

WARREN DALY

Interviewed by Mike Williams*

[This interview was published in Mike Williams' 1981 book The Australian Jazz Explosion.]

Mike Williams writes: The Daly-Wilson Big Band is an anachronism, for the simultaneous arrival of the Age of Electronics and the Age of Rock in the mid-1950s effectively ended the big band era. The demanding standards of early rock suddenly fertilised an apparently inexhaustible supply of musically-innocent guitarists and drummers willing to play for mere expenses. Why should promoters pay 16 or more musicians union minimum when this amplified alternative was available? But the big bands provided more than money for musicians. They were the great training grounds and they gave their own particular kind of thrill to players and listeners alike. So a few survivors lingered, bands led by men such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Buddy Rich, Sy Zentner and Buddy de Franco. There were others, too, where the musicians gathered for their own enjoyment, seldom giving public performances. These were, and are, the rehearsal bands. It was against this background that two young Sydney musicians, drummer Warren Daly and trombonist Ed Wilson, friends since their early teens, got together in 1969 to form a band which bridged the two worlds of jazz and rock.



Drummer Warren Daly (above left) and trombonist Ed Wilson (above right), friends since their early teens, got together in 1969 to form a band which bridged the two worlds of jazz and rock...

**In 1981 when Mike Williams published his book "The Australian Jazz Explosion", he was then jazz critic with The Australian newspaper.*

After a few months, economic difficulties accelerated, as Daly tells, by political pressures, forced them to break up the band. But the manufacturers of Benson & Hedges cigarettes, noting the Daly-Wilson Big Band's appeal to the young, saw it as a means of promoting a new market. Since then, the band has been reborn each year for a tour of capital cities and occasional forays overseas. Daly, whose power at the drums belies his slight build, is gifted with fervent energy, and his extrovert enthusiasm permeates any band with which he plays. There is, as he says, no room for gloom in his music. Although his particular delight lies in driving along the brass and saxophone sections, he is also, perhaps surprisingly, a small-group performer of great sensitivity. Between stints with the Daly-Wilson Band, he has often worked in small outfits alongside men such as Col Nolan, whose driving piano work is a perfect complement to his own playing.

Warren Daly: My parents used to take me to Mardi Gras when I was small, and I was fascinated by the pipe band drummers. I used to stand next to the snare drummer and watch him all night, while my brother, who was near my age, was on the merry-go-round. But I always had this respect for the drums and would never touch them.

I recently had a reunion with some classmates from primary school and they told me that I used to bang on rulers all the time. But I suppose what really made me want to take up drums was when I heard the theme from the film *Yellow Rose of Texas*, which starred John Wayne, one of my favourites. I remember that when I was about twelve and was coming home from the cinema on Saturday nights I used to sit on a fence outside the dance hall and listen to the big band and after that I always loved that kind of music.

I got my first drum kit when I was 13 and, although I hadn't touched a real drum until then, I had been hitting on everything for so long that I could play immediately. I started getting paid for what I was doing the same year, used to get ten bob for playing at church dances.



An early shot of Warren Daly at the drums in 1953... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

In 1958, when I was 15, I met Ed Wilson who was in a band at the Rivoli dance hall in Hurstville, where I lived. And I asked him, 'How do you get to play in a big band?' But Ed said that he couldn't read and couldn't really play, was just sitting there, blowing through a trumpet. Over the next few years I played with rock bands. I joined Max Hamilton's group, then Rod Stevens and the Ramblers, who turned into Rod Stallion and the Steeds, because we thought the name would have more impact. When the singer left we became just the Steeds and went on playing together for five years, doing all the backings on record, although we never had a hit of our own. And all the time, I was dabbling in any other band I could, to gain the experience.



*Warren Daly (foreground) with
The Steeds... PHOTOGRAPHER
UNKNOWN*

I started with a rehearsal big band led by Lance Prewitt at Parramatta, and when that folded I went into one that Ed Wilson and Dick Bowden had formed. I remember the first chart I played with them was *A Night in Tunisia* and I could handle it: I could read pretty well by then. For my dollars career I had switched from rock groups to nightclubs and was with Gus Merzi's band at Romanos and later at Spellsons.

About 1964 I joined Billy Weston's Big Band and also used to play at the El Rocco with Graeme Lyall on sax, Col Nolan, piano, and Ron Carson, bass. Another job I had was with Bill Barrett's Band, twice a week, at Lane Cove Town Hall and Hurstville Civic Centre. Shortly afterwards I got the job with Jack Grimsley's band on Channel 10, for the Carol Raye show. It was a great band and Jack used to write beautifully for it. The line-up included Judy Bailey on piano, Boof Thomson and Ken Brentnall, trumpets, Ocker Bamford, trombone, Charlie Munro, Errol Buddle and Graeme Lyall, saxes, George Golla, guitar, and Ed Gaston, bass.



A shot of Warren Daly at the drums with Col Nolan (piano) and Ron Carson (bass), at the El Rocco... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

In 1967 the Channel 10 show had become Barry Crocker's Sound of Music and one night the Kirby Stone vocal group from America appeared on it. Later, Kirby said to me, 'Do you want to go to the States?' I said, 'Great. Are you serious?' And he didn't say anything. So I said, 'I'll come. I'll come.' So I just went, took him up on it and just lobbed there. And I worked with the Kirby Stone Four for three months — a month in Detroit, a month in Chicago at the London House and a month at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas — all good joints.

One night Si Zentner, who was a mate of Kirby's, came in and heard me play and he said there was a vacancy in his band. I had told Kirby that the reason I wanted to go to the States was to play in a big band. He was really nice about it, so I joined Si for about four months. His band played with balls and with a level of musicianship I hadn't encountered before — really socked it to the audience. If there was a passage that was forte, I really had to work my butt off, although the Aussie bands had been telling me I was too loud. But they could play really softly, too. The biggest thing about working with them was the enthusiasm. The fourth trumpet would be doing a

solo and at the end the whole band would turn round and show him they really appreciated what he was doing. Offstage, too. They would come up and say, 'Man, that thing you played in the middle; that was gas.' And I was thinking, 'This must be Disneyland — people enjoying one another's playing.'



Trombonist Si Zentner circa 1965: his band played with balls and with a level of musicianship Daly hadn't encountered before... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

You see, I was used to the atmosphere at El Rocco: grudge and gloom. Nobody ever clapped — just drank their coffee and looked serious. I used to hate that; it was completely against my character. I used to love going down to listen to Lyn Christie and Errol Buddle and the others, but even the musicians were a little afraid to yell out in appreciation. And that was the character of jazz in Australia, certainly in New South Wales. And I thought, 'I want to turn this around. If ever I get something happening, I want it to be different.' And that was reinforced during my time with Zentner. For all the great music that was played at El Rocco, it was played with the wrong veneer.

It was 1968 when I was with Si in America, and that summer there were a lot of riots. He didn't want to go out on the road at the time, so we went back to Vegas to wait around for a job that was coming up at the Tropicana hotel. I couldn't get social security benefits like the other guys, and all I was eating was peanut butter sandwiches. A short while before, when the band was in Rochester, New York, Milt Yaner, who was lead alto and booker with the Glenn Miller band led by Buddy de Franco, came in to listen. He told me afterwards, 'If you ever leave Zentner, give me a ring.' Well, when I was eating those peanut butter sandwiches I kept on hearing that voice saying, 'Give me a ring. Give me a ring.' So I phoned him and he said, 'Yeah, I'll send you some money.' I couldn't believe it: that kind of thing wasn't done in Australia. They flew me from Vegas to Chicago with money advanced and I met the band there and stayed with them five months, playing all over the States, 500-miles-a-day trips, driving all night.



Daly in 1968 with the Glenn Miller Band, then led by Buddy de Franco: Daly stayed with them for five months, playing all over the States, 500-miles-a-day trips, driving all night... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

We ended up by doing a tour of Japan and Korea and when the band got back to Hawaii I wanted to go home. I couldn't get my green card in the States and I was also missing home. I had been telling them I was going back to Australia before Christmas anyway.

I got home on 4 December 1968 and Ed and I started the Daly-Wilson Big Band in February 1969. We had had our own band for a while in 1965, but there weren't enough good musicians around then to read the charts. We looked at each other and

agreed, 'It's not time.' But it was amazing how much the brass and saxophone talent had improved between 1965 and 1969. We organised the new outfit as a kicks band, a rehearsal band. Our whole approach was, 'There's not going to be any gloom.' We didn't want to know about being introverted.

We used to say, 'If you like what another guy plays, yell-out. Nowadays you don't have to do that, because everybody just enjoys himself. And I think that was something we revolutionised with the Daly-Wilson Big Band — that whole attitude to playing. I think I had an advantage, having just come back from the open atmosphere in the States: I didn't have any negative thoughts and the musicians here had the idea that I might have something to impart.



An early shot of the Daly-Wilson Big Band, when they were a rehearsal band...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Well, we came up with the first cooking band in Australia. The Stage Club in Cleveland Street allowed us use of their premises as a rehearsal room for six months — and that has turned into more than eleven years. At the end of that six months we thought we had better put on a concert for the club: they could take the door and we would just play. We had Ricky May singing with us, as he has done many times since. And the joint was packed. They were hanging from the rafters, and they went mad. We played the Musicians' Club a couple of weeks later and a lot of people couldn't get in because it was so crowded. The first time we played the Roundhouse at the University of New South Wales, 3,000 people were there. At that time, Blood, Sweat and Tears hadn't quite hit here, and these kids at the university had not heard brass since they were infants. We played with a rock feel, too, and that was new. We were the first on the scene with the Motown thing and brass. The timing was just right.

Not long afterwards, Kerrie Biddell joined the band. I was playing with Don Burrows at the Wentworth hotel, and Kerrie used to come in there. It was before she went to England with the Affair and nobody knew her. I heard her sing and she knocked me out and when she came back from England I was on the dock and I asked her, 'Do you want to join the band?'. She said, 'Yeah.' So I said, 'You're on.' She came in singing some of the high note phrases the brass were playing, plus a few feature vocals.

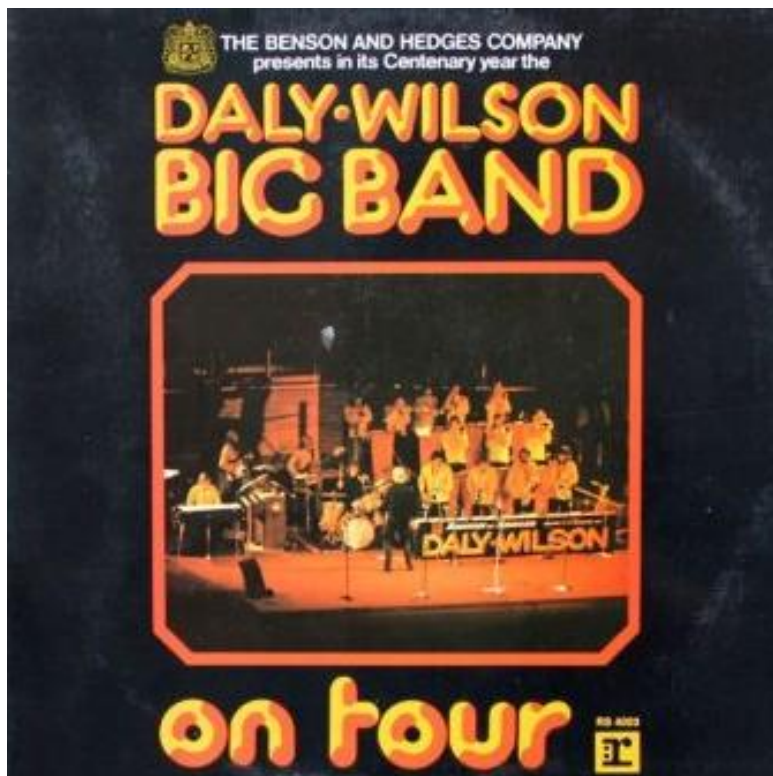


Vocalist Kerrie Biddell: she sang some of the high note phrases the brass were playing, plus a few feature vocals....

In the early days we did two tours — as support for Dudley Moore and Cilla Black — and we made our first record in September 1970, a live concert at the Cell Block Theatre in Sydney. One of the numbers, which featured Col Nolan on organ, was *WD & HO Blues*. Because of our later association with Benson & Hedges, everybody thought that was where the title came from. But it was the first chart I had written for the band's book. I composed it and Ed arranged it and he said, 'It's yours. You title it.' And I said, 'How about *WD & HO Blues — Warren Daly and His Own Blues?* You never know, a tobacco company might sponsor us one day.' I suppose that at the back of my mind was the fact that an orchestra sponsored by Alpine cigarettes had been successful.

But it wasn't long after we made that first record that the band broke up. Trouble had plagued us ever since we first formed it, and it is still happening, although I can't understand why. The Musicians' Union was frightened of us because all of a sudden there was this new bunch of brass players led by a maniac on drums. And they used to say, 'Before you know what is happening they will be running this town.' I remember that as a direct quote. So we got a lot of flak from the union and there was a lot of pressure. I really couldn't understand that because there was no other band doing concerts. And that is all we have ever done, never moved into a TV channel, never tried to take anyone's job in 11 years, but the union demanded we pay for every rehearsal, which we did; kept books and everyone got his money up front. And in the end we went broke and there was no money to pay anybody.

A few months later Benson & Hedges were looking for a way to celebrate their centenary. Denis Langley, one of the trumpet players who had depped with us and was also a lawyer, was working in the legal department of British Tobacco, as the parent company's name was then. He noticed that one of the suggestions was for music promotion. He told them, 'A lot of people are upset that the Daly-Wilson Band has broken up.' So they agreed to sponsor us and we started up again.



The Benson & Hedges sponsorship came about through Denis Langley, one of the trumpet players who had depped with the Daly-Wilson band, and was also a lawyer; he was working in the legal department of British Tobacco...

There was never any contract with them. They just said: 'We want you to go right round Australia.' We played 60 one-nighters all over the country, and the tour lost a fortune. We packed the capital cities, but country centres were a washout. We also lost money on a tour of New Zealand. So the hammer came down and we were told we couldn't play outside the capitals. Then we started to talk to entrepreneurs who

said they weren't willing to bring in any one act more often than perhaps a couple or three times a decade. So we thought we would have to be very careful and not overexpose the band. We adopted the policy of doing national tours once a year and, whenever we could, getting the odd gig, either locally or overseas. And we are the only band or act that an entrepreneur has been willing to put on seven years in a row in the concert hall, except possibly Kamahl — and he's another story.

In 1974 we went to the Hong Kong Hilton for a month and that was a dream, because the band got super-tight, playing every night. In 1977 we went to Russia, eastern Europe and Las Vegas and also played one night at Dontes, perhaps the best-known jazz club in Los Angeles. On that trip the band played better than ever before, but I think the one we have now is the best of all. We were going to Russia again in 1979, but the deal fell through. They would pay only half our fare and they said any money we earned would have to be spent in Russia. Under the conditions laid down, we couldn't have made both ends meet.



The Daly-Wilson Big Band in 1977, at the time of the tour which included Russia, eastern Europe and Las Vegas, where the band performed night at Dontes...

Some of the best times I have had have been playing in small groups with Col Nolan, because his emotions are so raw, and I love musicians like that. The band he had with Errol Buddle down at the Old Push was one of the most exciting I have ever played in. Every time I keep thinking of combinations I come back to Col and Errol and even though their temperaments clash, I think they need one another. And Errol is wonderful to play with, because he works off the drummer all the time.



L-R, Errol Buddle, Col Nolan, Warren Daly: Warren says that when he thinks of combinations he comes back to Col and Errol; “even though their temperaments clash, I think they need one another”... PHOTO COURTESY WARREN DALY PERSONAL LIBRARY...

One of the problems the Daly-Wilson Big Band has had is with recording companies. We have a terrible reputation for changing labels. The reasons we changed were that none of them would do anything to promote us, or else they would try to manipulate our music, start laying certain numbers on our heads, trying to get us to play certain things we didn't want to play. I don't know how those guys can wake up and look at themselves in the mirror for what they do to local groups. I told one lot, 'That's bloody terrible and I'm not going to play it.' So after that we didn't have a record company for a while. They only want us to do disco albums and I think that's a crying shame because they could sell what we have.

But I don't think the scene has ever looked healthier than it does today. The biggest minus this country had was the pseudo-gloom that had to do with jazz, and I believe we had most to do with the breakthrough. All the bands around today — look at Galapagos Duck, for instance — are up there, smiling. They have won the audience. And I can go and hear jazz anywhere today and have a good time, whereas before I put on my doom cap. I think the standard of musicianship is gaining every year; there are so many guys around who play well. Last night there was even one deputising in the band whom I didn't know. And when I was on the way up I knew everybody, because the scene was so restricted. I had to ask this alto player who he was, but he still read the book well. And these young kids coming in are playing their arses off. A lot of the guys we have in the band now were in the student bands we used to have at the Stage Club in the early days. Before the Con started its jazz



Daly: The biggest minus this country had was the pseudo-gloom that had to do with jazz, and I believe we had most to do with the breakthrough. All the bands around today — look at Galapagos Duck, for instance — are up there, smiling... PHOTO CREDIT MARGARET SULLIVAN

course, we used to run an Arts Appreciation Society — Burrows was our patron — where we were teaching kids how to play together. One thing I would like to see here would be for every worthwhile musician in Australia to have the chance to play in the States. And I would like to see the older guys here catered for, given more exposure.
