continued to work with the Port Jackson Jazz Band and such groups as Mister Crow and Mike Hallam's Hot Six. He played his last note with the Duke's Men on December 3, 1995 at Thurles Hotel.

Doc Willis had a profound knowledge of the history of jazz. When the Port Jackson Jazz Band opened for Woody Herman at the Sydney Opera House in August, 1985, Herman said that Doc Willis seemed to know as much about the activities of his different bands over half a century as he did. He occasionally sang - and better than most.



*Doc Willis (left, trombone) and Bob Cruickshanks (next to him, alto sax) sitting in with the Port Jackson Quartet, Macquarie Hotel, Sydney, 1958. Others, L-R in back row, are Bob Barnard (trumpet), and John McCarthy (clarinet). Dick Hughes is at the piano, and Ray Price is out front on banjo... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN*

One of his most popular songs with the Port Jackson Jazz Band was *Mississippi Mud*. It begins: "When the sun goes down and the tide goes out..." The sun set for the last time for Doc Willis on December 7. He went out with the tide on the morning of December 8 after a massive heart attack.



*Woody Herman: in 1985, Herman said that Doc Willis seemed to know as much about the activities of his different bands over half a century as he did...PHOTO COURTESY BBC.CO.UK*

Frank Willis is survived by his wife Patti, whom he married in 1973, and Glenn and Tracey, two children of a former marriage.