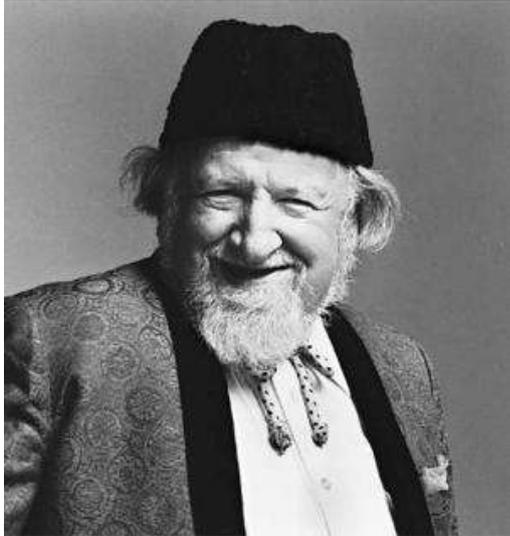


OBITUARY: JOE LANE 1927-2007

by John Shand*

[This obituary appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on May 11, 2007.]



Joe Lane: no fling with a Hollywood star

Joe Lane was larger than life. His thrilling, erratic performances as a jazz singer contributed to this impression, as did his eccentricity, gravelly voice and a rumoured fling with Ava Gardner. Above all there was an overriding zest for life - lived on Joe 'Bebop' Lane's terms.

Bebop, the complex jazz initiated in the 1940s by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach and others, occupied Lane's name and the centre of his life. He was among the first Australians to perform the new music.

The pianist Chuck Yates rates Lane the finest bebop singer he ever heard, his best improvised choruses of scat singing being fantasias of melodic invention, delivered with no inhibition. Lane's imagination was the only limit, and the relationship of his melodies to a song's chords was a matter of good ears rather than a formal knowledge of harmony.



**John Shand is a playwright, librettist, author, journalist, drummer and critic. He has written about music (and occasionally theatre) for The Sydney Morning Herald for over 24 years. His books include *Don't Shoot The Best Boy!:* The Film Crew At Work (Currency), *Jazz: The Australian Accent* (UNSW Press) and *The Phantom Of The Soap Opera* (Wizard). His website is www.johnshand.com.au.*

Keith Lane was born in Marrickville, and grew up in Sydney's inner suburbs, the oldest of four children of Alexander Lane, a travelling salesman, and Dorothy.

In the liner notes to the only album released under his own name, *The Arrival* (1996), Lane says he was already singing and scatting as a child. By 13 he was singing Frank Sinatra songs in talent quests.

In 1944 he first heard Parker, and the impact was pivotal. When drummer Max Roach performed in Sydney in 1995 Lane attended a function held in the great drummer's honour.* He shuffled into a circle of people around Roach and presented him with two 1940s records on which the drummer had played. Roach was astonished to see these treasures after 50 years and those assembled assumed Lane wanted them autographed. But they were a gift, from Lane to one of his heroes.



Max Roach: at a function in Sydney Joe Lane presented him with two 1940s records on which the drummer had played...

For Lane the material world and money were secondary to music and food. At the end of World War II he went off herding sheep in an effort to evade conscription, but his mother revealed his whereabouts.

When he was discharged from the army in 1948 he sang in various clubs around Sydney, and the bebop he preached made him a magnet for young musicians of successive generations - such as Bernie McGann in the 1950s and, later, James Morrison.

He had assorted day jobs, including door-to-door salesman and Father Christmas, and was very accident-prone; he was reportedly once run over by an ambulance. Lane also dabbled with drums. He would drag them onto buses to travel to gigs, and hitchhiked to Melbourne with them, flagging down a car with the drums out of sight, then announcing he had "a few parcels".

**Editor's note: This function was organised by Eric Myers, then National Jazz Co-ordinator, and a consultant to the artistic director of the 1995 Telecom Sydney Jazz Festival Anthony Steel.*



Ava Gardner: the story of a romantic fling between her and Lane is a myth...

Lane encountered Ava Gardner in Melbourne when she was making the film *On the Beach* (1959). As John Pochée tells it, Gardner visited a coffee lounge where Lane and Pochée were performing. She loved the music, and when it concluded, told the hotel manager to fetch alcohol and cigarettes. They all headed to Lane's house - known as Muttering Lodge - for an all-night party and jam. Pochée says the story of a romantic fling between Lane and Gardner is a myth.



Joe Lane performing at Soup Plus in Sydney in 1992. On bass is Jonathan Zwartz...

Lane moved to Auckland in 1968 and ran his own club. He resettled in Sydney in the '70s, and performed for many years at the Criterion Hotel, where Peter Allen once joined him on stage. Among his final performances, he sang in the Opera House Concert Hall with the Australian Art Orchestra in Sandy Evans's Charlie Parker tribute, *Testimony*.

In 2003 Lane suffered a stroke. He was paralysed down his right side and unable to speak. He could, however, sing. Musicians gathered fortnightly at the nursing home for Lane to let rip joyously over the accompaniment. He died of another stroke. He never married and leaves his brothers John and Ron.

Lane said in those liner notes: "Music is about getting away from your doubts, imposed by other people's discontent." On those terms he was massively successful.