

OBITUARY: Tom Pickering 1921-2001

by Ian Pearce*

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Tom Pickering was born in Burra, South Australia on August 8, 1921. He died in Hobart on October 26, 2001.

When the Pickering family came to Tasmania from Burra (South Australia) in the mid-1930s and settled in the house next door - but one - to the Pearce's, the stage was set for the beginning of what was to become a significant part of Tasmania's jazz history. Tom and I were both in our mid-teens and discovered together, via the "wireless", the popular music of the day- at that stage mainly the British dance bands.

It is pretty clear that it was just the rhythmic element which attracted us (isn't it always?) but, as time went on, the interest widened and deepened to embrace the music of the Benny Goodmans, the Louis Armstrongs and other prominent musicians of what was really the start of the Swing Era. Indeed it was Goodman, especially of the trios and quartets, who was Tom's main inspiration. The Pee Wee



The pianist Ian Pearce: he and Tom Pickering used to muck about on clarinet and piano, not knowing, really, what they were doing...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ REAL BOOK

**The pianist Ian Pearce, who began on trumpet, was a pioneer of Australian jazz. His career spanned seventy-five years as a professional musician. Along with his elder brother Cedric, and friends Tom Pickering and Rex Green, he co-founded Tasmania's first jazz band: The Barrelhouse Four. He died on November 8, 2012 at the Royal Hobart Hospital, Tasmania.*

Russells and Bud Freemans came a little later. Tom was promised a clarinet if he passed what was then called the Intermediate Exam, when he was about 16 years of age. He passed, and we used to muck about on clarinet and piano, not knowing, really, what we were doing. But it did lead to our playing jazz, of a sort!

At Hutchins school, Tom 'found' Rex Withers-Green, who was already a competent piano player and with me (then playing cornet) and my brother Cedric on drums, The Barrelhouse Four was born. Tom (now doubling on tenor sax) and I played in local big bands (Tom, with Max Humphries) as well as some, mostly charity, jobs with the Four. Jam sessions at Frank Fouché's Coffee Lounge (later The Stage Door) helped to develop our playing.

The war (1939-45) had the four of us going in different directions until we reformed in 1946 for our first commercial recording (an Ampersand 78). That year too, we attended, minus Cedric, the first Australian Jazz Convention in Melbourne.



Tom Pickering: Tasmanian, and to a considerable extent Australian, jazz would have been different without Tom Pickering...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

For the next few years I was away from Tasmania. Tom formed his Good Time Jazz Band, which included Keith Stackhouse on piano (Rex Withers-Green, like Tom, then a bank clerk, had been moved to Victoria). The others were Col Wells (trumpet); Benny Cuebas (trombone); Geoff Sweeney (guitar & banjo); Ron Roberts (bass); Kay Stavely (Roberts) on vocals; and Cedric Pearce (drums). The 7HT Theatrette (above McCann's Music Shop), the City Hall, and later the Hobart Town Hall, were the main

venues - enormously successful ones too, until the rising popularity of rock music led to the band eventually breaking up.

I was back in town and we worked as a trio until, at the suggestion of the ABC's Jack Smith and Max Absolom, we formed the Pearce- Pickering Ragtime Five. This included Oscar Smith (banjo); Michael Colrain (drums); and initially Don Shepard (bass). Broadcasts became LPs (on Swaggie), records which were well-reviewed world-wide. The alliterative name (Tom's idea, I think) led to the occasional confusion. "Which one of you blokes is Pearce Pickering?" was a question occasionally asked.

The Ragtime Five expanded to the Pearce-Pickering Barrelhouse Jazz Band for a successful run at what was then Tattersall's Bar and Bistro, and then the longer run at Wrest Point Casino. Ill-health led to Tom's eventual retirement and the end of his playing career.

There can be no doubt that Tasmanian, and to a considerable extent Australian, jazz would have been different without Tom Pickering. He would have laughed at the suggestion that he was a natural leader, but he was. Not, of course, in the sporting or military sense, but with a special quality which had most of us thinking, "Yes, that's the way to do it". He wasn't always right, of course, but to my knowledge there was always harmony on and off the bandstand.

Tom was not one of the great improvisers but, if individuality and beauty of sound, understanding of the idiom, choice of notes, taste, and that indefinable thing called "style" count for anything, his contribution to the music is, at the very least, considerable. Having started his working life in a bank, Tom qualified as a librarian in 1948 and, after some years in the State Library of Tasmania, became



Jim Cullum: a memorable sojourn with him in San Antonio, Texas... PHOTO CREDIT JAMES CULLUM

Parliamentary Librarian in 1974. A Churchill Fellowship for music as well as Library research saw him travelling in America (including a memorable sojourn with Jim Cullum in San Antonio, Texas); England and Europe; many of his reports being published in the *Mercury*.

He was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1982. His comment, on being congratulated, "They made me a morning instead of a (k)night", is an example of his skill, funny and serious, with words; a skill which led to his winning several short story competitions. He also won the Australian Jazz Convention Composition Competition twice (*Late Hour* and *If You Don't Know The Words*) and a handful, out of dozens of his compositions, have been recorded on Swaggie, Stomp Off and Little Arthur labels.

Tom Pickering's inclusion on the Roll of Honour of the Montsalvat and Mildura festivals and his receiving of the Satchmo Award (Suncoast, St Helens) are tribute to his great contribution to Australian jazz. He is survived by his wife Meg and sons Mark and Roger.

CODA: The last few weeks of Tom's life were spent in hospital. Probably knowing that the end was near, his wife Meg sat with him and, at a little after midnight turned the radio on just to help pass the time. Although he was not able to communicate, from the way he responded, Meg is quite sure that he heard the music. It was Ella singing *Someone To Watch Over Me*.