

THE UNEQUALLED KERRIE BIDDELL

by Mark Isaacs*

[This article appeared on the website of the Australian Music Centre on 22 September 2014, and can be read there at this link <https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/article/the-unequalled-kerrie-biddell>]

The unique Australian jazz vocalist, studio singer and vocal teacher Kerrie Biddell passed away in early September, 2014, at the age of 67. Mark Isaacs, who joined Biddell's band Compared To What at the age of 19, provides the following memories of his interaction with Biddell.



Kerrie Biddell: when Isaacs met her he was in his early-to-mid teens, and she was then the powerhouse featured singer with the Daly-Wilson Big Band... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE

**Mark Isaacs (born 22 June 1958) is an Australian classical and jazz composer and pianist. He was nominated for ARIA Awards for Best Jazz Album in 2007 (Mark Isaacs, Resurgence) and in 2009 (Mark Isaacs Resurgence Band, Tell It Like It Is).*

I was very saddened to hear of the passing of the great Australian singer Kerrie Biddell. She was someone with whom I had a strong professional and personal association.

I met Kerrie when I was in my early-to-mid teens. She was at the time the powerhouse featured singer with the Daly-Wilson Big Band (this band was then a household name in Australia). She was also a friend of my family, as her mother (a pianist) had done gigs with my father (a guitarist) and it was my parents who introduced us.

Later, at around the age of 18, I wrote a piece I called *Indian Hemp* for her band Compared to What and, in 1978 at age 19, I joined that same band. It was quite a remarkable ensemble, and very much under Kerrie's stewardship. As well as accompanying her singing of jazz standards or contemporary pop classics from the time by people like Stevie Wonder, we would perform our versions of the virtuosic instrumental jazz/fusion new music then very much in the forefront by artists like Jaco Pastorius, Brecker Brothers and Chick Corea. In these numbers, Kerrie used her voice quite remarkably (in terms of range and facility) as a wordless instrument. Under her encouragement I also wrote original compositions for the band. We played at least once every week, sometimes more often.



A rare photograph of Compared To What, taken in 1978, L-R, drummer Nick Lister, Biddell, bassist Alan Freeman, Isaacs, with saxophonist Graham Jesse seated, along with Biddell's dog Kelly... PHOTO COURTESY MARK ISAACS

Later (in the 1980s and early 1990s) I would work with Kerrie in the recording studio when she sang on some of the television music I was composing and conducting at the time. She was a natural studio singer and one heard her voice regularly on television ads and series themes. More recently, we renewed our professional and personal association when I suggested her for a Freedman Jazz Award judging panel that I was on. She was a great panellist and fittingly we awarded the coveted prize to young Australian jazz singer Kristin Berardi.

In my opinion, Kerrie had a technical control of her instrument (including pristine diction), a versatility of genre and an ability to deliver palpable emotion that is unequalled by any Australian singer outside of classical music. As a youngster, working in her band - virtually under her tutelage - was a salutary lesson in professionalism and exactitude. The renowned Australian 'she'll be right' ethos was still in full force in late 1970s (and perhaps has not fully retreated) but Kerrie was frighteningly demanding of herself and her collaborators. We rehearsed every week at her home in Bondi for an entire day, but there wasn't always new material driving this. It was simply about maintaining and (hopefully) exceeding the already high standards set.

Kerrie was scary; no words were minced or foolishnesses suffered kindly. As well as the example she set by her own (fulfilled) aspirations towards real artistry and virtuosity, she was the ideal nurturer of others' talents. Not necessarily through what is commonly thought of as encouragement (although there was plenty of that, especially onstage - I learned to yearn for the little yelps of appreciation she would emit if you played something particularly noteworthy) but as often through 'tough love'.



Compared To What in performance, L-R, Graham Jesse (tenor), Clive Harrison (electric bass) and Biddell (vocals)...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

I was a somewhat obnoxious 19-year old as I had been a child prodigy upon whom praise had been heaped from a very young age, so at that kind of bullish age I thought the world was my oyster. I remember once she turned to me - presumably

after some smug recital on my part - and said 'You know, you're not *that* good'. She was dead right, and these are precious words for a 19-year old to hear and have helped spur me to strive to greater heights ever since.

I know for a fact that she gave her gifts to many in this way, and in later life her formal teaching for the Sydney Conservatorium was renowned with a new crop of young singers benefitting from her expertise up until very recently. But in the end it will be her audiences - those who heard her live and/or have her many vinyl records and one CD - who will be the most transformed by being witness to one of Australia's very few artists who have reached a truly international and singular level of accomplishment as a soloist.



Kerrie Biddell: one of Australia's very few artists who have reached a truly international and singular level of accomplishment as a soloist...PHOTO COURTESY JUDY BAILEY

Hopefully an Australian record label or distributor will have the foresight to - with the necessary co-operation of the current rights holders - digitally release her many superb but out-of-print vinyl recordings so that they are preserved for posterity in a facilitated way. Hers is a legacy of recent Australian musical history the significance of which is by no means properly acknowledged.

An obituary written by Anthony O'Grady, which appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on September 9, 2014 can be read on this site at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/obituaries-page-26>.