

MEMORIES OF ALAN LEE

by Garry Lee*

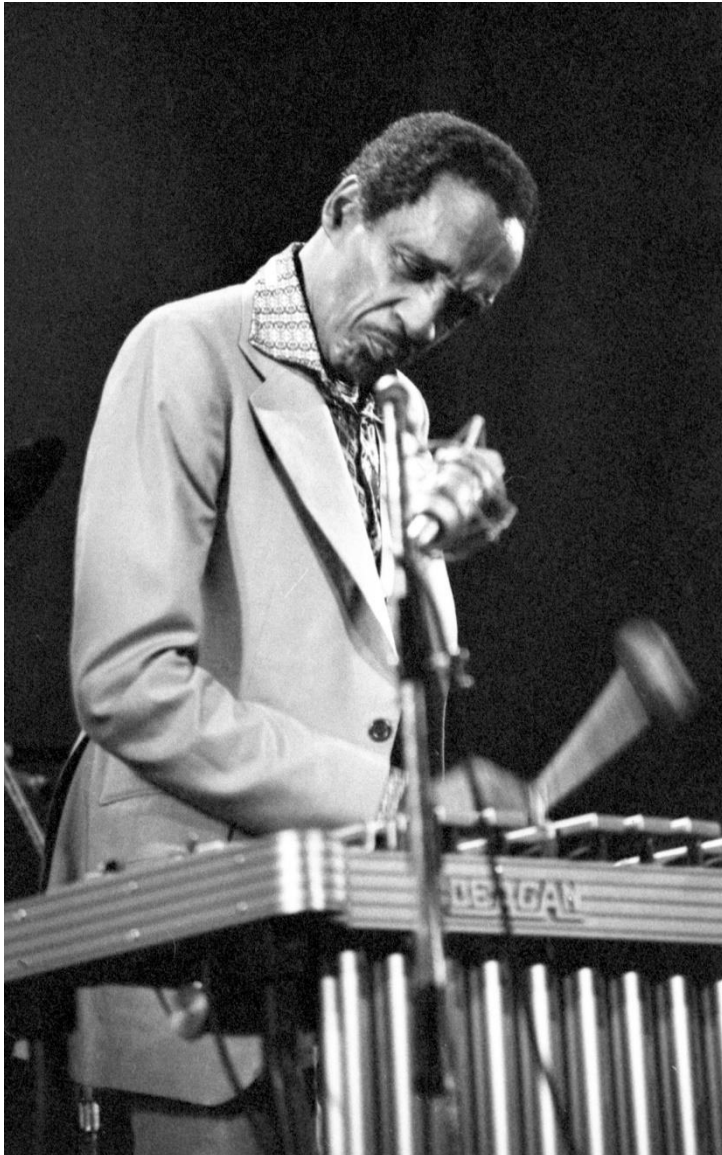
Alan Lee was born on 29 July 1936, and died on 7 August 2022. However, this is not to be read as a definitive obituary. Alan was more than 15 years older than me and lived in Melbourne for both the beginning and end of his life. I was born in England but grew up in Sydney from 1957 to 1983, when I moved to Perth. However our paths did cross on many occasions especially when Alan lived in Perth. He was a huge influence and inspiration for me in my formative years as a vibes player, and I think some of his outlooks on life rubbed off on me also.



Alan Lee: he and Garry Lee shared a love of the vibraphone in jazz and counted Milt Jackson as a favourite... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER

**Garry Lee is a leading Perth jazz musician (vibraphone, guitar) and educator. He was a member of the WAAPA jazz staff when the program commenced in 1984 and now teaches part-time at Hale School, Perth. Garry was administrator of the WA Youth Jazz Orchestra, early 1985, and then Jazz Coordinator of WA from late 1985 to 1992. He won an Australian Jazz Award in 1993 for his vibraphone playing and was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 1998.*

Although we share the same surname Alan and I were not related. We did however share a love of the vibraphone in jazz and counted Milt Jackson as a favourite. Alan was especially enamoured by the compositions of pianist/leader of the Modern Jazz Quartet, John Lewis and Milt's role in MJQ's overall sound. Alan enjoyed a profile in Australian jazz that commenced in the 1950s and 60s in Melbourne, leading bands that included Bob Sedergreen and Ted Vining. When I started to record in the 1980s I understand from Jim McLeod – then presenter of ABC's *JazzTrack* – many would ring in confused thinking I was Alan. Furthermore in 1992 Alan and I recorded together and took consecutive solos and then traded four bars, with many presenters thinking it was the one player.



Milt Jackson performing in Sydney in 1981... PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN

I first started getting interested in jazz vibes in 1968 at the age of 16. My uncle, Nigel, who had played vibes, piano and trumpet in England in the 1950s, recommended I buy an MJQ album and I was totally smitten. I had started playing guitar and like so many in this era was listening to The Beatles, Rolling Stones etc but, while babysitting my young cousins, I would also listen to Nigel's record collection – Parker, Diz, Monk, Basie et al – and I started my love for jazz.

In 1969 my father, Clive Lee AM, managed an Australian track and field team on a tour through Asia finishing at the inaugural Pan Pacific Conference Games in Tokyo. He asked me if there was anything he could get for me. I wanted a vibraphone but realised this might be very awkward for him to transport, so settled on a glockenspiel. Dad spent a day travelling around Tokyo with a driver and an interpreter before finding a store that had a glock.

In 1969 I heard John Sangster at Sydney Town Hall on two occasions. Sango, playing vibes, led a band that was support to the then popular rock band Tully. The concerts featured a light show in true hippy rock fashion but for me seeing the light bouncing off the bars of the vibraphone plus hearing Sango's playing was indeed heady stuff.



This is a shot of John Sangster, playing Alan Lee's vibes... PHOTO COURTESY SEEING THE RAFTERS

I first heard Alan in 1970 at French's Tavern in Oxford St, Surry Hills. I organised a bunch of friends to come with me to hear a jazz vibes player who was reputed to be very good. French's was a wine bar with no stage so the band was set up at the end of a long room around the upright piano. This meant to really hear and see what was happening you basically had to be almost touching Alan's Deagan vibes. In a break my girlfriend of the time inadvertently did touch the bars of the vibes incurring

Alan's wrath: "You might have a cute bum but keep it away from my instrument", Alan exploded, probably adding a few extra colourful expletives to the command.

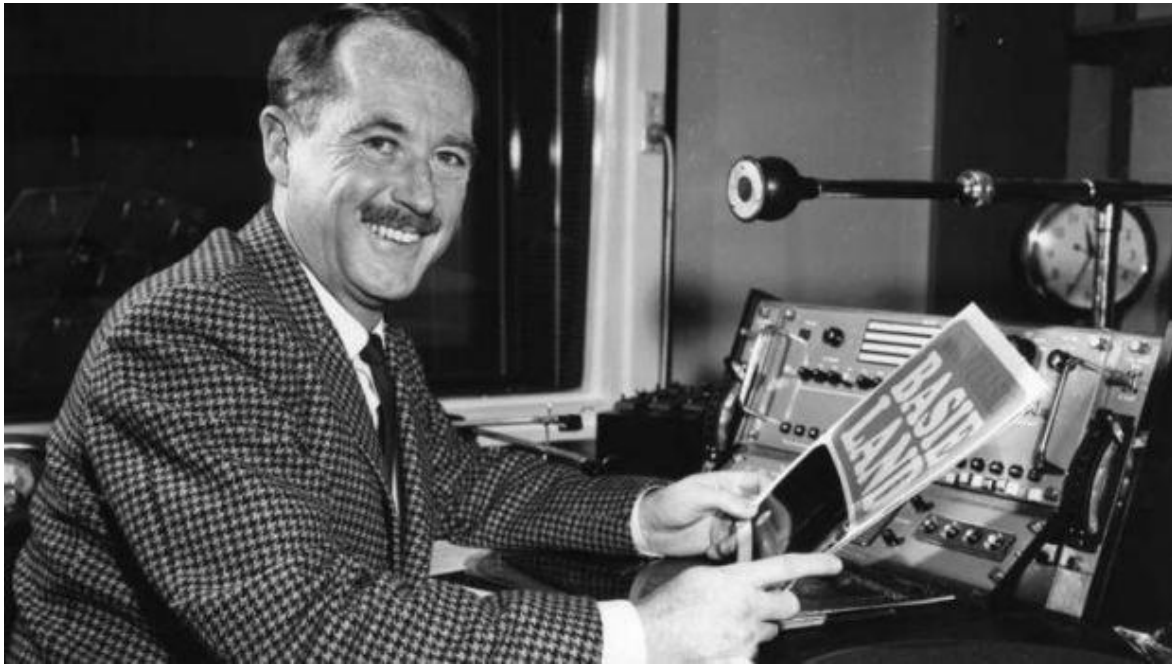
Anyway it was still a great night and I recall the band played *Ode To Billie Joe*, *Mercy Mercy Mercy*, *Spinning Wheel* [a pop hit of the previous year by US jazz/rock band Blood Sweat and Tears] and *Bag's Groove* [Milt Jackson's famous blues in F that Alan may have played almost as many times as its composer]. I did talk to Alan for the first time at this gig – he would have been 35 and I was 18 with *de rigueur* long hair and hippy attire. Alan told me that he always liked to hear what Milt Jackson recorded away from MJQ and I think he was a bit surprised that I knew of a recent Milt album with Teddy Edwards, Monty Alexander, Ray Brown and drummer Dick Berk. *That's The Way It Is* was recorded in August 1969 live at Shelly's Manne-Hole.



This album featured Ray Brown (bass), Dick Berk (drums), Monty Alexander (piano), Teddy Edwards (tenor saxophone), Milt Jackson (vibraphone)...



I frequently listened to Arch McKirdy's program *Relax With Me* on 2BL in Sydney [on the ABC – this program was broadcast nationally every night from 10 to midnight and was the precursor to *Music To Midnight* and then *JazzTrack*]. I have Arch to thank for providing so much information on jazz plus an enduring love of his theme music: Kenny Burrell's recording of *I'm A Fool To Want You*. I still get goose bumps when I hear this recording.



Arch McKirdy: his program on ABC Radio 2BL provides so much information on jazz...

Alan's attitude as bandleader was certainly aggressive. At one stage the drummer was apparently losing time and Alan turned to him and swung his arms around more or less impersonating a windmill in a savage storm in an effort to expunge more passion and drive from the under-sieged timekeeper. On another occasion the pianist played a wrong chord only to be wrapped over the hands by one of Alan's not insubstantial mallets. It was certainly a lesson for me in how to enhance the overall drive and commitment of a quartet where Alan struck his instrument with unequalled ferocity, leading by example. It is quite possible that in the following months my band mates wondered what was happening as I'm sure I tried to adopt some of Alan's bandleader aggression/passion.

Through the remainder of the 1970s Alan lived in Melbourne but did come to Sydney leading a quintet that I got to hear at The Basement. I recall one tune his band played – *The World Is A Ghetto* that George Benson had just recorded. Alan was never afraid to combine typical jazz repertoire with quality pop tunes of the time. I spoke to Alan briefly to let him know that I was now the proud owner of a Deagan Electravibe Model 515. Manufactured between 1970 to 1982, Milt Jackson used one on the Quincy Jones album *Smackwater Jack*. He can also be shown playing the instrument on Youtube – *The Modern Jazz Quartet Live in Oslo* [1970].

Alan let me know that he felt sorry for me but did say he had owned one briefly. There are two main problems with the Electravibe. Firstly you require a high quality amplifier, but this was OK for me as I also play guitar. Secondly and more importantly the bars are very narrow. The instrument is the full range – three octaves from F below middle C plus an additional F at the top making 37 bars – but the width of the bars are problematic. For me at this stage this was not a problem as I had started on glockenspiel but once I played an instrument with broader bars returning to the Electravibe [that I still own] is weird. I was also motivated to get the Electravibe after hearing Sydney vibes player, Sid Edwards, play one with the Peter Boothman Quartet.

It is important to mention here a significant jazz recording in the history of Australian jazz recordings. *Double Vibes: Hobbit* [Swaggie S 1376] was recorded and released in 1977 and my copy cost me \$6.99. It was recorded on one day, April 18, 1977 at EMI Studios, Sydney and featured John Sangster – vibraphone, marimba, percussions; Alan Lee – vibraphone, guitar, berimbau; Tony Gould – piano; George Thompson – bass; Len Barnard – drums. The recording engineer was Martin Bengel.



This album is significant because it unites Australia's two foremost jazz mallet players. See image below, Sangster is pictured top left, then clockwise Alan Lee, Len Barnard, George Thompson, Tony Gould...



This album is significant because it unites Australia's two foremost jazz mallet players. The eight tracks are all originals – four by Sango and four by Alan – and on some tracks combine the sounds of the marimba and vibraphone. Obviously this is an unusual combination that coincidentally was taking place also in New York with the pairing of Dave Samuels and David Friedman. This duo worked under the name Double Image and I heard them live in NYC in 1985 as well as taking lessons from both. Alan used to tell me that 1977 was the year he and Sango had a drinking competition with Alan coming second.

In late 1983 my wife Sue and I moved to Perth and in early 1984 Alan and pianist Jex Saarelaht came over from Melbourne to perform for the Perth Jazz Society. There was a unique atmosphere in Perth's jazz scene. Brits like Don and Moira Mead, Graham Fisk and Mike Messenger were running the Perth Jazz Society and via an annual Australia Council grant PJS was able to present a fair cross-section of leading Australian jazz musicians from Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and on one occasion, Hobart. Alan and Jex had recorded a duo cassette of mainly Thelonious Monk compositions.



Pianist Jex Saarelaht: in early 1984 he and Alan came over from Melbourne to perform for the Perth Jazz Society... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

One of the major problems of touring as a vibes player is the need to borrow/hire an instrument when you arrive in a different city. Alan was to use my Musser Pro Traveller. He arrived on the Friday before his Monday PJS concert and came to a regular restaurant gig I had with a pianist meaning that, after about 14 years this was

the first time he actually heard me play vibes. I also played guitar on the gig so naturally we had Alan up to sit-in.

By arrangement on the Sunday evening I took my vibes to the Brisbane Hotel to a regular gig with a band of June [vcls] and Lew Smith [reeds], Barry Bruce [pno], Viv Booker [dbl bs] and Barry Cox [drms]. Back in the 1980s WA hotels had a “Sunday session”. They were only allowed to be open for four hours and this meant that live music provided a focus and reason for punters to go to pubs where their style of music was presented. The Brisbane Hotel in Northbridge was one of several pubs in Perth and Fremantle that presented live jazz on a weekly basis. Alan and I sat in and the “Lee brothers” double vibes act was born. I might start a solo and then I would receive a friendly hip and shoulder on my left and Alan would take over starting on the bass end of the instrument with me circling behind him to reciprocate the friendly shove, finally culminating in us both playing together – it was always an obvious crowd pleaser.



Lew Smith and June Smith, performing for the Perth Jazz Society in 1985...

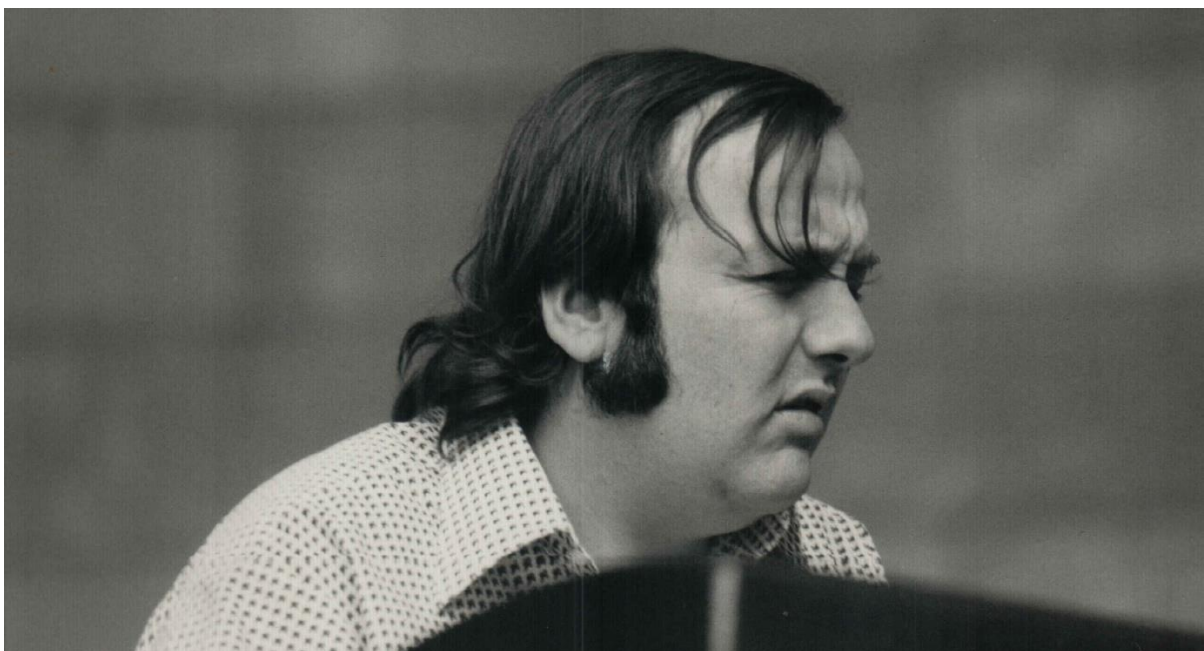
About 1989 Alan moved to Perth to be minister for a church after study in the US. This was the Unity Church founded in Kansas City, Missouri in 1889. Unity has several basic tenets including these: 1/ Human beings are divine at their core and therefore inherently good; and 2/ It is not enough to understand spiritual teachings. We must live the Truth we know.

Our friendship really commenced with Alan now living in Perth. Quickly he put together a quartet that included guitarist Tim Van Der Kuil who was studying jazz at WAAPA. Tim has gone on to enjoy a successful career as guitarist and musical director for English pop diva, Adele. In 1989 I was involved with the annual “Jacaranda Jazz” concert. This was an outdoor event at Houghton Winery beneath a jacaranda grove that took place on the third Sunday of November from 1986 to 2001. In 1989 John Sangster, Bob Barnard and pianist Chris Taperell were guests and at one stage Sango, Alan and myself were all thrashing away on my vibraphone.

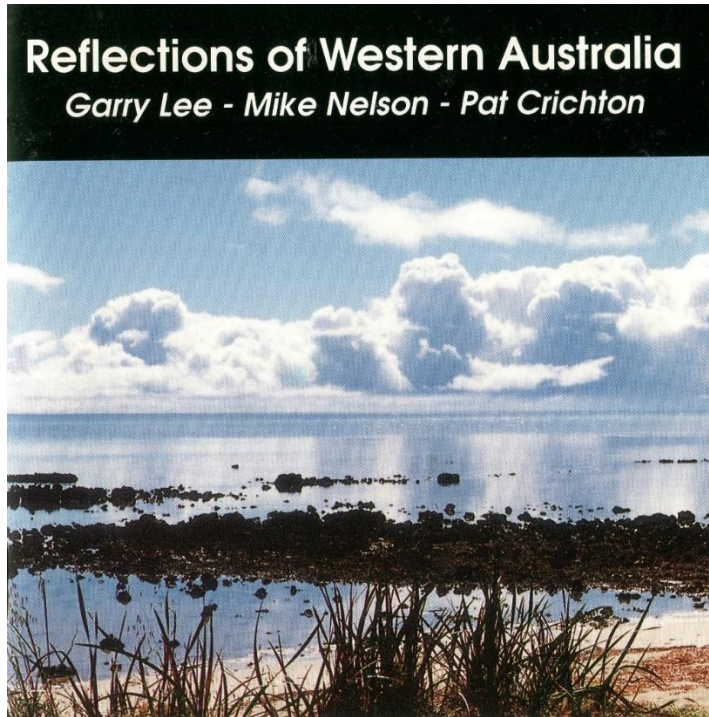
PJS presented the legendary Nat Adderley circa 1991 with Melbourne's Bob Sedergreen accompanying Nat around Australia. The Perth concert included Alan on a sit-in basis. The soul/gospel jazz of Cannonball [alto sax] and Nat [cornet] was what Alan was probably most into [along with John Lewis's fusion of Bach and jazz] and he certainly was not going to pass up an opportunity to play tunes like *Work Song* with the guy who had actually composed the piece. It was a great night with Bob providing the perfect accompaniment for both Nat and his former band mate from the 1960s, Alan.



American cornetist Nat Adderley (left): he performed for the PJS in the company of Melbourne's Bob Sedergreen (below) in the early 90s. Alan took the opportunity to sit in... PHOTOGRAPHERS UNKNOWN



Alan had two vibraphones at his church-owned residence in Como. I remember our jamming together on various occasions as well as practising for three projects. The first came about thanks to the 1988 Bicentenary – read my essay at this website: “Reflecting on ‘Reflections of Western Australia’: A Bicentennial Commission” at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-87>.



The transition from vinyl to CD in the late 1980s/early 1990s meant that the recording of the commissioned work by the Australian Bicentennial Authority needed extra material for a CD. Each of the three composers – Pat Crichton, Mike Nelson and myself – recorded with a small ensemble and I asked Alan to join me on a recording *Dunsborough Blues*. This was certainly one track that confused radio broadcasters with Alan and I both recording solos. A couple of years later I was successful with an application to commission Pat Crichton to compose a Latin piece for big band and two vibraphones – *Latin Lee*. The big band was Jazz West and Alan and I recorded together again. Although the recording was never commercially available it is of the highest audio quality thanks to engineer/producer Lee Buddle – son of the late Errol Buddle.

In 1997 I was successful in obtaining an Australia Council grant to feature the music of John Sangster. With Alan and Graeme Lyall living in Perth, the grant was to bring over Sango, Tony Gould, Chris Qua, Bob and Len Barnard. The concert would also include young trombonist Matthew Lees and myself. Sadly Sango passed away but the concert still went ahead and the Australia Council was happy that the airfare for Sango was used to bring his widow over from Brisbane. It was a great concert with Tony acting as musical director. I especially enjoyed Sango's tune *Phitts of Coffin* that was based on the “rhythm changes” but had everyone coughing every four bars. Yet again Alan and I were trading fours in memory of Sango.

On October 9, 1999 the great Milt Jackson passed away so it was obvious for Alan and I to present a tribute concert which we did in early 2000 for the jazz club, Jazz Fremantle [now in its 31st year of presenting weekly jazz concerts at the Navy Club each Sunday afternoon].

Sometime after this Alan moved back to Melbourne via the US and recorded an excellent CD with pianist Jo Abbott – *Music Of John Lewis: The Alan Lee/Jo Abbott Jazz Quartet*. This recording was released in 2006 on Move [MD 3303] and also featured Ivan Rosa [dbl bs] and Ben Hendry [drms]. Although mainly Lewis compositions, there were also tunes by Ray Brown and Milt Jackson, Tchaikovsky and former friend and colleague Brian Brown – *Diggers Rest*.



Finally it was great for me to meet up with Alan on a couple of occasions when I played at Melbourne's former leading jazz venue, Bennetts Lane. On both occasions it was with my favourite pianist Bob Sedergreen, Anita Hustas [dbl bs] and Sonja Horbelt [drms]. We would also occasionally talk on the phone and I would let him know of emerging vibists on the international scene and I am sure Alan [like me] was happy to see that the pendulum has turned from four mallet virtuosi to the more horn-like approach of players like Stefon Harris, Warren Wolf and Joel Ross.

I have been able to make contact with Alan's only living son Zac (full name Zacharey Lee Corrie) who was born in Perth in 1992. An older son Andrew, aged in his late 40s, died from cancer about a decade ago. Zac plays tenor sax and lived with Alan both in Perth and then as a boy in the US before returning to Perth and then following his Dad to Melbourne where he now resides. Zac contacted many of his Dad's music friends especially in Melbourne and expressed to me his pleasure that Alan had been an inspiration to so many. Zac has great memories of his Dad albeit being swept along on a hectic lifestyle and notes Alan was "A good Dad...a loving and attentive father".



The three Lees in the early 90s, L-R, Garry, Julian & Alan, at Hyde Park Hotel, North Perth for a Perth Jazz Society concert featuring Kerrie Biddell accompanied by Julian Lee. All three shared the same surname but were all unrelated... PHOTO COURTESY GARRY LEE



Alan Lee as he appeared in Mike Williams' 1981 book "The Australian Jazz Explosion". Underneath this photo Williams wrote "Alan Lee is an emotional man and, thank heavens, that emotion flows freely in the playing. The absence of bigotry in his makeup gives him entrée to a wide range of bands, and he seems as happy playing guitar in a thirtyish swing group, or piano in a big band, as he is at the vibes with his own group"... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH