

OBITUARY: CLARE BAIL 1926–2018

by Eric Myers

Clare Bail was born in Adelaide on May 26, 1926. He began playing at 18 and after about three years, along with other talented local musicians such as Errol Buddle, Johnny Bamford and Bryce Rohde, felt compelled to leave Adelaide to seek playing opportunities. He moved to Melbourne and then quickly on to Sydney.



A young tenor saxophonist Clare Bail, playing in Adelaide. Others in the photograph yet to be identified... PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER

It is not known exactly when he arrived in Sydney, but he first recorded in December, 1947 at the age of 21, playing clarinet with the Ellerston Jones Septet, along with Ron Falson (trumpet), Dick Jackson (tenor sax), Jimmy Somerville (piano), Johnny Edgecombe (string bass), Clive Whitcombe (drums) and Les Welch (violin). In November, 1948, he recorded with Ron Falson's Liberty Seven-Piece, playing tenor sax & clarinet with Falson (trumpet), Andy McIntosh (alto sax), Terry Wilkinson (piano), Ron Hogan (guitar), Wally Wickham (bass), Don Osborn (drums) and Norman Pearson (violin). Bail had quickly become one of Sydney's foremost musicians, playing and recording in the best company.

In 1949 at the age of 23 he was playing with Jack Allan's band the Katzenjammers which was formed to back the visiting American trumpeter Rex Stewart. On November 18, 1949 that group recorded under the name of Rex Stewart & His Sydney Six. Bail played tenor sax in the company of some of the era's most outstanding jazz musicians: Frank Smith (clarinet & alto sax), Allan (piano), Don Andrews (guitar), Reg Robinson (string bass) and Frank Marcy (drums).



This is probably in the Sydney Town Hall, in 1949 around the time of the Rex Stewart visit. Clare Bail is second from left, holding the tenor saxophone. Others are, L-R, probably trumpeter Ken Flannery, Frank Smith (alto saxophone), Joe Singer (drums), Don Andrews (guitar), Jack Allan (piano)... PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER



Channel 7 musicians working with MD Tommy Tycho (at the piano), probably late 50s. Others, L-R, are Reg (Swivelhead) Robinson (bass), Ken Flannery (trumpet), Johnny Bamford (trombone), Ron Gowans (alto saxophone), Clare Bail (flute), Tommy Spencer (drums)... PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER

During his subsequent Sydney career he was mainly active as a studio musician but was also known and recognized for his prowess as a jazz musician on clarinet and saxophones. He was often in the reeds section of various Bob Gibson orchestras from the 1950s through to the early 1970s. He recorded only once as a leader in August, 1956 when his group Clare Bail & His Sextet put down six tracks. His sidemen were Ken Brentnall (trumpet), John Bamford (trombone), Noel Gilmour (piano), Django Kahn (bass) and Jimmy Shaw (drums).

He was always on the short list as a backing musician for overseas visiting artists such as Frank Sinatra and Mel Tormé. In November 1957 he was appointed assistant MD at Sydney's Channel 7, a position he held for 13 years, working with the well-known MD Tommy Tycho. He did much arranging and conducting, wrote extensively for film and television, and toured with concert packages.



Members of the Bob Gibson orchestra snapped while on tour with the US singer Mel Tormé, probably 1955. From the top, going downwards, Jack Grimsley (trombone), next trombonist maybe Stewart Dawkins, next player standing under the trombonists unidentified, next musician could be trumpeter Darrell May, George (Strop) Thompson (bass), Frank Marcy (drums), next could be pianist Jimmy White, Clare Bail (holding clarinet), next musician leaning on rail unidentified, Alan Nash (holding trumpet), next player probably Jock McKenna, singer Daryl Stewart, next behind Stewart and Bob Gibson unidentified, possibly Ken Brentnall, then Bob Gibson... PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER

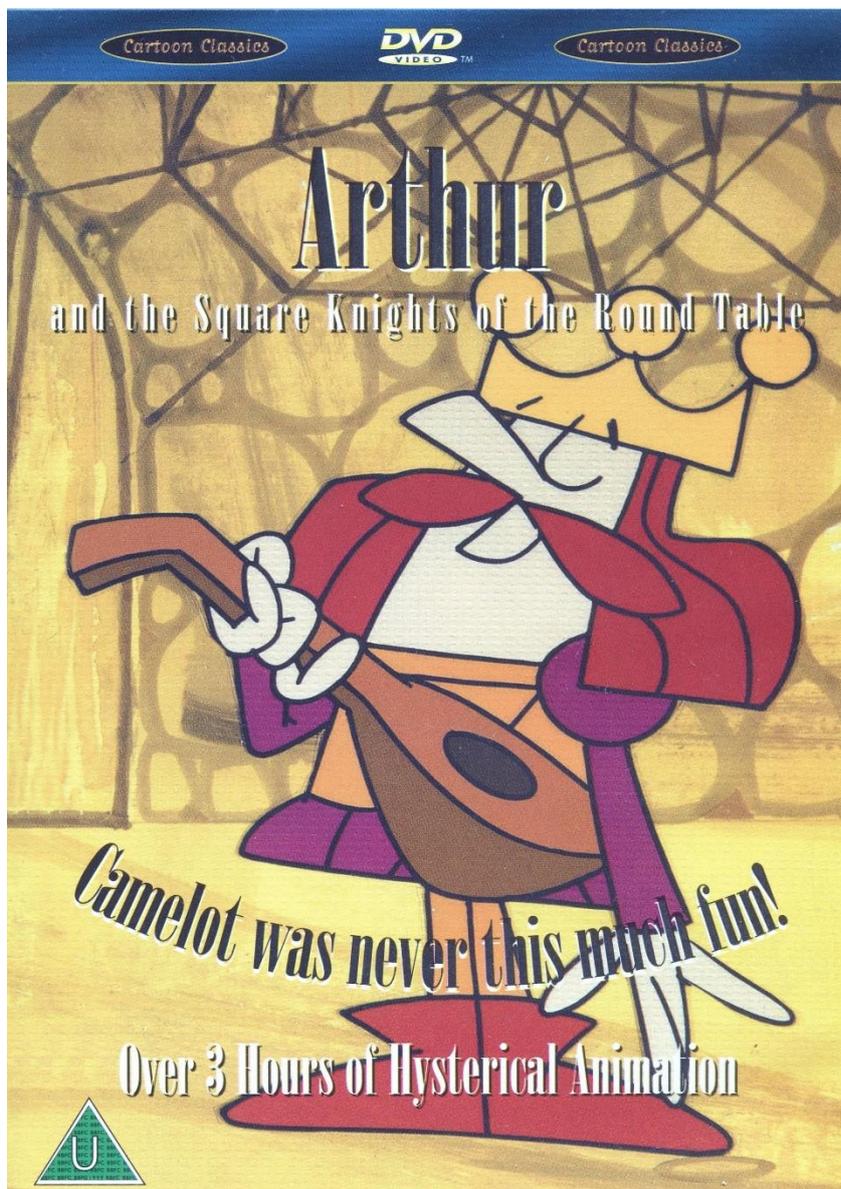
In 1971 he was a member of the Bob Barnard All Star Jazz Group which recorded for EMI. Other than Barnard (trumpet) and Bail (woodwinds) the musicians were Ed Gaston (bass), Ron Carson (banjo), Lawrie Thompson (drums), Billy Benham (piano) and Norm Wyatt (trombone). This was so successful that the group was invited to record again in 1973 with the album simply entitled *Bob Barnard*, with the same personnel except for the omission of Ron Carson.



Bail (right, on clarinet) often performed with Bob Barnard (here on cornet). Others are, L-R, trombonist Greg Foster and guitarist Steve McKenna. This was taken at the Manly Jazz Festival in the early 80s... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

In the early 1980s he recorded with the Julian Lee Orchestra on several occasions, providing backing for the singers Ricky May and Billy Field. Bail's last recording session documented in Jack Mitchell's *More Australian Jazz On Record*, is in 1983, when he was part of the Lee orchestra, providing backing for Ricky May and Bob Barnard.

Courtesy of his proficiency as a composer and arranger, he provided the music for a children's animated DVD *Arthur and the Square Knights of the Round Table*, for a North Hollywood, California production company East West Entertainment. The spiel for this product read "Follow King Arthur and all of his crazy brave knights of the round table as they battle dragons, evil wizards and The Black Knight in this hilarious collection of animated medieval shorts." This product took off in the US, and proved to be a lucrative money-spinner for Bail, who received annual royalty cheques for many years afterwards.



The DVD Arthur and the Square Knights of the Round Table: a lucrative money-spinner for Bail...

Although it is not unusual for a jazz musician to have a full private life outside of the music, Bail had several hobbies which required dedication and attention to detail, and an active life as a businessman. At various stages in his life, he was on the land breeding bulldogs, owned a farm with 25,000 chickens in Kenthurst, and bred cattle in Gympie. Rumoured to be a rich man, he owned several rental properties in Sydney's northern beaches, Kings Cross and Redfern. He was a licenced glider pilot in the Southern Highlands, and a certified scuba diver and instructor.

On the sporting side, he was a serious social golfer, a passionate fisherman who owned several boats throughout his life, and an active squash player. An early photograph in Adelaide which pictures him with a young Rod Laver suggests some prowess as a tennis player. He was a serious photographer who did his own developing in his own dark room.



A man on the land: Clare Bail (pictured above) bred cows, and was a licenced glider pilot (see below)... PHOTOS COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER



Bail's last wife Margaret-Christina Lever says that, before she formally met him some years later, she first became aware of Clare as the owner and manager of what she describes as "an upmarket, classy china shop" in Mona Vale in the 1980s.



Bail (left) is pictured here with a young Rod Laver... PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Clare Bail was very much what used to be described as a “ladies’ man”. It is said that women found him extremely charming, and he was married four times. At the age of 25 he married Peggy Limb (sister of the Adelaide saxophonist, and eventual national TV star Bobby Limb), in Adelaide, and they had a son, Martin Albert Bail, born in 1951. Peggy is now deceased.

At the age of 35, Bail married Noeline Gibbs in Coogee, Sydney, and they subsequently had three children: Victoria Clare Bail, born 1951, Adrienne Louise Bail, born 1964, and Jeremy Bail born 1970.



Bail is pictured here with his second wife Noeline, with whom he had three children... PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER

Bail's third wife was Roslyn White whom he married in Whale Beach when he was 52 years of age. They had no children, and Roslyn is now deceased.

Bail's fourth wife Margaret-Christina Lever met Bail when she was a pianist working in an Italian restaurant, and he turned up as a dep at her gig. They subsequently formed a successful group, calling themselves the Garden Court Duo, performing what they described as "sophisticated mood music". After seven years, they married on September 30, 2001, when Bail was 75 years old.



Bail on clarinet, pictured here with his fourth wife Margaret-Christina Lever: they were known as the Garden Court Duo... PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER



Bail (left), pictured with Graeme Bell (centre) and Bob Barnard (right) at Barnard's 70th birthday party at the Norfolk Hotel, Sydney in 2003... PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER

In 1996 Bail left Sydney and moved to Lemon Tree Passage in the Port Stephens area. Subsequently he moved, not far away, to Tanilba Bay in 2013.

After moving to Lemon Tree Passage he continued playing gigs in the Newcastle, Nelson Bay and Hunter Valley areas, and did the occasional South Pacific cruise, and a tour of New Zealand. He played in Broken Hill, and performed at the Sydney Jazz Festival.

From 2009 he experienced various degenerative health conditions, including Alzheimer's Disease. In 2012 his wife Margaret became his full-time carer. He ceased professional playing around that time, but continued to play at home until mid-2017. In his later years he took up the cello, which he played at home with enthusiasm, and subsequently composed impressive works for cello.



In his later years he took up the cello, which he played at home with enthusiasm...
PHOTO COURTESY MARGARET-CHRISTINA LEVER

Developing heart problems during these years, he had a pacemaker installed. He went into Tanilba Shores Nursing Home in July, 2018 a few weeks before his death on August 23, 2018. During that time he had a hip operation, and shortly after died following a cerebro vascular accident, which occurred five days before his death, at the age of 92.

Clare Bail is survived by Margaret-Christina Lever, his four children Martin, Victoria, Adrienne and Jeremy, three grandchildren, and four great grandchildren.