

Tragic death of Australian saxophonist



Andrew Speight on his beloved alto saxophone: jazz musician, educator, composer, producer, and musical and artistic director...

OBITUARY: ANDREW SPEIGHT 1964-2022

Andrew Speight; musician and educator. Born Sydney, March 23, 1964. Died San Francisco, December 1, 2022, aged 58.

ERIC MYERS

Andrew Speight and his two younger sisters Caroline and Emma, were born in Sydney into a highly musical family. Their father John Speight, who died in 2007, was a school teacher and accomplished pianist, best-known from 1980 as the artistic director of the Manly International

Jazz Festival, which still survives today. Their mother Niddrie Speight, now 82, was a star vocalist as a teenager who sang jazz and show tunes.

"We'd wake up to music, listen to music through dinner, talk about what we were listening to, and go to sleep to music," Andrew's sister Emma Mayhew told writer Jeff Kaliss in the splendid obituary Kaliss published in the US publication *San Francisco Classical Voice*.



Andrew's father John Speight, who ran the Manly International Jazz Festival for nearly 30 years...

Andrew grew up in the seaside suburb of Manly playing golf, building racing boats and programming computers from a young age. He started playing music at the age of six. He was a precocious and passionate alto saxophonist and,

while still a teenager, worked with leading musicians such as James Morrison and Don Burrows, and had his own highly regarded ensemble Now's The Time.



A young Andrew Speight (left) performing with James Morrison at the Manly Jazz Festival in the early 80s... PHOTO CREDIT HARDY ALHAUS

He went to New York at the age of 26 in 1990 to develop his skills at the source, and came to notice the following year in 1991 when he made the final of the prestigious Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition in Washington DC, the year it was won by Joshua Redman.

In 1992 he began a successful career as a jazz educator when he was appointed to the jazz faculty of Michigan State University (MSU) School of Music, where he collaborated with legendary African American musicians such as Benny Carter, Milt Hinton and Marcus Belgrave.

Two years later in 1994 he was appointed Director of Jazz Studies at the School. In that role he introduced programs that integrated improvisation throughout all undergraduate curricula. He developed a faculty of highly regarded jazz artists with international reputations, including saxophonist Branford Marsalis and bassist Rodney Whitaker, and created the Bachelor of Music in Jazz Studies.

In 2000, recommended by Branford Marsalis, Speight relocated to San Francisco State University, where he founded the Jazz Studies Program and became its director. One of his most interesting ventures there was the Generations Jazz Project, which involved an ensemble of jazz masters called the Generations Band. It included Jimmy Cobb, Ray Drummond, Ronnie Mathews, Eric Alexander, and Marcus Belgrave, with others such as Jimmy Heath, Frank Wess, and Louis Hayes on the regular roster. Speight played alto sax in the band, was its leader and artistic director, and co-produced their CDs and DVDs.

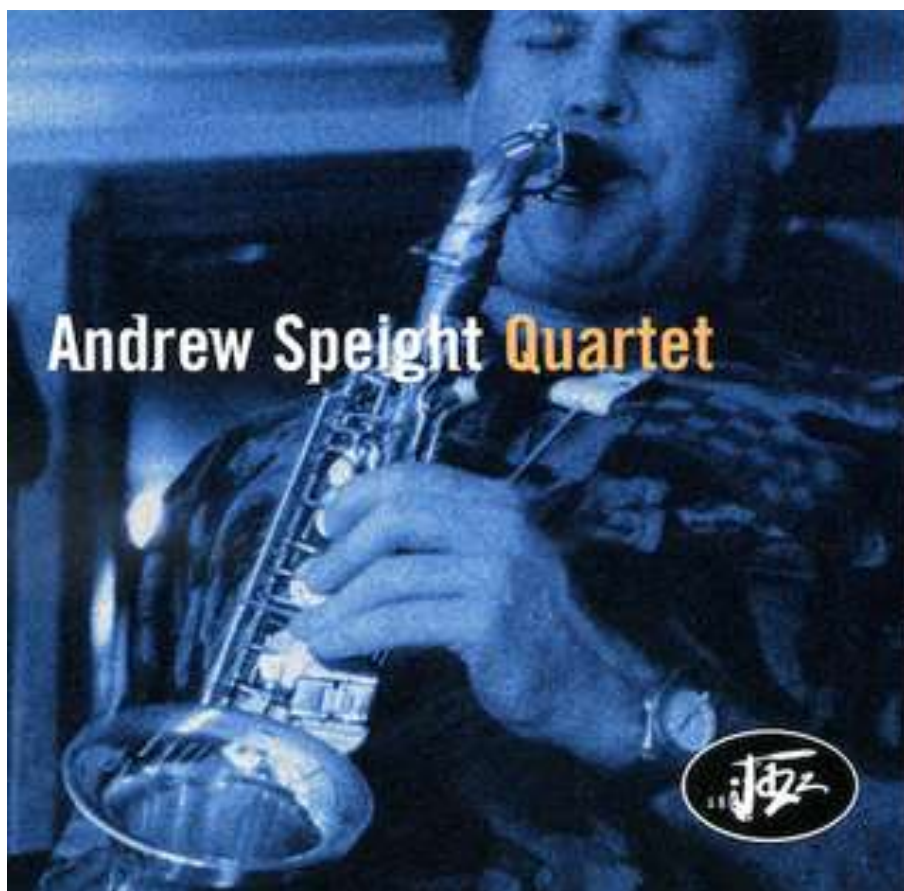


The Generations Band, L-R, Speight (alto saxophone), Ray Drummond (bass), Jimmy Cobb (drums), Eric Alexander (tenor saxophone), Marcus Belgrave (trumpet), Ronnie Mathews (piano)...

In 2001, he duplicated his MSU achievement by establishing the Bachelor of Music in Jazz Studies at San Francisco State University.

As a player he had many career highlights, too many to list here. He was long associated with Wynton Marsalis, who once said that “Andrew Speight will carry the music's torch into the next millennium.” Speight did a BBC TV concert in 1993 with Marsalis’s band, and subsequently performed at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

An outstanding album entitled *Andrew Speight Quartet in Australia* won the country's Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) award for Best Jazz Album of 1999. Its personnel included Speight (alto saxophone), Andrew Dickeson (drums), John Harkins (piano) and David Rosin (bass guitar).



One of Speight’s most successful projects was his re-creation of the two legendary *Charlie Parker with Strings* albums for concert performance, which he inaugurated in 2001. Since then he has performed and recorded these orchestrations around the world, in Australia, Europe, and the United States with full orchestral accompaniment.

Following the death of his father in 2007, Andrew took over as artistic director of the Manly International Jazz Festival, and with his sister Caroline Speight co-produced the festival in subsequent years.

When Andrew Speight died on December 1, 2022, he was en route to teach his jazz improvisation class at San Francisco State University. He was killed when, at a railroad crossing near his home in Burlingame, his car, a Porsche, became stranded on the railroad tracks, and was struck by northbound and southbound locomotives.



Andrew Speight: he died en route to teach his jazz improvisation class at San Francisco State University...

Andrew Speight struggled with mental health issues including depression, for many years. His first marriage to Erika Mobley in 2002, ended in divorce. He married his second wife NH Speight Jo in June, 2022. He is survived by her, his two children Colin, 18, and Avery, 14, from his first marriage, his mother Niddrie Speight, his two sisters Caroline Speight and Emma Mayhew, and five nieces and nephews in Australia.

“We know Andrew’s legacy will live on in the hearts and minds of musicians for generations to come”, says Caroline. “He was passionate and driven with a vulnerability and sensitivity evident in his saxophone playing and approach to life. He was always striving for excellence in whatever he did. Andrew was an extraordinary person with so much to offer. We loved him and will miss him greatly.”