

OBITUARY: KEITH STIRLING 1938-2003

by John Clare*

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Keith Livingstone Stirling, who has died of heart failure related to a diabetic condition, was a unique Australian trumpet stylist, recognised internationally by musicians. His network of local fans was devoted, but he was hardly a household name. Stirling had no urge towards self-promotion.



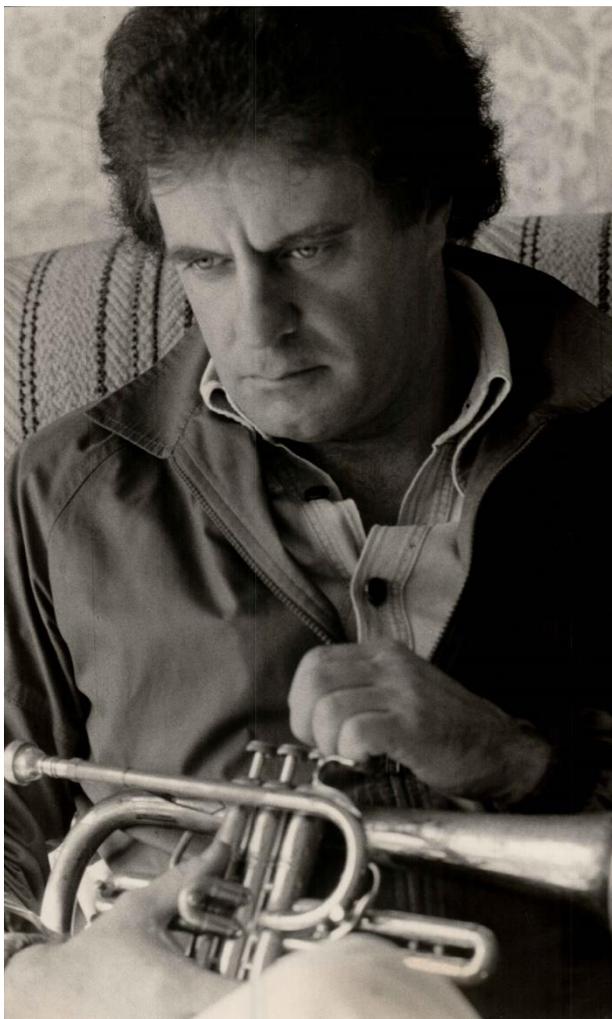
Keith Stirling: he had no urge towards self-promotion...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

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There were times when he would practically burn the place down with his playing. Some of his great solos - and at his peak he was on a par with the best in the world - combined cool running lines with stabs and skips across unpredictable intervals, fast chromatic patterns that sat across the beat and made the rhythm section boil up, and scorching rips into the highest register.

His next solo might be soft and subtle to the point of introversion. Listeners strained for the emotion that was undoubtedly in there.

Though his sound was resonant at even the softest levels, this could suggest anti-trumpet trumpet playing. Stirling seemed to be involved in a personal dialogue with the form and meaning of music. His preoccupation with the inner life earned him the nickname Cosmic Keith.



Stirling: his preoccupation with the inner life earned him the nickname Cosmic Keith... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

This pursuit had its risible aspects, but he was always ready to laugh at himself.

While some eccentric people are intolerant of oddity in others, Stirling sought to understand everyone and followed with interest musicians who took different paths from his own. He was known as a loyal friend and a dedicated teacher.

Stirling epitomised a certain group of modernists who drove or hitchhiked between Sydney and Melbourne in the 1950s and early '60s, often living in places dubbed Muttering Lodge and Junior Muttering. Just as Graeme Bell and other traditionalists had a meaningful connection with painters like Sydney Nolan and Albert Tucker, the modernists attracted a later generation of artists, photographers and filmmakers.

Two focal points were Jazz Centre 44, upstairs in a circular building in Melbourne's St Kilda - whose exact plot is now occupied by a circular McDonald's - and Sydney's El Rocco, which was in a Kings Cross cellar. Some of Stirling's earliest jazz playing was in the St Kilda-based band of saxophonist Brian Brown. This included the drummer Stewart Speer, who became a figure of legend in both jazz and rock.

Also in that band was pianist David Martin, who became an aeronautical engineer, working on the Concorde, among other things. Martin remained perhaps Stirling's closest friend.



The pianist David Martin, perhaps Keith Stirling's closest friend, pictured here (left) with the American singer Anita O'Day, and the promoter Horst Liepolt (right), in 1981... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Keith Livingstone Alexander Stirling was born in the Melbourne suburb of Coburg, the son of musical parents, but grew up in Reservoir, a very remote suburb at the time.

Before he ever played professionally, Stirling travelled regularly to Martin's Ormond home to play duets for hours at a time, sometimes staying overnight and starting again in the morning.

Stirling's Melbourne/Sydney see-saw went on for many years. He also played in Adelaide and Perth. In 1978 he moved to New York where the great alto saxophonist Lee Konitz became a latter-day mentor. A friendship also developed with Herbie Hancock. Both were devotees of Japanese Buddhism.

As well as being a great jazz stylist, Stirling was a leading session player. For 17 years he was in Georgie Fame's Australian band. During one of his Sydney sojourns Stirling played in the first production of *Hair* at the Metro Theatre, Kings Cross. The band, a meeting of leading rock and jazz musicians, was directed by John Sangster.

For several years Stirling played in the Sydney nightclub Chequers with drummer John Pochée, pianist Chuck Yates and bassist Andy Brown. They backed Carmen McCrae, Tony Bennett, Stevie Wonder and others. Returning to Melbourne in 1970, he played in the Channel Nine Orchestra near the end of the Graham Kennedy-Bert Newton partnership.

Stirling was not resistant to rock'n'roll. When Miles Davis began using electronics and funk and rock rhythms, Stirling declared, "Miles is at the spearhead of music today." He was one of the few trumpeters who understood what made Davis's playing successful in that context. Many rock musicians admired him.



Stirling was chosen for the trumpet role in Donald Banks's Nexus when it was played by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Stirling was chosen for the trumpet role in Donald Banks's *Nexus* when it was played by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra at Sydney Town Hall, with Don Burrows on flute and saxophones.

The list of distinguished musicians with whom Stirling had musical relationships, brief or long-lasting, is extensive.

I first heard him at the fabled Jazz Centre 44. The sessions were in the afternoon, and from the windows you could look through the tops of thick, dry palm trees that are there still to the struts of the big dipper at Luna Park.

Stirling wore the soft jumpers and the college boy haircut favoured by some jazz musicians at the time. I thought he had something of Chet Baker about him. His playing was intriguingly soft, somewhat dark and burnished, while the other trumpeter, the older Keith Hounslow, had a bright and projected sound. Like Miles Davis (who was his idol, along with Clifford Brown), Stirling developed power and range a little later than most trumpeters.

I asked him if he ever had trouble coming in on the right beat after a tricky drum break, as I did. He shook his head seriously. No. Never. Then he and Brian Brown looked at each other and smiled wryly. Then he gave me some advice. He was more than kind.

Stirling is survived by his wife, Marlene, and son Carlos.