

OBITUARY: DICK HUGHES 1931- 2018

by Malcolm Brown*

[This obituary appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on April 23, 2018.]

His father was a Cold War spy – literally, as it turned out, in the world of Ian Fleming. His mother died tragically when he was not two years old and his grandparents, bringing him up in the Catholic faith, tried to brush aside Dick Hughes' early interest in jazz. But out of it came Dick Hughes, journalist, jazz pianist and broadcaster.

With so many influences, among others his father's revelation to him that he was a double agent, it can be no wonder that Dick Hughes turned out to be an extraordinary individual, at home even in his old age rattling the ivories at furious pace, sub-editing suburban newspapers and hosting the long-running program on Radio 2MBS-FM, *Speak Easy and Swing Hard*.



Dick Hughes (piano) with The Chosen Three, including John Costelloe (trombone) and Johnny McCarthy (clarinet), October 10, 1963...

PHOTO COURTESY FAIRFAX MEDIA

** Malcolm Brown is an Australian journalist, editor and the co-author of books dealing with crime, forensic science, disasters and the Vietnam War.*

Richard “Dick” Hughes was born in Brighton, Victoria, on July 8, 1931, son of a journalist, Richard Hughes, and May (nee Bennett), who died on July 5, 1933. Hughes Senior worked on the Melbourne paper, *The Star*, which was struggling, and in 1935 joined Frank Packer’s *Daily Telegraph*, in Sydney, leaving young Richard with his parents, Richard and Catherine Hughes, in Melbourne.



Hughes on the piano in his Vacluse home: PHOTO CREDIT EDWINA PICKLES

Young Richard became entranced by the first jazz recordings he heard on radio. He was nine years old when he heard the word “jazz” for the first time. His grandfather liked classical music, but Hughes soon found himself attracted to the alternative, even though his grandparents had no time for it and, when he and a friend were caught at school playing jazz on a mouth organ, they were strapped. An Uncle Walter was more sympathetic and gave Hughes a first jazz record, for his 10th birthday. Hughes initially wanted a drum set but in 1947, when he matriculated, his grandparents allowed him to take piano lessons.

Hughes’s father was by now remarried and living in Tokyo, working for the London *Sunday Times*, and was destined to become the first man to interview the British traitors Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean.

The young Hughes went to Melbourne University, studied French language and culture and graduated with Honours in 1951. His father had offered him a return sea fare to London. Hughes left Australia and celebrated his 21st birthday in Paris by playing with the band Andre Rewelliotty in a leading hot spot in Paris, the Vieux Colombier. He arrived in London in July 1952 and started playing the piano for the New Orleans purist Cy Laurie and Ian Bell.

Hughes worked for a time on tarmac control with British European Airways. At about this time his father disclosed to him that he had been approached by Soviet intelligence to work for them, that he had told fellow journalist Ian Fleming, and that Fleming had put him in touch with MI6, after which Hughes Senior had become a double agent. At the suggestion of a friend of his father, Hughes joined the London office of Australian Consolidated Press. He became the only journalist to whom the jazz great Billie Holiday gave a radio interview. In 1954, Hughes himself played at London's Festival Hall.



Dick's father, journalist Richard Hughes, pictured here with his boss at the Sunday Times in London, Ian Fleming...

Hughes returned to Australia in November that year and began working with the *Daily Telegraph*, covering police rounds, courts and television, then became a sub-editor. In 1957 Clyde Packer and editor Donald Horne offered Hughes a position writing a record review column for a new magazine, *Pictorial-Show*, taking a new career direction and winning acclaim. Hughes was also performing. "I was playing the piano four, sometimes five times a week," he said. "It was mainly at the Macquarie Hotel, Woolloomooloo. I was earning more money than I was as a journalist."



Members of the Port Jackson Jazz Band in 1958, standing L-R, Doc Willis, Bob Cruickshanks, Bob Barnard, John McCarthy. Seated, L-R, Ray Price, Dick Hughes...
PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

Hughes played regularly for the Sydney Jazz Club in 1955 and became pianist for one of Sydney's longest-running groups, the Port Jackson Jazz Band. In June, 1962, he married a physiotherapist, Fay Parsons. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, with singer Brother John Sellers, rang Hughes in 1964 and asked him to be their pianist during a tour of Australia.

In May that year, Hughes was assigned to fly to London and interview the Beatles and return to Australia with them. Hughes made friends with Louis Armstrong, and Armstrong took Hughes and his wife to dinner on their last night in Sydney in November, 1964. Hughes joined the *Daily Mirror* in February, 1966, and continued sub-editing, record and book reviewing. He became, in 1972, the first foreign journalist invited by the US Government to attend the Newport in New York Jazz Festival.

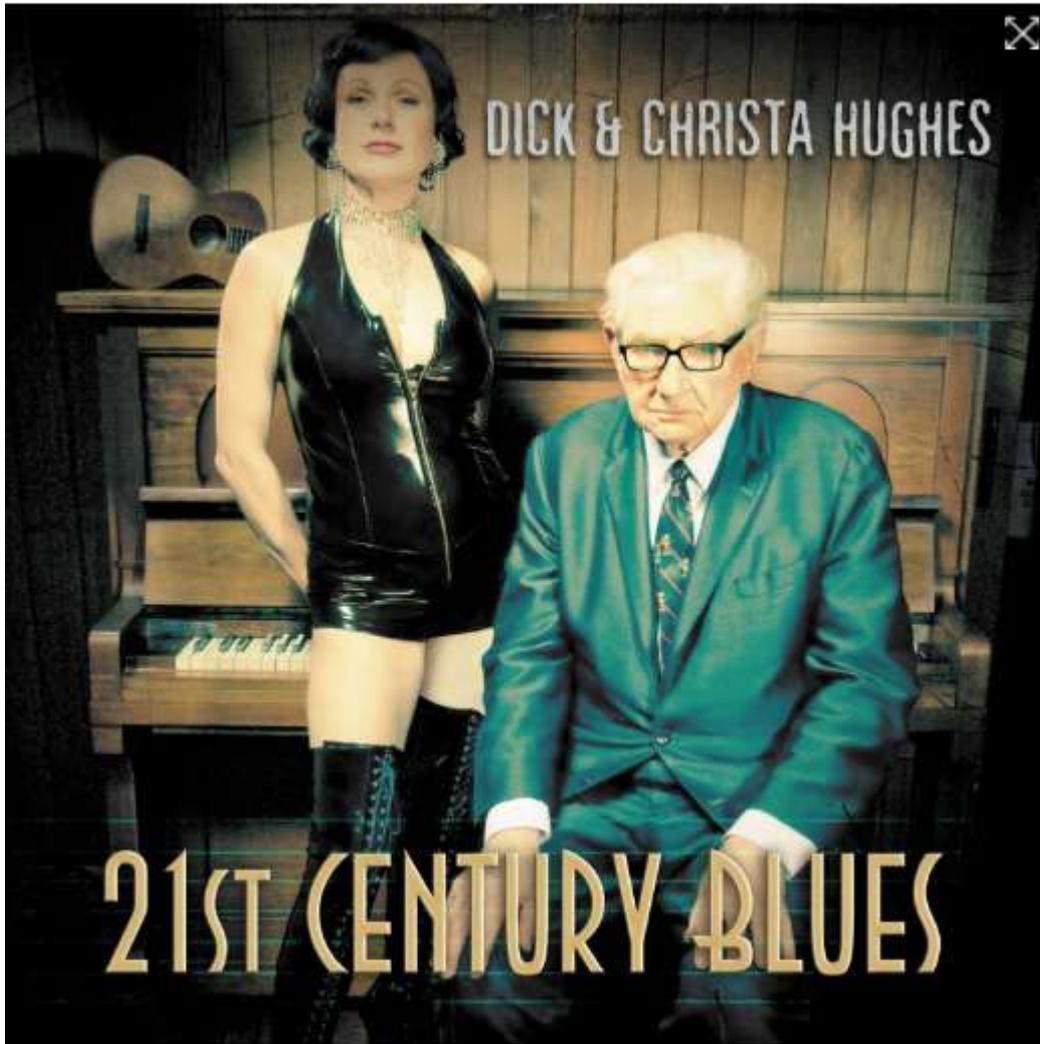
Hughes's marriage was a success. Daughter Vashti was born in 1969, followed by Christa in 1972 and Stephanie in 1974. But that did not lessen his pace. In January, 1973 he became the first Australian jazz pianist to record an album of unaccompanied solos. In October that year, he became the first jazz pianist to perform at the Sydney Opera House.



Fay and Dick Hughes with the American jazz and blues singer Helen Humes, at her opening night at Spellson's in Sydney...

PHOTO COURTESY DADDY'S PRACTISING AGAIN

Hughes continued in newspapers, working on the *Independent Monthly*, then Fairfax Community Newspapers. In 1980, he was performing with Dick Hughes's Famous Five. Of Hughes's first book, *Daddy's Practising Again*, published in 1977, an Old Etonian and jazz writer Humphrey Lyttelton said: "I don't know of any other book that conveys so well the excitement of being a jazz player." A second book, *Don't You Sing!* (1994), was "full of roaring laughter" according to critic Edmund Campion, who said it "brought me at last to tears".



Dick Hughes (right) with his daughter, the cabaret artist Christa Hughes...

Hughes began with 2MBS-FM as a jazz presenter in April, 1997. His program, *Speak Easy and Swing Hard*, continued for many years after and in that quiet, subtle way Hughes believed he made his greatest contribution to the world of jazz. His quiet, good-humoured and infinitely knowledgeable presentations became a fixture for Sydney Sunday radio.

In his playing, he accompanied his daughter Christa who had made a name for herself in vaudeville.

Dick Hughes died at his home in Vaucluse on April 20, 2018 after a long illness. He is survived by his widow, Fay, his three daughters and a son-in-law.
