

## OBITUARY: JOHN McCARTHY 1930-2011

by Dick Hughes with Bill Haesler

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The Australian Jazz Convention, which is devoted almost exclusively to the older forms of revivalist jazz, is held every year in a capital city or country town. The highlight of the fifth convention (1950), the first held in Sydney, at Ashfield Town Hall, was the clarinet carving contest, on December 28, between Geoff Kitchen, veteran sideman with Frank Johnson's Fabulous Dixielanders, and a relative Sydney newcomer, John McCarthy.

The tune being played was *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*. When the time came for the clarinet solo, Kitchen stepped forward and took two spirited choruses. Then came McCarthy with three choruses, not as technically polished as Kitchen's, but tougher and harder. Kitchen returned to the fray and the "clarinet chase" went on for ten minutes with the newcomer eventually emerging as the victor. McCarthy had been a leading light in the Sydney jazz world for three years by then but that night he established himself on the national scene.

John McCarthy was born in Sydney on January 6, 1930. As a teenager, he fell in love with jazz after seeing the films *Syncopation* (1942) and *Sweet and Low-Down* (1944), featuring Benny Goodman, one of his idols.



*From left, Keith 'Honk' Atkins, John Sangster, Keith Hounslow and John McCarthy outside Prahran Town Hall, Australian Jazz Convention, 1948.*

However, whereas most clarinettists who are influenced by Goodman leave it at that, McCarthy dug deeper and listened to those who had influenced Goodman, especially the New Orleans masters Jimmie Noone and Johnny Dodds. His interest in jazz deepened in his last year at school, St Benedict's on Broadway, Sydney. He said he never knew how his mother had saved enough to buy him a clarinet but she did. He later also learnt to play alto, tenor and soprano saxophone.



*Front-line of the Riverside Jazz Band, December, 1950, L-R, John McCarthy (clarinet), Keith Scanlan (trumpet), Jack Parkes (trombone)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

There is no record of who McCarthy's first teacher was but he mainly taught himself - well enough to play with the Riverside Jazz Band, which appeared at several concerts organised by promoter Bill McColl.



*John McCarthy (left, on clarinet) with L-R, Ken Flannery (trumpet), Ray Price (banjo) and Doc Willis (trombone)... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD*

Melbourne bandleader Frank Johnson remembered McCarthy's performance at the Sydney convention and in mid-1951 invited him to Melbourne to replace Geoff Kitchen, who had just left the Fabulous Dixielanders. This arrangement didn't work out and McCarthy, who was homesick, was back in Sydney the next week.

In 1953, McCarthy joined the Port Jackson Jazz Band, the leader of which was trumpeter Ken Flannery, a musician McCarthy had long admired. It included the guitarist/banjoist Ray Price, who, although he was the group's motivating force, punctiliously insisted on the title of "musical director".



*The guitarist/banjoist Ray Price: he was the group's motivating force, but punctiliously insisted on the title of "musical director"... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

Flannery had steady work with the ATN Channel 7 orchestra and Price brought the trumpet master Bob Barnard up from Melbourne to work with the band and the Ray Price Trio. The trio played at the Macquarie Hotel in Woolloomooloo, one of the hottest jazz spots in Sydney and, in 1958, when Barnard returned to Melbourne, McCarthy took his place.



*John McCarthy (left), pictured here with trombonist John Costelloe ... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

McCarthy was with the Port Jackson Jazz Band when it opened at the Sydney Stadium in October 1960 for a Lee Gordon jazz festival that included American stars such as Dizzy Gillespie, Coleman Hawkins, Teddy Wilson, Jonah Jones and Sarah Vaughan. By this time, John Costelloe was on trombone and the Ray Price Quartet played four nights a week at another top jazz spot, the Adams Hotel's Tavern of the Seas on George Street.

The Ray Price Quartet (with Wally Wickham on string bass) also recorded *A Moi De Payer* - which no one in the group could pronounce so they called it *The Pay-Off* - in early 1962 and it was then recorded as *The Pay-Off* by several overseas bands.

Graeme Bell, who had been living in Sydney since 1956, formed his All Star band in mid-1962 and McCarthy was soon the clarinettist. This was one of the greatest bands that ever played in Australia and Louis Armstrong pricked up his ears and beamed when he heard Barnard's trumpet with them as the Armstrong band arrived at the Sydney airport in March 1963.

Members of the Armstrong band went to hear the Bell band at the Adams and McCarthy was delighted when Armstrong's clarinettist, Joe Darensbourg, expressed admiration for his style and said he would easily hold down a top job in the US.



*Louis Armstrong's clarinettist, Joe Darensbourg (pictured here) expressed admiration for McCarthy's style...PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA*

McCarthy travelled extensively with the Graeme Bell All Stars and it was while he was with them that he decided to become a professional musician - instead of a clerk in the Department of Lands. The decision paid off and in 1974 he was with the Bob Barnard Jazz Band, with which he played in Davenport, Iowa, at the Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival.



*The Bob Barnard Jazz band, L-R, John Costelloe (trombone), Lawrie Thompson (drums), Barnard (trumpet), Wally Wickham (bass), McCarthy (clarinet), Chris Taperell (piano)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

He was also an outstanding success at the Barnard band's performance at the Pizza Express in London in 1979. The band went to the Edinburgh Festival the same year and met several American greats, including Earle Warren, a Count Basie stalwart who played reed instruments.

When it came time for a clarinet solo on *Mood Indigo*, Warren deferred to McCarthy. McCarthy's last regular job was with Geoff Bull's Olympia Jazz Band in 2006. Then he retired but still gave a few lessons.



*McCarthy: a modest and amiable man who was one of Australia's greatest jazz musicians...*

John McCarthy was a modest and amiable man who was one of Australia's greatest jazz musicians. He is survived by three wives, Norma, Joy and Geraldine.