

## OBITUARY: JACK SAVAGE 1927-2009

by John Shand\*

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**H**is career as a jazz drummer started so young that if a musicians' union official dropped into one of Jack Savage's New York gigs the under-age player had to slip off the stage and hide. Asked where the drummer was, the band would say he was out having a smoke. This began when Savage was only 12, and his blue eyes would have been glinting at the joke being played on authority.

Jack Savage was born Jacob Solomon Sevush on July 14, 1927, in Brooklyn. He changed his surname 40 years later (after his father's death) to end the constant misspelling and mispronunciation. His parents were Polish Jews who jointly ran a douche-bag business.

Savage's early drumming aspirations, perpetrated on garbage cans, were resisted by his father but supported by his mother. She won. Among his teachers was the famed jazz drummer and band-leader Cozy Cole.



*The famed jazz drummer and band-leader Cozy Cole: he was one of Jack's teachers...*

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Typically for the era, Savage was well-schooled and versatile, able to back any act, play any music. This grounding also made him a fine teacher, something he took up early on and continued until the end, relishing passing on a rich tradition. He would never take credit for a successful student, however, saying he would then have to accept blame for the bad ones.

Some of his early playing was in the Catskills, a resort area of New York State where comics such as Mel Brooks honed their routines. He played in Broadway and off-Broadway shows, and gained a reputation as a brushes expert, with a now-rare authenticity of technique. His friend and fellow New York drummer, Bobby Shanken, described him as having the perfect chemistry for his instrument: "Defiant, assertive, irreverent and gutsy."



*Savage spent the early 1960s playing with the famous pianist Carmen Cavallaro (pictured here)...*

Jazz was Savage's first love but with a wife, Marsha, and two sons to support he went where the work was, spending the early 1960s playing with the pianist Carmen Cavallaro. Their international tours twice included Australia and Savage moved here in 1971 following the end of his marriage.

His initial scheme had been to go to Switzerland. When asked for his reasons by Swiss immigration officials, he replied, "Any place that's good enough for Charlie Chaplin is good enough for me." He was rejected. Then he recalled how much he had loved Potts Point while playing at the Chevron Hotel with Cavallaro.

He arrived here on a 12-passenger freighter with two cases of excellent French wine. Within two days he was sitting in at the Musicians' Club, was heard by the legendary tenor saxophonist Merv Acheson and was offered a gig. Word soon spread, and work streamed in - amid some suspicion of the machete-witted New Yorker.

Also within two days he met his future wife, the pianist and Fairfax journalist Jenny Sheard. Already a jazz-lover, she now aspired to becoming a jazz pianist, which Savage discouraged. When, after several years' intensive study, she began working professionally, he initially refused to collaborate, only relenting when he considered her good enough. With Savage managing, the Jenny Sheard Trio set sail.



*The Jenny Sheard Trio in the 1980s, L-R, Sheard (piano/vocals), Savage (drums), Lloyd Swanton (bass)...*

One work offer that Savage accepted was contingent on Sheard singing, even though she never had. She survived that night, sought lessons and the revamped trio with vocals swiftly attracted interest. With an EMI contract they recorded their first album, *Satin Doll*, meanwhile playing six nights a week, and sometimes three gigs a night.

Savage and Sheard married in 1981, and when work became scarcer he suggested they try their luck in Europe. They sold up, flew to Paris for a belated honeymoon, then found work in Munich, before settling in Paris, and attracting fans including the seminal jazz pianist Joe Turner, ex-Ellington drummer Sam Woodyard and Kenny Clarke, bebop drumming's father.

When Savage became a grandfather in 1985, they went to New York for a year. Returning to Sydney they recorded a second LP, *November Girl*, and Savage went back to teaching and sometimes playing independently of Sheard, who began a twin career as a writer, including for *Good Living*, *The Australian Financial Review* and *Good Weekend*.

When the trio's gigs faded in the late 1990s, Sheard added travel writing, and Savage expanded his own repertoire to play her photographer.



*Jenny Sheard: a twin career as a writer, including for Good Living, The Australian Financial Review and Good Weekend...*

One student, the jazz drummer Craig Simon, described his teacher as having "lit a creative fire that continues to burn". Savage taught in schools as well as privately and was still instructing his beloved - if browbeaten - students until 36 hours before he died.

In typical style, he has an agreement with the owner of his favourite New York watering hole, that his ashes may reside behind the bar, "where everybody is having a good time". Jack Savage is survived by Jenny Sheard and two sons.

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