

## **OBITUARY: KERRIE BIDDELL 1947-2014**

by **Anthony O'Grady\***

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*[This article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 9 September 2014. It does not include the exact date of Kerrie Biddell's death, but it is known that she died at the age of 67. It can be read on the SMH website at this link*

*<https://www.smh.com.au/national/kerrie-biddell-the-first-lady-of-australian-jazz-20140909-10eaff.html>. ]*



*Kerrie Biddell was dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in others as well as herself... PHOTO CREDIT SAHLAN HAYES*

**K**errie Biddell will be remembered as Australia's most distinguished jazz singer and as the performer who, on the brink of international fame, rejected the glamour of Las Vegas to be true to herself and her art. "It was a hard decision to make," she said. "Cost me a hell of a lot of money. But I wouldn't play that game. I just couldn't."

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*\*Anthony O'Grady is a journalist who co-founded and edited Rock Australia Magazine or RAM, which was a fortnightly national Australian music newspaper, published from March 1975 to July 1989, and designed for people with a serious interest in rock and pop music.*

Kerrie Agnes Biddell was born on February 8, 1947 in Kings Cross, Sydney. She later described her parents, Kathleen and Dan, as "Irish-Catholic alcoholics". Kathleen was an accomplished jazz pianist. Her father Dan, a solicitor's clerk and part-time piano player left the family when Kerrie was six. Kathleen could not cope with being a single parent and sent Kerrie to board at St Vincent's Convent in Potts Point.

"The nuns taught me great self-discipline and a pretty conservative moral code," said Kerrie. But the child never understood why "we were supposed to go Mass because we loved God. But if we flouted the rules, our punishment was to get up early and go to Mass." It was early warning that Kerrie Biddell would never let a double standard go unchallenged.

In 1962, at age 16, Kerrie had her annus horribilis. "My lung collapsed and I got rheumatoid arthritis. My sense of humour went really black. I was a piano player, but what was the first thing the arthritis attacked? I thought, 'Well, where does my life go now?' " She turned to singing, learning to sustain a note for over a minute, a near Guinness Book of Records achievement for anyone with two lungs.

Her first live performance was as a backing vocalist on Dusty Springfield's 1967 Australian tour. Springfield was astonished and delighted by Biddell's tone and control and became a lifelong friend. "You should be a lead vocalist," she told Biddell, who joined a local band The Echoes, then top-tier club group The Affair.

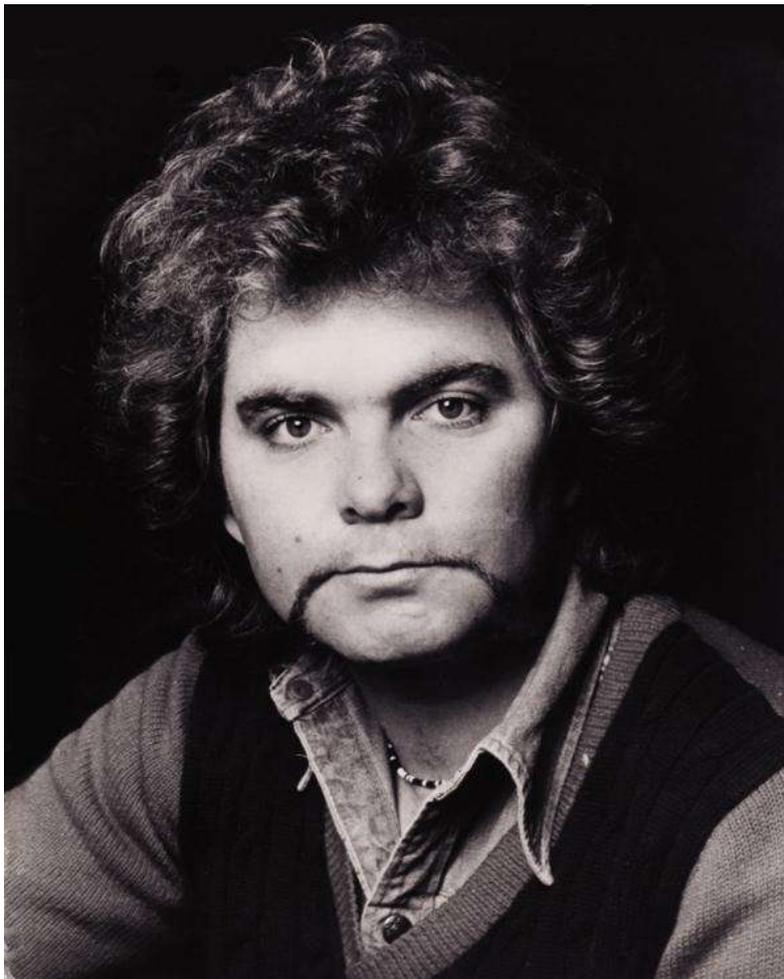


*Guitarist Jim Kelly, who worked with Kerrie Biddell in the group The Affair: he went on to form Crossfire...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR*

The Affair were notable for the number of world-class musicians who passed through their ranks. Guitarist Jim Kelly went onto form Crossfire, Australia's first international-standard jazz-fusion band. Bass players Bob Daisley and Mike Howlett went on to high-level international careers. But, said Kelly, Kerrie Biddell was a class above them all.

"She was already a world-class vocalist," he said. "Her sense of relative pitch was so highly developed, she could break down a multi-instrumental arrangement to simple notes." With Biddell on board, The Affair added Aretha Franklin soul, Sly Stone funk and the complex compositions of Jimmy Webb, becoming a national drawcard. In 1969, the National Battle of the Sounds added a Vocal Group category to its main Pop/Rock category. Prizes for both would be trips to London to record.

"We weren't really a vocal group," said Jim Kelly. "But Kerrie rehearsed us till we were." Doug Parkinson In Focus won the main event and headed to England in search of international recognition. The Affair won best vocal group and enjoyed their time in London as tourists. "The group had decided to break up," said Kelly. "Kerrie was heading towards jazz and so was I. But different styles of jazz."



*Doug Parkinson: his group In Focus won the main event and headed to England in search of international recognition...*

Before leaving, The Affair recorded with producer Pat Alton. The B-side of one of their singles was Biddell's soaring rendition of Sly and the Family Stone's *Sing A Simple Song*. It became one of her signature tunes, its lyric expressing the happiness and wellbeing she found in song as her escape from rheumatoid arthritis.

"I can't remember a day when Kerrie did not feel pain," said Jim Kelly. "Twice she was confined to a wheelchair," said her friend Cassandra Darvall. "She fought back

both times." Kerrie Biddell returned from London in 1970 and joined the Daly Wilson Big Band, an ambitious, high-volume, rock energy reimagining of '40s big band swing. Daly Wilson was a cause celebre in Australian music and Kerrie was celebrated as its star. "Kerrie excelled at every genre we threw at her," said trombonist Ed Wilson, "rock, jazz-rock, funk, torch..."



*Ed Wilson of the Daly-Wilson Big Band: Kerrie excelled at every genre we threw at her...*

Between stints with Daly Wilson she toured with Dudley Moore, Cilla Black and Buddy Rich. In 1972 she married David Glyde, formerly tenor saxophonist for Sounds Incorporated, The Beatles' touring support act. The two left for Canada where Glyde had contacts. Kerrie was soon an in-demand studio session singer.



*In 1972 she married saxophonist David Glyde, pictured here with the bassist Dieter Vogt... PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN*

The duo made reconnaissance sorties into America, aiming for Las Vegas. "It happened very fast," said Glyde. "She got work in a small club. Then a booker for the casinos in Las Vegas saw her. The MGM Grand had just opened and Kerrie was offered \$190,000 for three years.

"She was to perform for six weeks in the Lounge for the first year then she'd take on the main room. Sinatra's band came by one night and they raved. Count Basie dropped by, said, 'She's incredible.' Mel Tormé invited her to a recording session. Merv Griffith heard the buzz. She went on his *Tonight Show* and got a standing ovation."



*American singer Mel Tormé: he invited Kerrie to a recording session, which she turned down... PHOTO CREDIT JAN PERSSON*

"I was desperate to be a star," said Biddell, "but Las Vegas was a shit heap. I started to see that the amount they wanted to take away from me was too much."

"She turned down the Mel Tormé session. She cancelled her contract with MGM," said Glyde. "She didn't care if she ever had a number one record. Her ambition was to be best in the world and she could separate that from being famous."

Back in Australia Biddell enrolled at the Sydney Conservatorium and sang improvisational jazz with Glyde's band Steamboat Willie at Red Ned's wine bar in Chatswood, Sydney. "I'd gone from 5,000 US dollars a night to 15 Australian dollars," she said. "It was a great time for me because I learnt a lot."

Steamboat Willie morphed into Compared To What, named for its eclectic mix of jazz, funk, fusion, pop, torch and comedy. For a decade the group featured Australia's

jazz elite, including Mark Isaacs, Rick Best, Michael Bartolomei, Nicky Lister and Alan Freeman.



*Compared To What at Red Ned's, L-R, Graham Jesse (tenor saxophone), Clive Harrison (electric bass) and Biddell (right)...PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK*

Biddell recorded highly regarded albums and won innumerable Best Vocalist awards. She separated amicably from David Glyde in 1977. "I was really bad at marriage," she said.



In 1992 she wrote a one-woman show, *Legends*, that later included June Bronhill, Lorrae Desmond, Toni Lamond and Jeannie Little. She performed in the Sydney Theatre Company production of *As You Like It*, with music arranged by Michael Bartolomei.

"And she gave back to the music community as a teacher," said Cassandra Darvall. "She was an autodidact, she had trained to such an elite level and she passed on what she'd learnt. She gave master classes, she taught at the Con. She was totally dedicated to pursuit of excellence in others as well as herself."



*Cassandra Darvall (above) said that Kerrie gave back to the music community as a teacher...*

In 1997, aged 50, Biddell went into semi-retirement. By 2001 she had left the stage. "She would not perform if she thought she was not be capable of her best," said Darvall. In 2007 she sang with the Ed Wilson Big Band at a benefit for David Glyde, then suffering from prostate cancer. It was her last public performance. She continued as a vocal coach till her sudden death from a stroke.