

## OBITUARY: STEWART SPEER 1928-1986

by Duncan Kimball

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Stewart Speer was born in Melbourne on June 26, 1928 and died in Sydney on September 16, 1986. His portly build, bushy grey hair and beard, and ever-present cap made him an instantly recognisable figure. The veteran Australian drummer is best remembered for his long stint in Max Merritt & The Meteors, but he was one of several prominent rock players who began their career in jazz, such as other contemporary jazzers who worked widely in popular music (eg Bob Bertles, Bernie McGann, Warren Daly, Bobby Gebert). Speer was known for his ability to work across many musical genres.

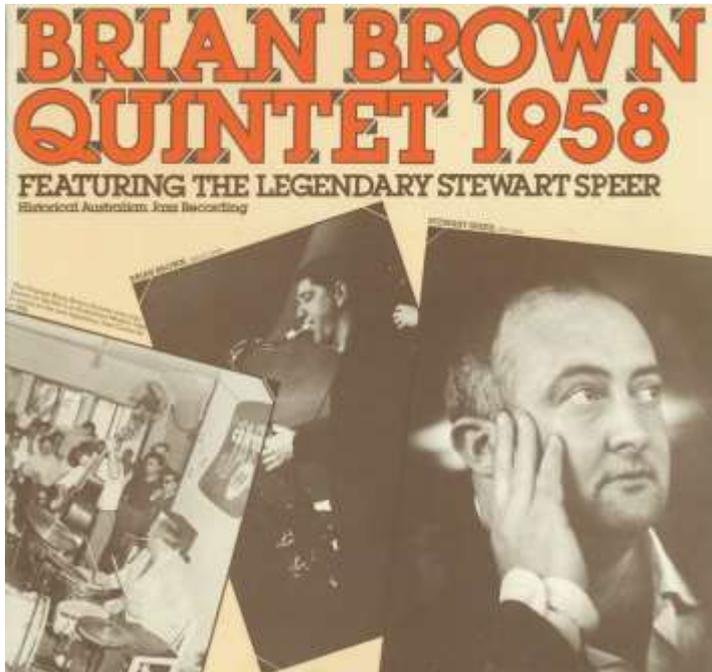
Speer was part of the generation of distinguished Melbourne jazz drummers who came onto the scene in the late 40s and early 50s. Alongside contemporaries like Len Barnard, John Sangster, Lawrie Thompson and Alan Turnbull, Speer was strongly influenced by Melbourne's three leading "trad" drummers, Bob Featherstone, Charlie Blott and Billy Hyde (founder of the well-known Drum Clinic).

Throughout the 50s Speer played the prevailing 'trad' jazz style with Roger Bell, Bob Barnard, Frank Traynor and others, but he was drawn irresistibly to bop, which had begun to filter across from the US in the late 40s. Although trad still ruled the roost in Australian jazz well into the 1950s, both Speer and Charlie Blott amassed considerable collections of imported bop records and both men were avid fans of the new genre. After gigs (according to jazz historian Andrew Bisset) Speer and his friends, including sax player Splinter Reeves, used to "sneak in through the back window so as not to wake his mother and stay up until breakfast trying to work the records out."



*Stewie Speer on drums in Melbourne with Max Collies Jazz Kings...*

In early 1956 saxophonist and bop fanatic Brian Brown returned from Europe and formed a new band with like-minded players: Speer, trumpeter Keith Hounslow, schoolboy pianist Dave Martin and bassist Barry Buckley. In Speer, Brown found a drummer "... who swung. Stewie had beautiful time, especially on cymbal, hard and straight ahead, with the message on his kit 'Art Blakey For Pope'." [Bisset]



*The front cover of the classic Brian Brown Quintet 1958 LP on 44 Records...*

The Brian Brown Quintet were regulars at Horst Liepolt's influential Jazz Centre 44 in St Kilda, which operated from 1955 to 1960. As indicated by the 'Blakey for Pope' message on Speer's kit, the Quintet championed the more progressive (but less popular) east-coast style of modern jazz. At that time, the preferred genre was the "cool", west coast style epitomized by artists like Chet Baker and Dave Brubeck who were then all the rage with modern jazz fans in Australia.

The Brown Quintet were enthusiastic ambassadors for bop, introducing Melburnians to the then largely unheard music of artists like Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins. Speer continued to work in trad bands to make ends meet, but he was a regular member of the Quintet until it split in 1960.

Speer then moved to Sydney and became a regular at local jazz haunts like Quo Vadis in Martin Place, Chequers, and Sammy Lee's legendary Latin Quarter, where Jimmy Sloggett's band (which included Bernie McGann, Bob Bertles and Graham Morgan) was introducing Sydney club goers to the sounds of soul music. It was during this period that Speer succeeded Kiwi drummer Bruno Lawrence as the drummer in the Latin Quarter's resident band, after Bruno (himself soon to join The Meteors) fell ill with hepatitis.

In the mid-60s, Speer was an integral part of the fertile scene that centred on the famous El Rocco coffee lounge in Kings Cross, playing with groups led by John

Sangster, Judy Bailey, pianist Col Nolan, clarinetist Don Burrows, Warren Daly and others. Founded by Arthur James in 1957, and developed by Sydney drummer John Pochée from 1957-59, the converted plumber's shop at the top of William Street became the epicentre of modern jazz in Sydney in the 1960s.

Speer might well have remained a respected member of the local jazz scene had it not been for a series of coincident events that brought him together with Christchurch-born R & B singer Max Merritt.



*The NZ singer Max Merritt: he had risen to the top of the NZ beat scene with his band The Meteors before moving to Australia in 1963...*

Max had risen to the top of the NZ beat scene with his band The Meteors before moving to Australia in 1963. After a tough start, the group had enjoyed moderate success, and they were a popular draw on the Sydney circuit, but by the mid-60s, with the beat boom starting to fade, their manager Graham Dent was keen to steer them into a career in cabaret. Another difficulty was the regular turnover of personnel; many prominent players passed through the ranks in the band's ten-year life to 1966, but none of the line-ups lasted more than a year.

By the end of 1966, the line-up had (briefly) settled down to long-serving guitarist Peter Williams, bassist Billy Kristian and drummer Bruno Lawrence, but their recording career had stalled and they needed a change of direction to survive. In early 1967 the band reluctantly took a gig entertaining passengers on a Pacific cruise liner, but just before they left both Williams and Kristian announced their intention to leave after the cruise.

As a temporary addition, Max took Bruno Lawrence's suggestion and brought in one of Speer and Bruno's Latin Quarter colleagues, saxophonist Bob Bertles. Another stalwart of the Sydney jazz scene, Bob was a powerful and commanding tenor player, who also had a strong background in rock as a member of Johnny O'Keefe's backing band The Dee Jays from 1961-65, and he was also a regular session player on pop recordings.



*The saxophonist Bob Bertles (left) had a strong background in rock as a member of Johnny O'Keefe's backing band... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE*

This temporary five-piece version of the Meteors set sail, but along the way they also lost Bruno Lawrence -- he "jumped ship" in Auckland, leaving Max to play drums on the last leg of the cruise. The other crucial event happened during The Meteors' stopover in Auckland. It was here that Max's old friend Jimmy Sloggett introduced him to Otis Redding's LP *Dictionary of Soul*. In particular, Otis' famed version of Try A Little Tenderness had a huge impact, and it transformed Max's thinking about The Meteors' direction.

Back in Sydney, he put together a new Meteors, hoping to better emulate this new wave of soul epitomised by the artists on the Atlantic and Stax labels. He was also greatly impressed by Bertles' talent, and even before the end of the cruise it was clear that Bob was in to stay. After recruiting flamboyant NZ-born bass player John "Yuk" Harrison (ex Invaders, Heart'n'Soul) as his new bassist, Max again turned to the jazz scene and invited Speer to join as their new drummer in May 1967. Although he played outside the band on various occasions over the years, Speer effectively worked with Max for the rest of his life.

Speer's new career as a rock drummer almost ended in tragedy only one month after he joined The Meteors. The band was planning to try its luck in UK, but while preparations proceeded they had to live and this meant taking gigs wherever they could get them.



*Max Merritt & The Meteors in London, L-R, Speer, Lance Dixon, Merritt, Martin (Fuzz) Deniz, John Gourds: a head-on collision in Australia on June 24, 1967...*

On 24 June 1967, on their way to a gig in Morwell, their van collided head-on with a truck just outside the town of Bunyip, 90 miles south east of Melbourne. Only Yuk Harrison, who had been sitting in the back with the equipment, escaped unhurt. Bob, Max and Speer were trapped in the front of the crumpled van and it took firemen more than an hour to free them. Max sustained severe head injuries, Bob's leg was smashed, and Speer suffered multiple serious injuries. His legs were crushed, both arms were broken and he lost the tips of several fingers, resulting a four-month hospital stay and a long and painful rehabilitation. It took the better part of a year for the group to recover from the accident. As a result of their injuries, Max lost his right eye and his face was badly scarred, Bob was left with a permanent limp, and Speer never regained full mobility.

Successful benefit concerts in Sydney and Melbourne raised money to support them through their convalescence, but their only gig that year was a one-off comeback

show at Berties disco in Melbourne on December 2. Gradually the band returned to live work through the early months of 1968 and by mid-year The Meteors were back on the road full time, and winning acclaim as one of the hottest live bands on the scene.



*Max Merritt (left) & Stewie Speer: from 1967 Speer effectively worked with Max for the rest of his life...*

In July, they came in third behind runners-up The Master's Apprentices in the national final of the Hoadley's Battle of the Sounds. Ironically, the winner was The Groove, a new 'supergroup' that included Max's former guitarist Pete Williams. The new Meteors were certainly an unlikely-looking group of rock stars -- counter to the current trend, Max had close-cropped hair, and Speer was overweight, over 40 and greying, his bald "musicians band" who were also renowned as one of the hardest-working (and hardest-living) groups in the country, an outfit that never compromised, onstage or off.

By 1969 Max was Australia's undisputed "King Of Soul and the Meteors gained added stature when the ABC presented them in a four-part series, Max Merritt and the Meteors in Concert, the first such series ever made in Australia featuring a rock band live in concert. They signed to RCA and recorded their long overdue debut album Max Merritt & The Meteors -- "an impressive collection of brassy, bluesy soul' (Ian McFarlane). The album included their first Australian hit single, their classic cover of Jerry Butler's *Western Union Man*, which featured a punchy Stax-style brass arrangement by Bob Bertles. It reached #13 on the national chart in December 1969, and the album itself did even better, reaching #8 in June 1970.

In October 1970 Max Merritt & The Meteors finally left for their long-postponed visit to the UK, but as with so many Australian bands of the period, it was mostly hard going for little reward. For Aussie fans, the highlights of that period were undoubtedly their brief returns to Australia for triumphant appearances at the Sunbury Festivals in January 1972 and 1973.

The Meteors slogged away with regular live work on the London pub circuit, building up a solid following. They also began to pick up prestigious support slots on national tours by leading groups like Slade and The Moody Blues, but it all came unstuck in 1974 when manager Peter Raphael suddenly decamped, leaving them stranded with no money and mass of outstanding debts. Bertles left to play with UK jazz-rock band Nucleus, Speer toured Europe with Alexis Korner, and Max was forced to fall back on his old trade and take work as a bricklayer.



*Bob Bertles, performing with Ian Carr's Nucleus...*

Picking up the pieces once again, Max and Speer put together a new, five-piece Meteors in late 1974, with British musicians John Gourd, Howard Martin Deniz and Barry Duggan. They went straight back to work on the London pub circuit and became the first act signed to the new UK division of the American Arista label. Happily, the resulting album, *A Little Easier*, became their biggest success to date. An Australian best seller, it reached #4 in November 1975, with the classic ballad *Slipping Away* reaching #2 in Australia and #5 in New Zealand that same month. Still based in the UK, The Meteors returned to Australia for successful tours in May-June 1976 and February 1977, the latter producing the album *Back Home Live*, recorded at Melbourne's Dallas Brooks Hall.

In 1978 Max broke up The Meteors, retaining only Speer. He signed a new deal with Polydor, and recorded an album in Nashville, then relocated to Los Angeles, where he has been based ever since. In May 1979, Max toured Australia with a 12-piece band, and returned in late 1980 for another visit with a band comprising Speer, Paul Grant (guitar), John Williams (keyboards) and Phil Lawson (bass). This was Max and Speer's last major tour together.

Speer returned to live in Sydney in 1980, and he remained active on the local scene, although the health problems stemming from the 1967 car accident affected him increasingly during his last years. He died of a heart attack in Sydney on September 16, 1986, aged 58.