

# THE AUSTRALIAN

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## Don Burrows tribute concert brings live audience back to SOH

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*James Morrison (left) and William Barton in action at the Don Burrows Celebration of Life through Jazz concert on Sunday... PHOTO CREDIT PRUDENCE UPTON*

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### ERIC MYERS

In its free digital program From Our House to Yours, the Sydney Opera House has presented 53 live events over the last 31 weeks. They are streamed from a purpose-built digital stage inside the Joan Sutherland Theatre. [The Don Burrows: Celebration of Life through Jazz](#) concert on Sunday, however, was the first concert in the program to welcome a live audience. Over 500 jazz aficionados were present for a heartwarming experience, compered by television personality Ray Martin.

This event was the brainchild of James Morrison, who began as a 16-year-old Conservatorium student under Burrows, then evolved into a member of

Burrows' band, later to a close friend, and finally to guardian when Burrows, who died this year aged 91, was no longer able to be independent.



*Compere Ray Martin (left) dwarfed by the screen image of Don Burrows in the Joan Sutherland Theatre... PHOTO CREDIT PRUDENCE UPTON*

A cavalcade of 13 fine musicians associated with Burrows throughout his long career was assembled for this concert, which revealed some remarkable and innovative aspects.

Proceedings commenced with Morrison on trumpet, William Barton (didgeridoo) and John Morrison (drums) performing a “welcome to country” piece called *First Rain* written by Morrison. The mood struck here was echoed two hours later when the same trio closed the concert with *Amazing Grace*. Both performances were strangely moving, striking a note of appropriate solemnity, which underpinned the whole program.

The repertoire primarily concentrated on standards from jazz history or the Great American Songbook. Those who enjoy the concert online will have their favourite performers and segments. For my money one of the highlights was the juxtaposition of Paul Furniss and Andrew Firth, two master clarinetists in Australian jazz, but with entirely contrasting styles.



*Clarinetist Paul  
Furniss: a lovely tone  
and an unusual  
imagination...*

Furniss was featured with Morrison (trombone) and Craig Scott (bass) in *The One I Love Belongs To Somebody Else*, and later did a beautiful duet with Kevin Hunt (piano) on Eubie Blake's famous tune *Memories Of You*. Furniss is so musical, with such a lovely tone and an unusual imagination, that he cannot be pigeon-holed as a traditionalist, as he often is.



*Clarinetist Andrew Firth (right) with James Morrison ... PHOTO CREDIT  
PRUDENCE UPTON*

With unrivalled technical control of the clarinet, and a crowd-pleasing brilliance, Firth was a natural for inclusion here. He is perhaps the most authentic Burrows disciple in existence, allegedly having taught himself jazz by learning note-for-note all of Don Burrows' recorded clarinet solos.

Firth was also part of *Benny's Bugle*, a high-spirited tribute to Benny Goodman with Morrison (trombone) and one of the staple rhythm sections for the night: Hunt (piano), David Pudney (bass), Gordon Rytmeister (drums) and William Morrison (guitar).



*L-R, Kevin Hunt (piano), James Morrison (trombone) Gordon Rytmeister (drums), Andrew Firth (clarinet), William Morrison (guitar), David Pudney (bass)... PHOTO CREDIT PRUDENCE UPTON*

The program also included a number of short film clips featuring Burrows on screen. While various interviews highlighted Burrows' sense of humour and his humility, one television performance came from 1988 on the Ray Martin Show shortly after Burrows and Morrison returned from the Australian Jazz Orchestra's celebrated tour of the United States. Filmed in the Channel 9 studio they were playing the great Frank Foster tune *Shiny Stockings* when part-way through, in seamless manner, the video cut to the live musicians on stage at the Opera House playing the same number. A great moment.

Another highlight was the treatment of the ballad *Whenever*, performed beautifully by singer Emma Pask, with some exquisite piano accompaniment by Paul McNamara. The one Burrows composition in the program, it's notable that it was Pask herself who wrote the lyrics. This was an unforgettable highlight.



*L-R, Emma Pask, Kevin Hunt, James Morrison... PHOTO CREDIT PRUDENCE UPTON*

A most striking aspect of this concert concerns what one might call The Drums Problem. Since time immemorial reviewers have drawn attention to the poor acoustics for drums in what used to be the Opera House's Concert Hall. Excessive volume from jazz drummers has been the ruination of scores of jazz concerts over the last 40 years, testing the patience of listeners, and in my view contributing to a serious decline in the jazz audience.

How delightful it was therefore to see that in the new configuration of the Joan Sutherland Theatre this problem has at last been rectified by placing the drummers (in this case Rytmeister and John Morrison) encased in a plastic box, thus containing their sound. Whoever thought of this extraordinary and welcome innovation deserves a medal.

The event, [simultaneously live streamed](#) as part of the From Our House to Yours program, will remain online for the next two months.

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