

THE AUSTRALIAN

Death of a talented & influential jazz musician



Mark Simmonds (right) pictured here with Diana Peters...

OBITUARY: MARK SIMMONDS

Jazz saxophonist. Born Christchurch, New Zealand on June 27, 1955, he was found dead in Surry Hills, Sydney on September 8, 2020.

This obituary was commissioned by The Australian, September 20, 2020.

ERIC MYERS

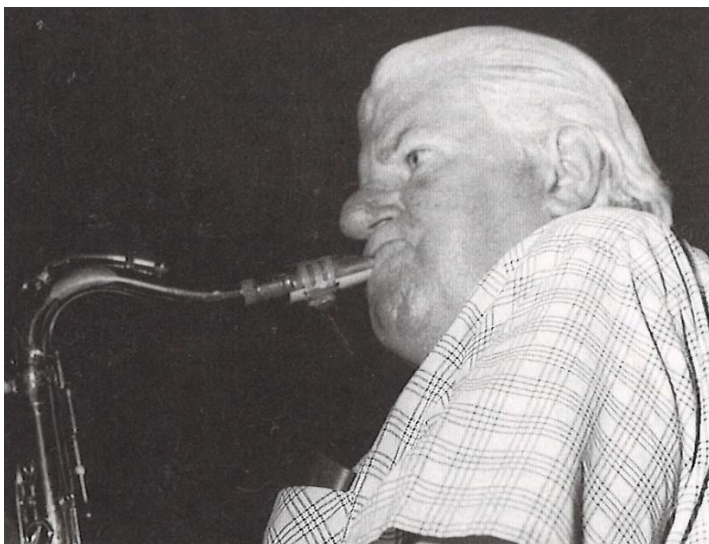
Mark Simmonds, who has died at the age of 65, was one of the most talented and influential musicians in the history of Australian jazz. The key to his extraordinary career is his odyssey through virtually every known jazz idiom.

Mark Simmonds and his elder brother Derek first came from New Zealand to Australia as small boys when their parents set up a business in Sydney. They returned to Christchurch until the family moved permanently in 1966, to live in Northbridge. Mark was 10, and attended North Sydney Boys High.

Simmonds studied the blues and played guitar for some years. Interested in New Orleans jazz, he played trombone, then trumpet, switching to the saxophone in 1972. He played in traditional and swing groups, his main hero being the American Lester Young. In later years he claimed his favourite Australian saxophonists were the traditionalist Paul Furniss and the mainstreamer Merv Acheson.



Simmonds' favourite Australian saxophonists were the traditionalist Paul Furniss (above) and the mainstreamer Merv Acheson (below)...FURNISS PHOTO CREDIT RON JOBE; ACHESON PHOTO COURTESY OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ



Simmonds was still at school in 1973 when he attended the new jazz studies course at the NSW Conservatorium. He was introduced there to Charlie Parker's bebop and John Coltrane's free jazz. Along with other young musicians, Simmonds became a leading light in the Keys Music Association, formed in 1979. It received government funds to rehearse, perform and record "modern improvisational music".

During the following 20 years, Simmonds blazed his way through many musical settings, including soul and funk groups the Dynamic Hepnotics and Jackie Orszaczky's Jump Back Jack. He was best-known in jazz as a member of Feeling To Thought, a quartet led by the drummer/composer Phil Treloar, and Simmonds' own longstanding group The Freeboppers. He also had an unhappy stint with the Australian Art Orchestra whose music he described as "mediocre".

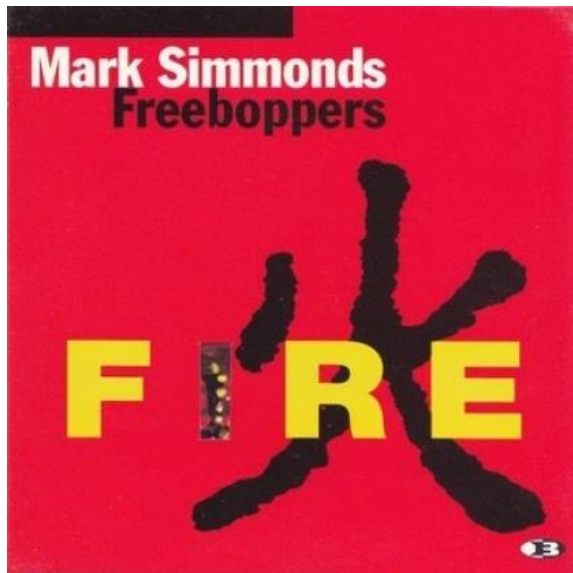


The Freeboppers, L-R, Scott Tinkler (trumpet), Steve Elphick (bass), Simmonds (tenor saxophone), Simon Barker (drums)...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

In the early 90s Kieran Stafford, owner of Sydney's Birdland jazz store heard The Freeboppers at the Strawberry Hills Hotel, and was astounded at Simmonds' sound and musical conceptions. "Mark was light years ahead of everyone else I had seen at that point. In every respect, he was completely fully formed," Stafford said this week. "I've heard a lot of supposedly great players

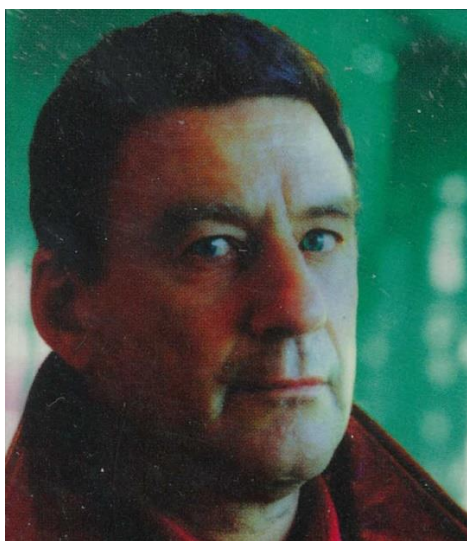
from overseas, and most of them didn't hold a candle to Mark. He's up there with Sonny Rollins in my book."

Stafford funded The Freeboppers album *Fire*, released in 1993 on Birdland Records. Widely acclaimed, it sold 2,000 units, and won an ARIA Award for best jazz album in 1995.



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Jazz enthusiasts were astonished by Simmonds' performances. In 1987, reviewer John Clare described a Simmonds performance at The Basement as "an unbroken hour-and-a-half orgy of rhythm and fire."



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The Melbourne Jazz Co-Op's Martin Jackson described Simmonds' approach as "incendiary intensity". In John Shand's book *Jazz: The Australian Accent*, the relevant chapter is entitled "Mark Simmonds: Volcano".

A turning point in Simmonds' career was his visit to New York in 1980 on a study grant. He returned to Australia with a narcotics problem which subsequently masked what has been described as "a bipolarity disorder". In the late 90s he suffered a breakdown, from which he never fully recovered.

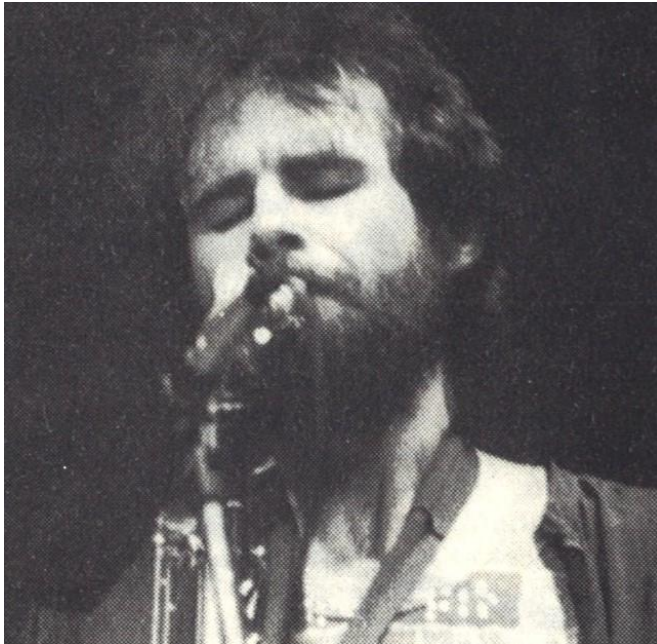


Simmonds (above): for over 20 years he was a recluse and, for a time, homeless... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SMETANA

For over 20 years Simmonds was a recluse and, for a time, homeless. He lost many of his teeth, which inhibited him, and he returned to playing and composing on guitar. He was on methodone for many years. He missed an appointment with his social worker on September 7, 2020, which prompted a police visit to his Surry Hills apartment. An autopsy was done, but cause of

death awaits the results of ongoing coronial investigations. Simmonds latterly had a cellulitis condition which, untreated, may have contributed to his death.

Mark is survived by his elder brother Derek Simmonds.



Simmonds: we will never know for sure, but Mark may have committed suicide via methodone toxicity ... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Eric Myers writes, October 1, 2023: Prompted by a discussion on Facebook I enquired about the result of the “coronial investigations” referred to above. We now know that the official cause of Mark’s death was “methodone toxicity”, in other words an overdose, and he suffered from cirrhosis of the liver. Prior to his death Mark was due to be admitted to hospital for alcohol detox. Mark’s elder brother Derek is of the view that “we will never know for sure, but the overdose might well have been another tragic musician suicide”.

Other articles on this website which may be of interest:

Martin Jackson’s interview, published in the September/October, 1982 edition of Jazz Magazine, entitled “Mark Simmonds: I Want To Be The Best” is at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-12>

John Shand, “Mark Simmonds 1955-2020”, obituary published in The Sydney Morning Herald on September 21, 2020, is at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-18>