

THE AUSTRALIAN

A formidable populariser of jazz in Australia



Don Burrows, pictured here in 2008, has died at 91 ... PHOTO COURTESY THE AUSTRALIAN

OBITUARY: DON BURROWS

Jazz musician and educator. Born Sydney, August 8, 1928. Died Sydney, March 12, 2020, aged 91.

An edited version of this obituary appeared in The Australian on March 16, 2020.

ERIC MYERS

Don Burrows will be remembered primarily as a formidable populariser of jazz in Australia. Amongst his many honours were the MBE (1972) and the AO (1986), but what was most striking about his career was his accumulation of firsts as a jazz musician - the achievement of significant milestones which enabled him to dominate Australian jazz for most of his career.

He was the first Australian jazz musician in the modern era to perform with his group at prestigious international jazz festivals such as Montreux and Newport

(1972); the first to sell a gold record (the LP *Just The Beginning*, 1973); the first in 1994 to be awarded a “Keating” (an Australian Artists Creative Fellowship worth \$330,000); and he was the driving force behind the first tertiary jazz studies program in Australia, perhaps his most important achievement, at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 1973.

He received two honorary doctorates, from the University of Sydney (2000), and the Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia (2001). Otherwise his awards and achievements are too numerous to list.



Don Burrows, on the occasion of receiving one of his two honorary doctorates...

Burrows grew up in the 1930s, when live music was everywhere. As a child, he found listening to musicians playing on Bondi Beach a joyous experience, and would frequent the big movie houses in the city - the Prince Edward, the State, the Regent - to marvel at the live bands playing. A devotee of radio programs on 2KY and 2GB, he would write for tickets, then come in and watch a show being recorded, always sitting near the band.



Burrows (left) pictured here with Victor McMahon...

Plucked from the Bondi Public School band, he played in the Metropolitan Schools Flute Band under Victor McMahon, and was captain at age 12. On April 6, 1942, aged 13, he acquired his first clarinet, and in three weeks taught himself to play it well enough to perform on The Youth Show, a national program on the Macquarie Network, accompanied by a large orchestra. Much of his youth was spent competing in talent quests, and he became known as a prodigy.

The disjointed era of World War II created a shortage of musicians, and Burrows, who never finished school, celebrated his 15th birthday playing at Sammy Lee's Roosevelt Club in Kings Cross. That year he recorded with the George Trevare Jazz Group, on three 78s released in 1945, rare sides which are now valuable collector's items.



The George Trevare Jazz Group, July 19, 1945, L-R, Pat Lynch, Wally Norman, Trevare, Al Vincer (holding sticks), Don Burrows (crouching), Morgan McGree (standing, holding guitar), Rolph Pommer (seated, next to Burrows), Horrie Bissell... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Throughout the following years Burrows made a good living as one of Sydney's leading studio musicians. This subsidised his work as a jazz artist at the El

Rocco in Kings Cross, with the Australian All Stars at the Sky Lounge, and a long residency at the Wentworth Hotel Supper Club, which commenced in 1968.



The Australian All Stars at the Sky Lounge in the fifties, L-R, Burrows (clarinet), Dave Rutledge (tenor sax), Freddie Logan (bass), Terry Wilkinson (piano). Drummer Ron Webber is obscured behind Rutledge... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

His most prominent sidepeople were his quartet members George Golla (guitar), Ed Gaston (bass), and Alan Turnbull (drums), plus at other times musicians such as Julian Lee (piano), Judy Bailey (piano), Errol Buddle (reeds) and John Sangster (vibes), until the arrival of his protégé, the multi-instrumentalist James Morrison.

In 1983 the Regent Hotel (now the Four Seasons) opened the Don Burrows Supper Club, which for some years was Sydney's most elegant jazz venue.

Over his career Burrows released 40 albums and for six years hosted his own television show, *The Burrows Collection* on the ABC. His most resilient group was the duo with George Golla, which lasted for 38 years, before he formed in 1996 a new duo with pianist Kevin Hunt which lasted ten years.



Burrows' two duos: with guitarist George Golla (above) and with pianist Kevin Hunt (below) ...PHOTO ABOVE COURTESY JAZZ DOWN UNDER; PHOTO BELOW COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ ARCHIVE, NFSA



In 1988 Burrows was a member of the well-funded 11-piece Australian Jazz Orchestra, which celebrated the bicentenary with two tours of Australia, and an acclaimed tour of six major cities in the US. Reviewers invariably singled out Burrows for special praise.



Burrows (on the right) performing with the Australian Jazz Orchestra at The Basement in Sydney in 1988. Other members of the group clockwise are Dale Barlow, Doug DeVries, Warwick Alder, Bob Venier, James Morrison... PHOTO CREDIT BRANCO GAICA

Burrows once said “I believe that jazz music and the discovery of it is not a class-room thing at all. It’s a street music - the streets and the smokey joints are the true classrooms of jazz, and I would hate anyone to think that I thought differently.”

But, as early as the 1960s he could see that social changes were disrupting work opportunities for musicians. Dance halls and nightclubs were disappearing, and with studio work in decline, he began to worry that the opportunities which had allowed his generation to flourish would not be available to the many young musicians emerging.

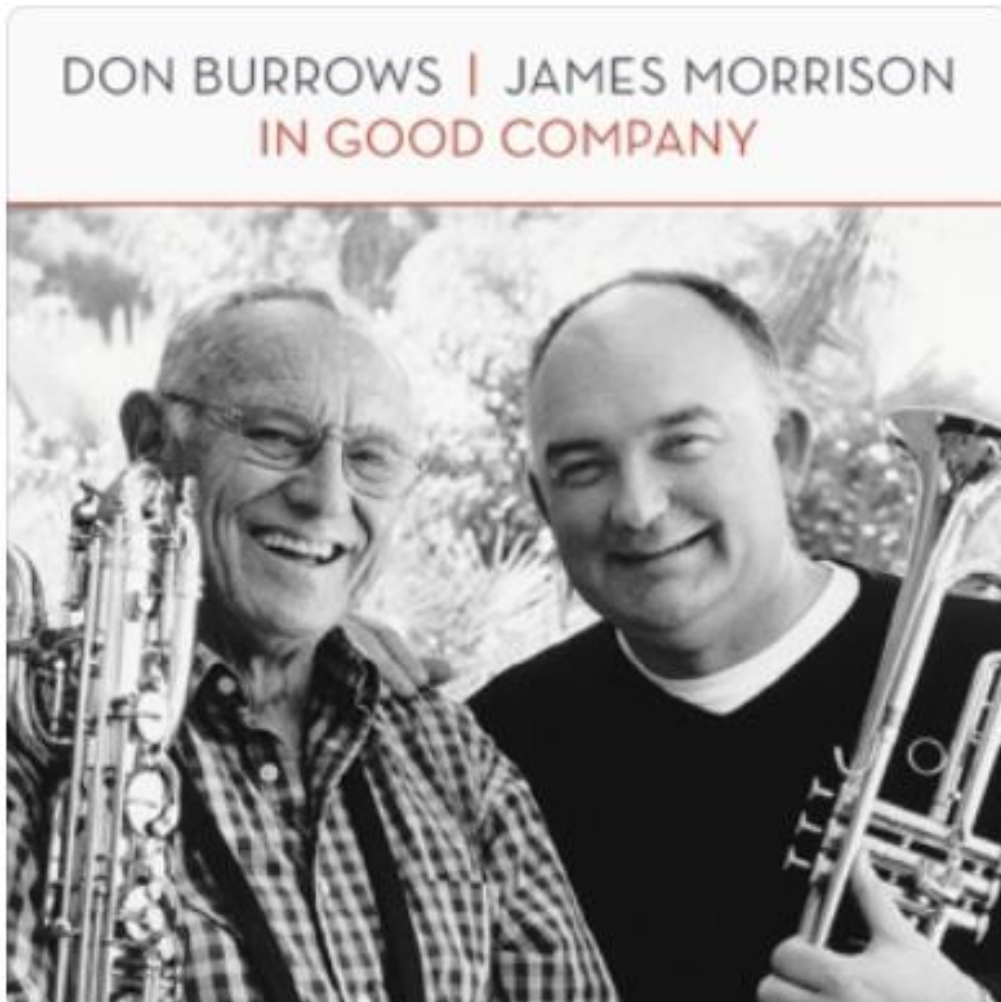


Sydney Conservatorium of Music director Rex Hobcroft: the institution should study musical genres other than classical music...

In the early seventies the new director Rex Hobcroft declared that the Sydney Conservatorium of Music should include the study of musical genres other than classical music. Burrows contacted Hobcroft, suggesting a jazz studies program. This was achieved in 1973, when a course under the direction of American saxophonist Howie Smith commenced. Smith was succeeded by another American Bill Motzing, followed by Australian Roger Frampton. In 1980 the position became full-time, and was offered to Burrows, who remained in the position until 1990.

In 1987 Bruce Johnson in his *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz* summarised Burrows's iconic status in Australian music: "As a musician, Burrows's mastery of his mainstream/bop-based style is unsurpassed, but his importance to Australian jazz extends beyond his musicianship. He has been central in the acceptance of jazz as a musical form to be treated with the same seriousness accorded other performing arts. For most Australians, he is, with Graeme Bell, the embodiment of local jazz".

In 2000 Burrows relocated to Paynesville, a small town in eastern Victoria, while continuing to perform. In 2013 he suffered a stroke, leaving him paralysed down one side. That year he did his last recording *In Good Company* with James Morrison, and did his last public gig at the Art Gallery of NSW, again with Morrison.



In August 2013 he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease and Morrison, now his guardian, moved him back to Sydney, to Terrey Hills Nursing Home.

In his final years Burrows became increasingly unable to recognise some of his closest former colleagues but, amazingly, with a clarinet or flute in his hands, he was able to remember tunes and improvise as he always did. His musical ability was apparently unaffected by dementia.

Don Burrows died peacefully of multiple organ failure and Alzheimer's Disease at 9 pm on March 12.