

OBITUARY: ROGER BELL 1919 – 2008

by Ray Marginson*

[This obituary appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on July 8, 2008]

Roger Bell, the younger of the two Bell brothers, who spearheaded the post-war resurgence of improvised jazz in Australia, has died in Melbourne after a long illness. A gifted and virtually self-taught player and inimitable vocalist, his bright driving but melodic and lyrical trumpet lead was much of the striking sound that characterised the Graeme Bell Band from the 1940s onwards.

His family had a major musical background. His mother Elva (Rogers) was for many years a contralto recitalist of distinction and had toured Australia and New Zealand in Nellie Melba's company. His father John was well known for musical comedy and music hall performances, and on the early ABC.



Elva Rogers, mother of Roger Bell, pictured here in 1906: she was a distinguished contralto who toured with Melba...

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Roger is credited with seducing his brother from classical piano into the world of jazz. At Scotch College he met with kindred spirits, the late Ade Monsborough (AO) and the future medico “Spadge” Davies and his musical path was set. He and Graeme became absorbed in the recordings of the classic negro and white jazz spectrum.

By the middle 30s, with Roger initially on drums, they were playing some local dances. These associations developed into reasonably disciplined ensembles, the music of which was developing jazz character, despite the need to meet the requirements of playing much popular orchestrations and featuring “old time” dances. This was followed by less restricting quartet engagements at Portsea and St Kilda.

By the early 40s, and with talented Adrian Monsborough on trumpet and trombone as well as the unique Don “Pixie” Roberts on clarinet, Roger was leading the group of musicians by then known as the Bell Band, playing at major dance venues such as the Heidelberg Town Hall and the Palais Royale at the Exhibition Buildings.

Graeme returned in 1943 from entertaining troops in Queensland to assume full-time leadership of what was now a formidable jazz music ensemble. All the other members had day jobs; in Roger’s case in engineering and drafting.

In 1943 William H Miller, a Melbourne Oxford-trained lawyer, started his recording label Ampersand, which spread the band’s reputation. Further, the first Australian Jazz Convention (still continuing today) drew players and bands from interstate. It exposed Roger’s playing and singing to a larger Australia-wide audience, in a period (pre-rock and roll) of immensely popular jazz for dancing.



William H Miller: in 1943 he started his recording label Ampersand, which spread the band’s reputation...

All this was consolidated by the first commercial recordings of the band by EMI in 1947. There were few dancers of the era that didn’t know these records with Roger

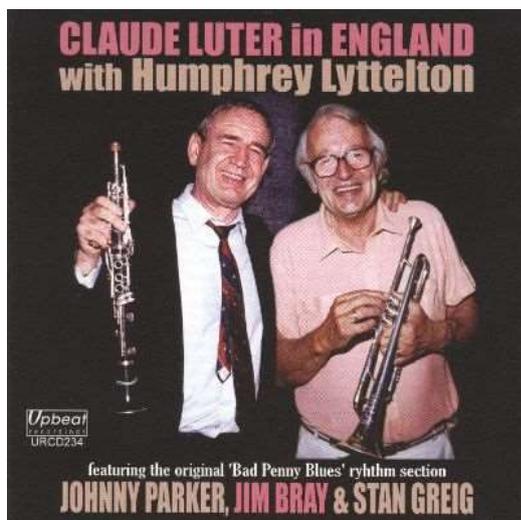
singing on *Ugly Child* and other Graeme Bell Band standards such as *Smokey Mokes*.



The Bell Band, off to the World Youth Festival in 1947...

The band came to Sydney for a series of concerts before leaving for Prague in 1947 to play at the World Youth Festival, sponsored by the Eureka Youth League, whose hall in North Melbourne they used as a weekly night club, The Uptown Club.

By their return in 1948 they were widely known in Europe and had sparked a jazz-for-dancing movement in the UK. Roger's infectious playing and singing were very much part of the success of the tour. A three-month ABC tour of all states consolidated the band's reputation. They again visited Europe and the UK in October 1950.



Two friends of Roger Bell's: Claude Luter (left) and Humphrey Lyttelton...

After the core band broke up in 1952 Roger played lead trumpet in popular jazz groups such as Frank Traynor's Jazz Preachers, Max Collie, the Melbourne Jazz Club house band and with his own group The Pagan Pipers. He continued to make recordings, particularly with the latter, and played at many festivals. His substantial body of compositions of basic themes for improvised jazz were recorded by his and other bands.

He again visited Europe in 1971 and 1981, playing with old friends such as Humphrey Lyttelton, who died in 2008, and Claude Luter in Paris.



One of Roger Bell's Pagan Pipers groups in Melbourne in the mid-60s, L-R, Mal MacGillvray, Denis Ball, Bud Baker, Robin McCulloch, Bell, Mal Wilkinson...

Witty and well-read, Roger Bell was an engaging companion with a wide range of friends in the music and art worlds. Stories abound of his off-hand comments. When Bell's close friends, Peter Glass, the Meldrumite painter (Graeme Bell also trained with Max Meldrum) and Gordon Ford, the celebrated landscape architect, bought several hectares of land in Eltham and began building mudbrick houses, the humour was hilarious and often literary. When Gordon hit his foot with a mattock, Roger muttered: "Ford Madox Ford", a literary bow to the English novelist, poet, critic and editor

Bell was known to his friends as the "Badger", a literary gnu-flection to his devotion to Kenneth Grahame's *Wind In The Willows* and to the nature works of Henry Williamson. So much so that when he had difficulty in finding a badger for a record cover he substituted a stuffed wombat from the Museum of Victoria.

His first marriage to Bonnie failed and he later married Lorraine Watson, a physiotherapist, with whom he travelled widely and who has been his constant support over a long degenerative illness.

Roger Emerson Bell, who has died aged 89, is survived by Lorraine and the children from his first marriage, Helen, John and Jean, his six grandchildren and his brother, Graeme Bell, now a redoubtable 93.