

## OBITUARY: JOE LANE 1927 – 2007

by John Pochée\*

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**J**oe Be-Bop Lane was born in Sydney on March 21, 1927. He began singing whilst still attending school. His first name was actually Keith but according to various stories he used to bring a banjo to school (or mimicked a banjo) and became known as “Banjo”, which was later shortened to Joe.

I first met him at the Mocambo in 1957 and he became a good friend and teacher. My father would drive me over to Croydon where Joe lived with his mother, brothers and sister, once a week. Joe would play all the bebop records and tell me about Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, which was a revelation to me. I had grown up listening to my mother Valerie’s collection of Big Band records and some traditional jazz.



*Joe ‘Bebop’ Lane (left), with John Pochée, on the occasion of Pochée’s 40<sup>th</sup> birthday... PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE*

At the time I met Joe, I was influenced by the cool West Coast scene, Dave Brubeck, the MJQ etc. Joe familiarised me with the New York scene in general, and Lennie Tristano and Lee Konitz, whom I later had the honour of playing with.

In the late 50s he moved to Melbourne, hitch-hiking with his drums and personal belongings. A couple of years later, there was a similar trip with Keith Stirling and myself, that he talks about at the beginning of the documentary film *Beyond El Rocco*.

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*\*The Sydney drummer John Pochée knew Joe Lane for 50 years, having met him at the Newtown venue The Mocambo in 1957. This obituary is based on John’s piece “Bebop Spoken Here: My Memories of Joe Bebop Lane”.*

Shortly after he moved to Melbourne, around 1959, I got a job on the ship, The Kanimbla and sailed around the coast with the first stop being Melbourne. Somehow I managed to track him down to where he was playing, in a small coffee lounge called the Mokaris with Freddie Wilson and Gerry Gardiner. There were no drums so I sat in on bongos. This is when the famous Ava Gardner came in with her maid and her hotel manager. She loved the music and we all decided to go back to Joe's house "Muttering Lodge", where we partied through the night and had a great time. The stories of Joe's liaison are a myth, but Ava did sit on my lap at one stage, quite something for an 18-year-old, and I can still feel her impression.



*The actress Ava Gardner: at one stage, she sat on John's lap...*

A few months later, I stayed in Melbourne and lived with Joe, and for a time Mike Nock, who had an alto and slept curled up in a roll of underfelt. The son of the famous wrestler Big Chief Little Wolf rented the other room. Many musicians congregated at Joe's and there were many parties, sometimes attended by slightly underworld figures. Mike and I remember doing a gig on the back of a truck with Keith Stirling on trumpet, Mike on alto and Rudy Van Egmond on bass, with Joe dressed up as Santa Claus. The truck drove around a park in Prahran and Joe was giving out presents to the kids. It turned out to be for the local gangsters, and we later finished the gig playing in the backyard of a house.

Joe and I moved to a couple of other places in the next two years but there were always jam sessions being held in various locations with everyone hanging out at

Joe's. We played at various speakeasies and guys like Keith Stirling, Graeme Lyall, Chuck Yates, Dave MacRae and so many others were all part of the scene. It would take a book to document this period when The Embers club opened, and we got to hear Oscar Peterson, Benny Carter and many of our heroes.



*When The Embers opened in Melbourne, Pochée and his friends got to hear many of their heroes, including Oscar Peterson (above) and Benny Carter (below)...CARTER PHOTO COURTESY JIM COLEMAN*



Over the years, Joe returned to Sydney and worked in a variety of gigs, not always in music, but all of a sudden he would appear, quite often scattin on whatever was being played as he entered. In the late 60s, he went to New Zealand and ran his own jazz club in Auckland for a time. A couple of years later he arrived in Sydney on a ship on his way to a gig in Singapore. We had a big party at my place to farewell him and off he went. A couple of weeks later we got a phone call saying Singapore was a disaster and he was stranded in Perth, drums and all. About 20 of us took up a collection and flew him back to Sydney, where he lived with my wife and I for six weeks, until I decided it was someone else's turn and delivered him at the actor Tony Barry's place.



*Another shot of Joe Lane and John Pochée ...PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE*

Through the 80s, he had his band The Jazz Cats and played legendary Sundays at the Criterion Hotel. Many players went through the ranks: Dave Levy, Roger Frampton, Denis Sutherland and myself, Steve Russell and even James Morrison played the bass sometimes. Denis Sutherland formed a ten-piece band around him, Killer Joe, and contributed some wonderful arrangements. This band was also a learning experience for many younger players.

Joe was in several car accidents over the years and at times was awarded large sums of money, which he spent as quickly as possible buying drinks for everybody, or whatever. He was far more comfortable being a battler.

In the late 80s, he appeared in the documentary *Beyond El Rocco* before being hospitalised for months after being in another accident. Barry and Danny Ward organised a huge benefit night for him at Bronte RSL which was filmed by the ABC. Sydney's very best bands performed and he was eventually able to settle back into life in his flat at Petersham.

Serge Ermoll and Helene Grover once organised a small benefit and when it was over and they gave him the money, he then invited everyone to a restaurant for dinner. I looked at Chuck Yates and we fled, but Joe had made up his mind, and nothing could stop him once he did that. To say he was impulsive would be an understatement.



*Serge Ermoll: he and Helene Grover organised a small benefit for Joe...*  
PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

He spent his last years in a Housing Commission flat in Redfern, where he battled on, often travelling across Sydney to various shopping centres where they had cheap chickens or potatoes or whatever. Joe's appetite was legendary and I often witnessed him spending over an hour consuming whatever was available at various parties, including Ron Philpott's annual birthday feast.

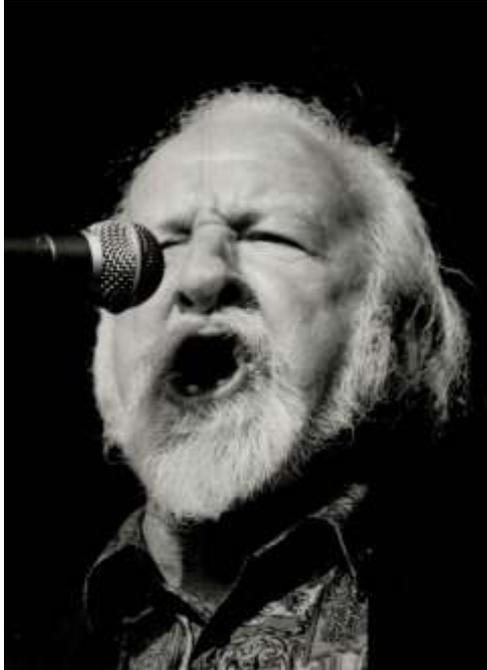
As a performer, Joe could sometimes be a little erratic, but when he was at his best it was sheer magic. I've seen him sing to mild applause and then sing a ballad like *Poor Butterfly* and get a standing ovation. His count-ins were classic. Always acting immediately on impulse he would call "1-2" with everyone shouting, "What is it?... what key?"...to which he would reply "*Prelude To A Kiss*, father... 3-4"!

Joe was a genuine eccentric. Impulsive, exasperating, kind, dogmatic, generous, riveting, and when he was on it was unforgettable. I learned so much from him. The greatest thing he instilled in me was his spirit to give whatever you were playing your best shot.

I kept tabs on him whenever I could in his later life, arranging for my wife Shirley to wheel him on stage at the Sydney Opera House, and organising Dan Barnett to get him on the plane to Adelaide to perform in Sandy Evans' suite *Testimony* with the Australian Art Orchestra.

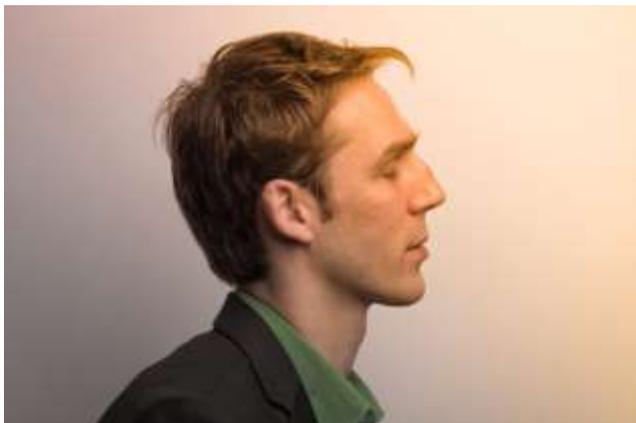
Finally, after I couldn't get him on the phone for a couple of days, I went over to his flat with my wife and Chuck Yates. He had suffered a stroke and I broke in and called the ambulance. Given little chance of recovering (again) he did just that,

spending the last couple of years in a nursing home. He couldn't speak but could still sing. Several of us visited him fortnightly and jammed for a couple of hours in the backyard of the home. The words gradually diminished but the music still poured out, and he scatted with accuracy and a remarkable memory of bop tunes and standards.



A couple of weeks after we celebrated his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, which he thoroughly enjoyed, he slipped away quietly after dinner one night. His brother Ron and sister-in-law Maria looked after him with loving care to the end.

In the notes of his album *The Arrival*, Joe outlined his life and said “You have to find your own individuality and maintain it... And you’ve gotta take chances... Music is about getting away from your doubts imposed by other people’s discontent”.



*The wonderful young saxophonist Willow Neilson sent a message lamenting Joe’s passing with some great words. “Joe was a reminder that happiness was not about what you have in your pocket, it’s about being IN the pocket!”*

R.I.P. Joe. You were an inspiration and a genuine original.