

OBITUARY: ERROL BUDDLE 1928-2018

An appreciation by Bruce Johnson*

I did not perform often enough with Errol Buddle to be able to speak as one of his regular musical colleagues. Even so, every one of the handful of times I worked with him, I found the experience overwhelmingly memorable, a source of enormous pride. It was not simply that I was having a musical conversation with a jazz musician of unsurpassed command and sensitivity, but that I knew I was standing next to a legend. I knew this as a long time historian of Australian jazz, and it is in that role that I am asked to write this obituary appreciation of his importance as a giant of the postwar Australian jazz.



Errol Buddle on alto: a giant of postwar Australian jazz...

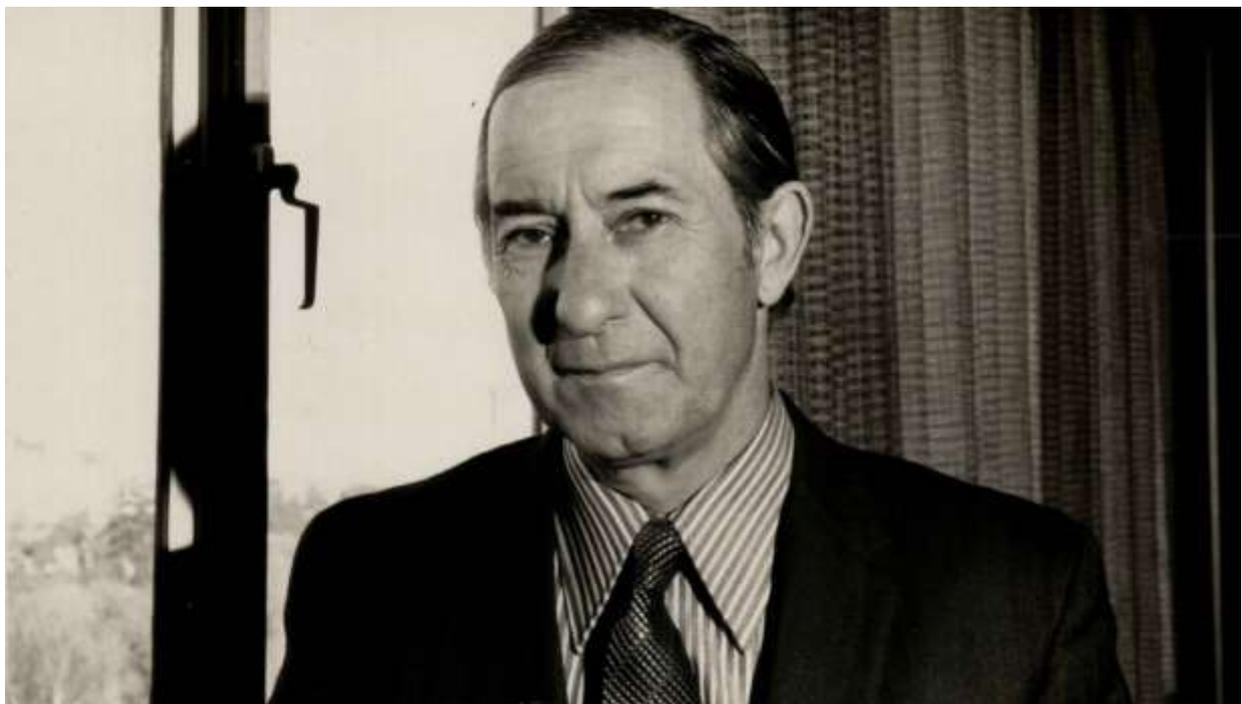
Errol was born in the wine-making township of Reynella, some 25 kilometres outside Adelaide. As a child he began playing banjo at the Adelaide College of Music



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(ACM), founded in 1932 by the visionary John Ellerton Becker, who purchased large quantities of musical instruments, and which would establish an enormous pool of musically literate youth in Adelaide from the 1930s, many of whom would later emerge as the city's leading jazz musicians. In 1936 Becker bought a shipment of saxophones and thus at the age of eight, Buddle switched to soprano saxophone. Becker himself later became a researcher in farming methods and received a knighthood. Within three months, Becker organised for the young ACM saxophonists to play a three week season at the Prince Edwards Theatre in Sydney. Buddle however was not initially an enthusiastic music student, and continued to learn only under parental persuasion, even abandoning music for a period in order to concentrate on his schoolwork. During his high school years, however, some family friends invited him to join a trio that played written arrangements at a country dance, for which he received fifteen shillings a night, but which he found so enjoyable that he would have done it for nothing.

In 1944, aged 16, Buddle successfully responded to an advertisement for a saxophonist at Adelaide's Kings Ballroom; it is likely that, in this way he became one of the many young Australian musicians, like Sydney's Don Burrows and Terry Wilkinson, to enjoy early opportunities created by wartime gaps in professional dance bands. At that time, Adelaide had a small but burgeoning jazz scene, centred primarily on the Adelaide Jazz Lovers' Society (AJLS) founded in 1941 by a number of enthusiasts that included Clement Semmler, later Deputy Chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission/Corporation, and Bill Holyoak who would become a long-running jazz broadcaster and whose brother Alf would mentor so many of Adelaide's postwar jazz musicians. The AJLS held Sunday jam sessions at the Kings Ballroom, at one of which ACM alumnus Bobby Limb made his jazz debut



Clement Semmler: one of a number of enthusiasts who founded the Adelaide Jazz Lovers' Society, he was later Deputy Chairman of the ABC...

in 1942, and went on to become a leading figure in the local jazz scene. It was while he was playing a jazz concert at the Astoria Ballroom in 1945 that Buddle first heard him, and was immediately 'mesmerised' by Limb's tenor playing, and from which he dated his enthusiasm for jazz. Even into the late twentieth century, he regarded Limb as 'one of the better tenor sax players in Australia' (*JACM* August 1982: 8).



Bobby Limb on tenor: Buddle regarded Limb as 'one of the better tenor sax players in Australia'... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

It is difficult to date such events with confidence without going back to primary sources such as professional journals, and in the case of jazz these are themselves ephemeral and unreliable, partly because of varying intervals between submission and publication of copy. But if the year 1945, above, is reliable, then Buddle grasped the basic principles of jazz improvisation with astonishing speed, especially given the relatively uncodified state of the music at that time; because it was also from that year that we have his first recorded jazz solos.

The story of Errol Buddle most frequently takes us from the Astoria experience to the trail that led to him becoming a dominant figure, nationally and internationally, in what has become known as the modernist jazz scene. But before we jump to that development, I want to pause at an episode that has been overlooked in the public obituaries, but which in fact enlarges the compass of Errol's achievements significantly.

From the postwar period to the end of the century, the story of Australian jazz has been told through several standard models, mostly articulated by fans and critics. One is the 'mouldy fig' version, in which, since the advent of Swing in the 1930s, significant elements of the jazz community diverged from the righteous path of 'classic' jazz, largely as defined in Chicago in the 1920s by King Oliver, Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. These apostates became anathematised as the 'modernists', betraying the true jazz tradition with all manner of heresies, culminating in bop, not to mention later anarchies like free form and fusion. The modernists in turn regarded the mouldies as harmless naïfs, determined primitives who had cut themselves off from what became known as the 'mainstream'. What these two narratives shared was the retrospective construction of the jazz narrative in terms of what were once called in another historiographical feud, ancients and moderns. Jazz history was a history of this antipathy.

The problems with this mythology included the fact that musicians themselves insolently wandered back and forth across the border, but also that the binary itself was an *ex post facto* imposition on history. Until the late 1940s, jazz was barely marked by this internal demarcation. Rather, until the late 1940s, it defined itself as a more or less homogeneous genre whose 'other' was commercial dance band music. It is worth remembering that one of Australia's most influential pioneer 'modernists', Don Banks both recorded what is considered Australia's first bop composition (and later also recorded with Errol), and performed with the Bell brothers coterie as a boogie pianist.



Don Banks: he both recorded what is considered Australia's first bop composition (and later also recorded with Errol), and performed with the Bell brothers coterie as a boogie pianist...

And the same indifference to this later demarcation was apparent in the early career of Errol Buddle. In 1945 he became a founding member of a band calling itself the Southern Jazz Group. They rehearsed at his house at 77 Anzac Highway, because his mother owned a piano. The band was in the freewheeling, collectively improvised style associated with the Chicagoans, one of the templates for what became known as Dixieland; Buddle's sound on the earliest recordings the band made suggests Bud Freeman, though as he recalled, he held Ben Webster and Georgie Auld in particular esteem. Four sides survive of the band with Errol in it, his first recorded jazz solos. That they survived at all is remarkable. They were one-off brittle acetates, two of them glass. It is worth briefly summarising their provenance, as this will also have a bearing on my concluding comments.



Buddle's sound on the earliest recordings of the Southern Jazz Group suggests Bud Freeman (pictured above)... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

Bill Holyoak founded a record label, *Memphis*, the main archive of the Southern Jazz Group. These acetates predate the design of the label, but they carried hand-written information, and I bought them at the auction of Holyoak's record collection following his death in the 1960s. They were unplayable at that time, partly because in their deteriorated state even one session under a diamond stylus would have damaged them even further.

With the establishment of the Australian Jazz Archive, hosted by the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), we embarked on a programme of remastering old Australian jazz recordings, including the entire Memphis catalogue, available as a double CD, *Memphis Records, Linehan Series*, CD/SSA/MLO033. Buddle is listed on the handwritten notes as playing alto, but in my CD booklet I declared that ‘the sound is clearly tenor’ (p.5). I subsequently found that this was wrong. In a conversation with Errol on 29 December 2004, he informed me that he did not even own a tenor at that time – he first bought one in 1946. But he had been so impressed by Limb’s tenor that it became his favourite instrument and he consciously cultivated the lower register of the alto.

There are several aspects of this episode that are remarkable, including the provenance of the recordings. More importantly, we have this early evidence of his jazz command, and that he achieved this within what must have only been a matter of months, since he identified his exposure to Bobby Limb in the same year as the beginning of his jazz awareness. And further, that this improvisation tyro could produce such expressive clarity using only the lower registers of his instrument, a foreshadowing of the exploratory spirit that later manifested itself in, for example, his use of double reed instruments. It comes as a shock to realise that his assured lines are the work of a teenager, and prior to the massive exposure to the US models that came later. This is a musician clearly on the way to becoming a master.

The remainder of the career trajectory is much more familiar (see the sources below), and I shall summarise them more generally. When Limb moved to Melbourne in February 1947, Errol took over most of his work, but later in the year he was invited to join fellow Adelaidean drummer and vibes player Jack Brokensha at the Plaza in



The Jack Brokensha group, L-R, Brokensha (vibes), Edwin Duff (vocals), Errol Buddle (tenor sax), Ron Loughhead (piano), Ken Lester (bass) at the Plaza in Melbourne... PHOTO COURTESY FAIRFAX MEDIA

Melbourne. Over the next five years he established a reputation in jazz circles there and in Sydney, and from time to time also revisited Adelaide. Over this time he worked at the top of the profession with, *inter alia*, Billy Weston at the Gaiety, and Bob Gibson, at the top venues in both cities including the Galleon and Golds. He also recorded with visiting US cornet player Rex Stewart, his first live exposure to an American jazz musician, though, alas, the masters seem not to have survived. Thus far, a story of the rise to the top ranks of an Australian dance/jazz saxophonist from the late 1940s, though distinctive in that by 1951, when he was working every night at one of the country's top nightclubs, Chequers, he was still only in his early twenties.



The trombonist Billy Weston: Buddle worked with him at the Gaiety... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

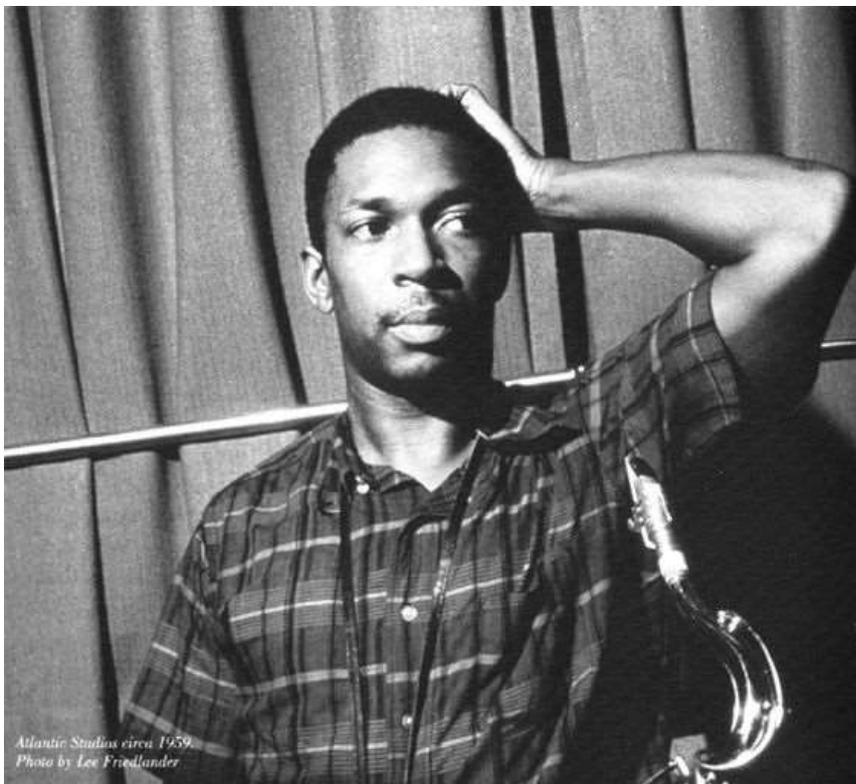
But his enduring curiosity now opened a new door. Introduced to the work of Stravinsky by Jock McKenna, he became fascinated by the sound of double reed instruments, particularly as deployed in *The Rite of Spring*. He took up study of the bassoon at the Sydney Conservatorium with the principal bassoonist of the Sydney Symphony Wallace Black and before long was playing it in the Conservatorium's youth orchestra. Back in Adelaide for an extended visit, he continued his conservatorium studies, building up a high level of command that would add a distinctive profile to his international jazz reputation.

That reputation was germinated as a consequence of an invitation to join New Zealand drummer Don Varella in Canada. Buddle left to join him in August 1952 and as a consequence would not know for some time that in October he would be voted Australian 'Musician of the Year' by *Music Maker*. He arrived in Canada on 3 August 1952, and immediately embarked on a three week journey through the West Coast of the US soaking up as much jazz as possible, including Brubeck, Carl Tjader, Earl



Vibist Cal Tjader: one of the musicians Buddle heard on a three-week journey through the West Coast of the US...

Bostic, and at that time a relatively unknown tenor player, John Coltrane. Buddle was immediately struck by ‘the different quality of sound the Americans were getting out of their instruments’, and in particular the saxophonists, who were using ‘closer facings on their mouthpieces than we were using ... The opening tip of the mouthpiece is smaller’ (*JACM* October 1982: 22).



John Coltrane pictured in 1959: in 1952 he was relatively unknown... PHOTO CREDIT LEE FRIEDLANDER

After the US jazz feast, Buddle settled into Windsor Ontario, because it was handy to Detroit, at that time a major jazz centre. He joined the Windsor Symphony Orchestra on bassoon, and began to make a name for himself on the jazz scene to the extent that Woody Herman flew him to New York to audition for his band. He was pipped by Jack Montrose who, also an arranger, represented a double asset. Buddle and Varella began to frequent the jazz venues in Detroit, hearing, meeting and talking to such luminaries as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Stan Getz and Paul Chambers. At one of the clubs, Kleins, they heard a band led by Yusef Lateef. Lateef allowed Buddle to sit in, after which the owner, George Klein, invited him to take over leadership 'to keep these guys in line'; the 'guys' included trumpeter Frank DiVita, Milt Jackson's brother Alvin (bass), Tommy Flanagan (piano) and drummer Frank Gant. Buddle



The pianist Tommy Flanagan: one of the sidemen Buddle had to keep in line...PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

wasn't sure if Lateef was fired (not 'keeping the guys in line'?) or if his contract had expired, but he accepted with great astonishment. His three month contract was extended, with new musicians coming in including Elvin Jones (drums), Barry Harris (piano), Major Holley (bass), and Pepper Adams (baritone), with once-a-week guest Billy Mitchell as a third sax.

If it was not extraordinary enough that a young white Australian should be leading a group of black Americans in one of the major US jazz centres, then even more so that, following the expiration of his contract at Kleins, Buddle was contacted by Ed Sarkesian who was running the top jazz venue in Detroit, the Rouge Lounge, and invited to bring an all-Australian group in, to back singer Chris O'Connor for a two week season. Buddle contacted Jack Brokensha and pianist Bryce Rohde who were already in Windsor, and added local bassist/reeds player Dick Healey. In this way, the Australian Jazz Quartet was formed in December 1954. The rest, as they say, is history, that is, well-documented history.



The original Australian Jazz Quartet: Bryce Rohde (at the piano) then, clockwise, Errol Buddle, Dick Healey, Jack Brokensha...

Over the next five years, as well as backing singers like Carmen McRae, the band in its own right became one of the most successful jazz acts in the US, sharing the bill with, and often outbilling, performers like Gerry Mulligan, Dave Brubeck, George Shearing and Miles Davis, touring almost continuously and recording extensively. They performed in every major jazz venue in the US including the legendary Hickory House, and played concerts in New York's Carnegie Hall. The band was an exemplar of the 'Cool School', in which Buddle established a reputation as one of the major pioneers of double reed instruments in jazz, with both the band and Buddle himself winning numerous polls.

The AJQ disbanded in 1959, after the group returned to Australia. Based in Bob Gibson's band in Sydney, and extremely active in various studio orchestras, Buddle engaged in more full-on jazz activity in the incubator of Australia's progressive movement, the El Rocco. From 1972 he joined Col Nolan's Soul Syndicate, beginning a new career path that saw him become a central pillar of Australia's modernist movement: in groups including the Nolan-Buddle Quartet, and in the Daly-Wilson Big Band, with whom he recorded and toured in Russia, the UK and the US. He also

participated in the most ambitious recording programme conducted by any Australian composer in any genre, John Sangster's massive *Lord of the Rings*



Buddle (far left) performing with (L-R), Laurie Bennett (drums), Dieter Vogt (bass) and Col Nolan (piano)... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

project, with a stylistic range unmatched anywhere, a monumental statement encompassing the entire jazz tradition from ragtime to free form. The extent of his jazz mastery was epitomised in the 1977 album *Buddles Doubles* in which he played and overdubbed himself on a range of single and double reed woodwinds, as well as flute and percussion, another unique recording project. Later ventures into funk and fusion were part of a trajectory that also included numerous reunion concerts. He continued performing and informally mentoring well into the twenty-first century in a career that spanned nearly 70 years.



Errol Buddle, pictured in 1979 with the forest of instruments he played... PHOTO CREDIT BARRY JOHN STEVENS (FAIRFAX MEDIA)

If this overview seems to be balanced towards his earlier years, it is because it has sought to emphasise areas of Buddle's career that have been generally neglected, and that in turn is intended to emphasise even more the magnitude of his stride across postwar Australian jazz. The published obituaries have extolled Errol Buddle the 'modernist'. But before he began to make his international mark, I have tried to foreground his presence in another milestone of Australian jazz that predates the traditional/modern divide. The world's longest surviving jazz festival is the Australian Jazz Convention. The first was held in Melbourne in 1946, and by general consensus, the 'hit' of that event in Graeme Bell's words, was a hitherto barely known band from Adelaide called the Southern Jazz Group, led by Dave Dallwitz. It became inspirational to the Australian revivalist jazz movement which has made a unique contribution to the international jazz story. So, even if we wish to see our jazz history traversed by that dubious boundary, Buddle was there on both sides of it. Errol's centrality to postwar Australian jazz thus extends further back than Sydney in the 1950s, to the closing years of World War Two and encompasses both the burgeoning revivalist movement and our extraordinarily creative modernist phase.



Adelaide's Southern Jazz Group, led by Dave Dallwitz (left, on trombone): by general consensus, the 'hit' of the 1946 Australian Jazz Convention...

If we are to draw up a roster of the most internationally influential Australian jazz performers or groups, I believe it would have to include Graeme Bell, Errol Buddle, and probably The Necks. The last are still far too active for retrospectives. But the credentials of Bell and Buddle (and their most important associates) are, to my mind, unassailable. It is not just the durability of their contribution to the music at the highest level. Many Australian jazz musicians have risen to the highest peaks of recognition from the 1920s to the present, excelling by existing international standards. But Bell and Buddle *changed* the standards.

The Bell band established a jazz scene in postwar Czechoslovakia where none had existed, and in the UK they transformed the social function of jazz from a 'listening' music back to a 'dancing' music for English youth desperate for an outlet for energy in the dismal culture of postwar austerity. Errol Buddle made a major impact on the understanding of jazz instrumentation. Apart from simply being so good at what he did, in the words of jazz encyclopaedist Leonard Feather, he was 'the first musician in jazz to make extensive use of the bassoon' (Feather 1960: 147). In the larger context, this is not simply the introduction of a novelty. It was a manifestation of an irrepressible curiosity that experienced none of the constraints that normally box a musician into formulae, into a sense of what can and cannot be done, and which leads to a placeless standardisation. This needs a longer argument, but both Bell and Buddle exhibited what I argue is a pattern in Australian culture: to make something out of whatever is to hand. Buddle recalled why he incorporated the bassoon into the Australian Jazz Quartet/Quintet: 'I had the instrument and thought I might as well use it' (JACM January/February 1983: 23). As with Bell and his 'Music-for-dancing' policy in the Leicester Square Jazz Club in the 1940s, it didn't occur to Errol to say, 'Oh, but we don't do that, we can't do that'.



Errol Buddle on tenor: we have lost a giant... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

It is often said of the death of an artist or performer that we have lost a giant, but it has never been more justly said than now, with the passing of Errol Buddle.

Finally, and on the matter of the preservation and retrieval of our jazz history. Especially with the advent of the New Jazz Studies from the 1990s, in conjunction with broader fields of ethnography, cultural history and social anthropology, there is now an increasing reaction against the 'grand narratives', that purport to tell the Big Stories. But to construct these Big Stories, so much has to be left out, so many people omitted, that the outcome is, literally, mythical. To counter this, to cross-hatch the detail so that our engagement with the past is more constructive, it is now more fully understood that micro-histories are essential, close and detailed studies of exactly how individuals negotiate their day-to-day lives. It is difficult to conduct these for jazz subjects, partly because the records of those negotiations don't have the traditional status of historically significant documents. Errol Buddle has left behind as comprehensive a collection of memorabilia as can be imagined; in the words of his son Lee, Errol never threw anything away. In addition to his stature and importance in the history of Australian cultural history, this archive is a unique resource. Buddle should be the subject of a biography, and with the materials remaining, it could be the definitive biography not only of one individual but of the era he spanned.

At this time, his partner, Maree Steinway, his family, notably his son Lee, jazz writer Eric Myers and I are trying to ensure that this collection remains intact for future researchers. It will require prolonged commitment to systematise and catalogue. Anyone interested in discussing this is invited to email Eric Myers at emyers2568@gmail.com.

Errol Buddle was born in Adelaide on April 29, 1928. He died of heart failure in Sydney on February 22, 2018, aged 89.

Sources

The information that forms the basis of the foregoing is drawn from a number of sources, of which the most detailed and valuable in relation to Buddle himself are McKeon and Myers.

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[The above four articles by Eric Myers, originally published in *Jazz: The Australasian Contemporary Music Magazine (JACM)* in 1982-83, are now on the internet in the form of two articles and renamed 'The Errol Buddle Story (Part One)' at this link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/essays-6> and 'The Errol Buddle Story (Part Two)' at this link <https://www.ericmyersjazz.com/essays-8>.]
