

THE AUSTRALIAN

Janet Seidel, ‘first lady of jazz singing’, put music first



Singer Janet Seidel (centre) with partner Chuck Morgan (left), and brother David Seidel... PHOTO CREDIT JOHN APPELYARD

Published in The Australian, August 18, 2017

OBITUARY

Janet Seidel

Singer and pianist. Born Cummins, South Australia, May 28, 1955. Died Sydney, August 7, 2017, aged 62.

ERIC MYERS

Growing up on a dairy farm in rural South Australia, Janet Seidel would listen to jazz on the late-night ABC radio programs *Relax With Me* and *Music to Midnight*. It's where she first encountered the voice of American singer and

pianist Blossom Dearie, an artist who would greatly influence her own style in later years.

Seidel, who has died at age 62 after a short battle with cancer, garnered a loyal following at home and overseas, especially in Japan, for her soft-grained interpretations of standards, and for her tribute shows to musical forebears including Dearie and Doris Day.

She studied classical music in Adelaide but realised that with her distinctive voice — usually described as “girlish” — she would never be an opera singer. In Adelaide she was mainly known as a solo pianist-vocalist in hotel piano bars during the mid-1970s and early 80s. She primarily sang standards from the Great American Songbook, honing her skills as a vocalist, and developing a judicious piano style, which seemed to perfectly complement her voice.

When she moved to Sydney in the late 80s she was relatively unknown. A turning point in her career was her brother David Seidel’s creation of his record label La Brava. Janet Seidel’s first album, *Little Jazz Bird*, was released in 1993, the first of 18 to be released in following years, generally to critical acclaim. They covered a wide range of styles, from easy listening to lounge, cabaret and jazz.

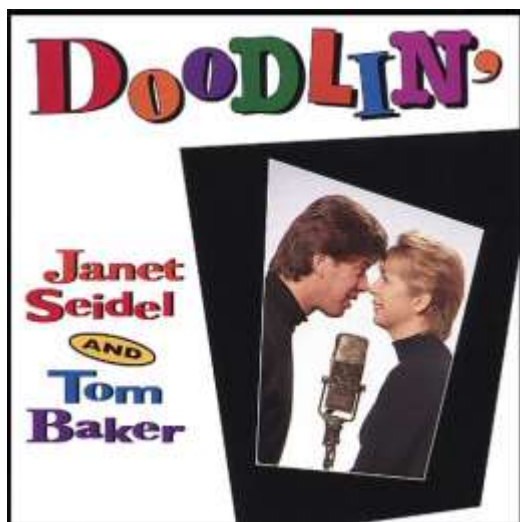


Janet Seidel, pictured here with the late Tom Baker, who pushed the Seidel group in the direction of mainstream jazz...

She always handled lyrics with understatement, and was proud to say that she sang a song the way it was written. A critic once referred to her “soft, unfussy vocals”. She eschewed the tendency of some other singers to stretch the boundaries of the music to sound original. “I feel and have always felt that the song is more important than the singer,” she would say. In her strong armoury of musical skills, the most pleasing aspect of her style was her lovely vibrato.

Although she was by temperament more of a cabaret artist than an orthodox jazz vocalist, she was increasingly drawn to jazz by the excellent musicians she worked with, such as David Seidel on bass, guitarist Chuck Morgan and outstanding multi-instrumentalist Tom Baker, who performed and recorded with her in the late 90s.

Before Baker died suddenly in 2001 at the age of 49, he pushed the Seidel group in the direction of mainstream jazz. He not only played trumpet and saxophones with her group but also sang with her, providing effortless harmonies with her voice. Their album *Doodlin'* was especially favoured by jazz fans.

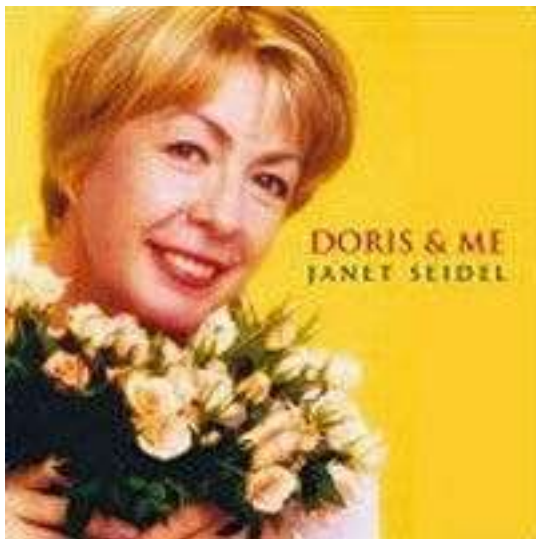


International success arrived, particularly in Japan where 12 of her albums were released, and where her trio completed many tours. She was consistently named among the top 10 jazz vocalists in Japan’s jazz polls, and on two occasions her trio toured Japan for Fujitsu Jazz Elite, when she shared the bill with luminaries such as Helen Merrill, Roberta Gamberini, the George Mraz Quartet, and Toshiko Akiyoshi/Lew Tabackin.

She also toured many times to Britain, the US and Europe. Her growing international reputation was underlined in 2006, when *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD* (UK) described her as “Australia’s first lady of jazz singing”.

As her career developed she branched out into cabaret with several tribute shows, such as *Doris and Me*, her 2000 tribute to Day. The show played in many venues around Australia and the album was a finalist in the ARIA

Awards. Other cabaret shows and albums included *Delovely*, a selection of Cole Porter songs; her Dearie tribute, *Dear Blossom*; and a Johnny Mercer cabaret show, *That Old Black Magic*.



Her *Moon of Manakoora* CD featured her soft, sensuous vocals framed by Morgan's beautiful work on ukulele and guitar. It was No 1 on the jazz vocal charts in Japan for three months in 2005, and in Australia won the Bell Award for best jazz vocal CD of 2006 at the National Jazz Awards in Melbourne.



Guitarist Chuck Morgan: beautiful work on ukulele and guitar...

Her last album, *Far Away Places*, issued in 2013, featured her usual backing musicians, plus contributions from jazz greats Paul Furniss (clarinet), Fabian Hevia (percussion) and Hamish Stuart (drums). Following the album's release in Japan the trio toured there for two weeks, with the album reaching No 1 on the Amazon jazz vocals chart.



Janet Seidel at the piano (right), in performance with L-R, Tom Baker (trumpet), Laurie Thompson (drums), David Seidel (double bass), and Ian Date (guitar)...

“I’m excited to be performing what I consider to be some of the most sophisticated, subtle and witty music ever written,” she said in one interview. “I’d really like what we do to be considerably less about me, and just completely about the music.”

Seidel was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in October last year. She undertook chemotherapy and surgery, swam daily and continued to perform until recently. She appeared to bounce back from physically demanding treatment, but her condition was declared terminal.

She is survived by her partner of 15 years, Morgan; six children; and her brothers David, Geoffrey, Robert and Mark.
