

RON FALSON: CRASH HOT JAZZ PLAYERS

Quotes compiled by Eric Myers

[There is no separate interview with the trumpeter/arranger/composer Ron Falson in John Sharpe's book "Don't Worry Baby, They'll Swing Their Arses Off: The Stories of Australian Jazz Musicians", but there are a number of quotes from an interview that Sharpe must have done with Falson. Those quotes appear in a number of chapters towards the end of the book. This article also includes quotes from Falson which are in Sharpe's subsequent book "I Wanted to be a Jazz Musician", published in 2008.]

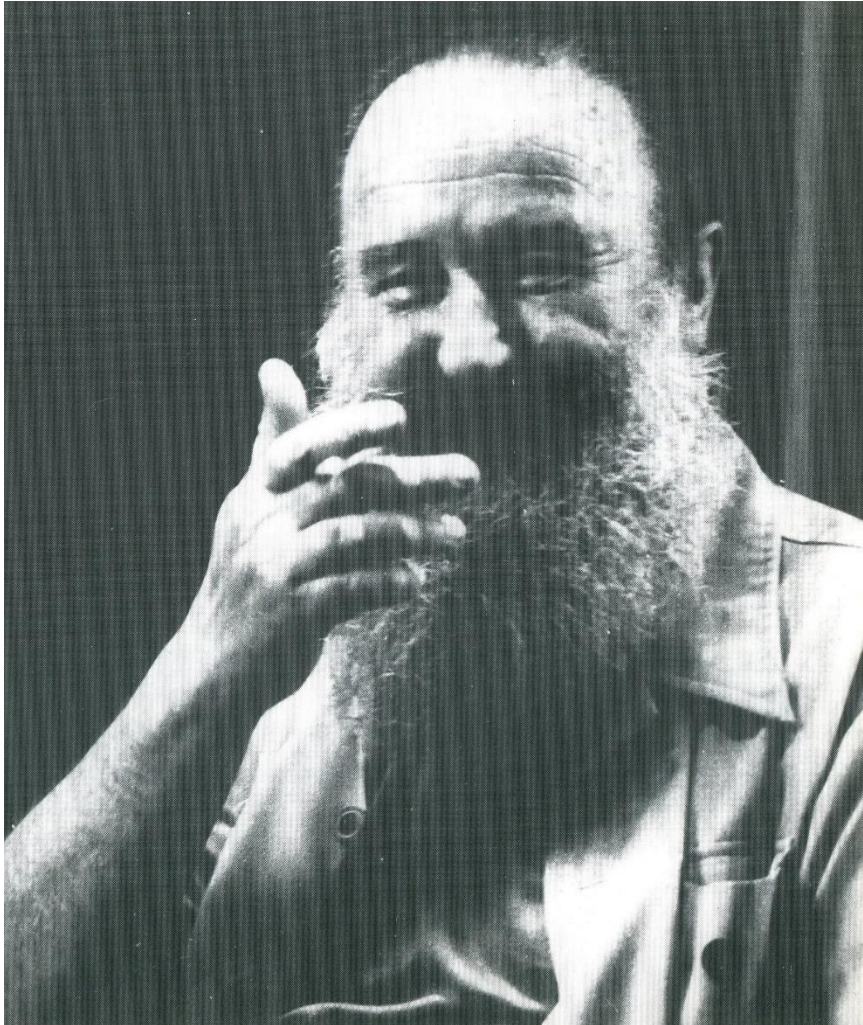


Ron Falson, the arranger: being young we thought we were crash hot jazz players... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

The following comes from the chapter entitled "John Sangster" (p 227)

Ron Falson: There are a million stories about John Sangster. He, at one stage in his career, had a very strange little car, a three-wheeler, which he called a Humphremobile, or something, after a cartoon character in America. It was very

small but John used to get around in it with his tymps, drum gear and things in the back. One day it stopped, just stopped in William Street, not far the Museum, going up the hill towards the city, towards Park Street. And there it was. So he got out and took a cab to work. This is when the parking police weren't so strict and the car was there for two weeks. I guess there were stickers on his bonnet when he eventually got the NRMA to come and have a look. He told them "I just can't get it into gear, it won't go into gear". So they pull up the seat and they found about five or six empty rum bottles that were jamming the gears (laughs), that's the only reason the car wouldn't go (laughs).



John Sangster: when his Humphreymobile stopped in William Street, not far the Museum, going up the hill towards the city, towards Park Street, he got out and took a cab to work... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

The following comes from the chapter entitled "Bombs, Bob Hope and Bougainville" (p 233)

Ron Falson: I guess we were pretty lucky because our bandleader, Les Welch, was a good businessman and he got these jobs at the American Red Cross and the American Naval Hospital. We had quite a lot of work in those days, playing mostly

jazz which was appreciated by the American servicemen. They encouraged the kind of music we were trying to play by dancing and listening to it. This was lucky for us



Bandleader Les Welch: he was a good businessman who got these jobs at the American Red Cross and the American Naval Hospital... PHOTO CREDIT DAVID WELCH

because that's all we wanted to play. We were able to avoid playing in any of the Australian establishments at that time where, from previous experience in the surf clubs, they wanted barn dances, gypsy taps and the old-fashioned music with straight melody things which we found quite boring. Being young and as we thought crash hot jazz players, anything but jazz was out of order as far as we were concerned.

The following comes from the chapter entitled "Guns, Girls and Gambling" (p 258)

Ron Falson: The nightclubs in Sydney in the 1940s weren't licensed. You had to order your beer before you went there so that each nightclub would have a great big carton of beer or whatever under the name Joe Smith, and another of scotch whisky under Bill Brown. They used to get away with it like that and every now and then they'd get caught by the licensing police, but it just went on and on, every nightclub did it in those days.

I was at the Roosevelt one night when it was raided, well not exactly raided. What happened was the musicians were standing around the kitchen when they were having their break because the band room at the Roosevelt was non-existent. So we were standing in the kitchen talking, telling lies I suppose, and a cab pulled up outside the door and the cab driver was a brother of the drummer Johnny Blevins. His brother says, this guy, his passenger, wants to buy some beer. So right-oh we'll get him some beer. So we got a bag full of beer—big bottles—and one by one the musicians passed this along out to the door. John Blevins was the last one at the door, and as he handed them to the guy, this guy says "You're under arrest for selling illegal alcohol" (laughs). This policeman was in the back of the cab pretending to be a client. He had asked the cab driver to take him to where he could get some grog which the driver innocently did. So he arrests Johnny and takes him to the local police station at Darlinghurst. Abe Saffron, the owner of the Roosevelt had to go and bail him out so that he could play for the floor show—get him out of the prison (laughs).



Drummer Johnny Blevins, pictured here with the American bandleader and vibist Lionel Hampton: when Blevins was arrested, Abe Saffron, the owner of the Roosevelt had to go and bail him out so that he could play for the floor show...

PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

The following also comes from the chapter entitled "Guns, Girls and Gambling" (p 264)

Ron Falson: A lot of the nightclubs were either run by or frequented by underworld characters. Some of the names escape me or are best forgotten. But one night at the Celebrity Club the owner Joe Taylor was called outside and somebody shot him—this is while we were inside. Joe was a gambler and a fringe person who also had shares in Thommo's Two-up School, the largest two-up game in Australia. At least they had the decency to shoot him outside. At another club in Sydney one guy was shot inside in front of the band.



At the Celebrity Club, L-R, Ron Falson (trumpet), Don Burrows (clarinet), Billy Walker (piano), Joe Singer (drums)... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

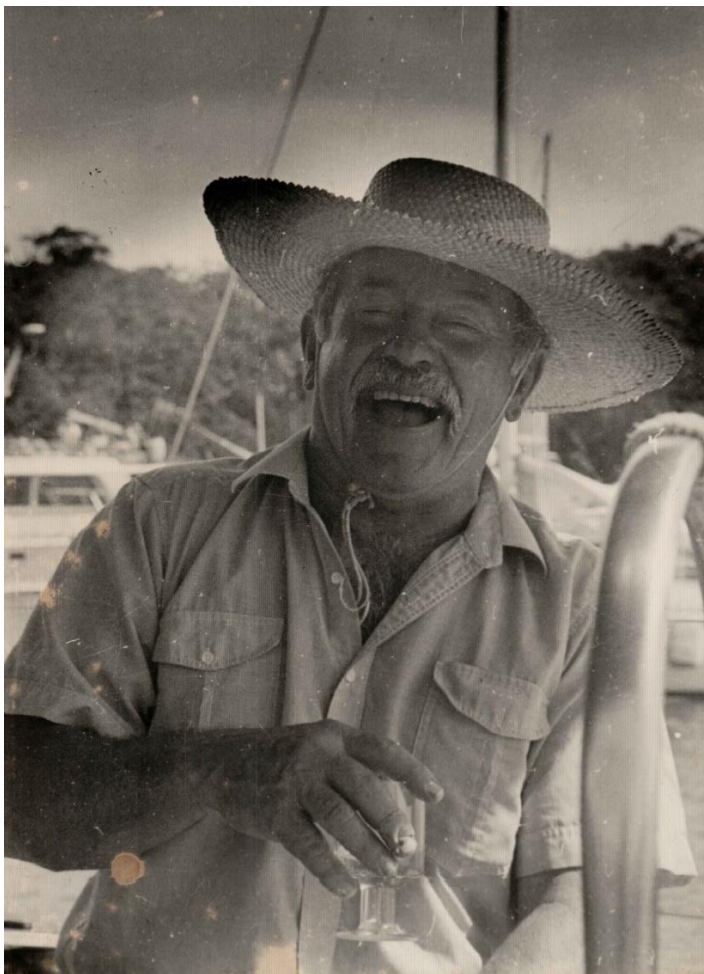
There were some pretty hair raising experiences. There was a club at North Bondi called The Golden Key which I didn't actually work at but I sat in with the band a few times. About half of the clientele were gangsters. I think that was where they all congregated, sort of like check your guns at the door. One night there was an argument at this table and somebody pulled out this great big gun. The moment the gun hit the table the band jumped out of the window. One after another getting away They are not very brave, musicians. I was sitting in that night. I didn't go back again (laughs).

The following comes from the chapter entitled "Jazz Education" (p 273)

Ron Falson: It's a difficult question because there are some very fine young jazz players that have come out of the Sydney Conservatorium from the jazz course there. I'm not firmly convinced that they wouldn't have been just as good if they hadn't gone there. I've actually heard more of them in Perth than I have here because I judged one of the final years in the jazz course over there. But the ones that I hear all

sound the same to me when they first come out. Maybe they develop their individual styles afterwards. They are taught chord substitutions and things like that but no one mentions heart—everything seems to be done mechanically and I just don't like that. There are plenty of fine jazz players going around the place who didn't learn that style. I think I know what they're doing but they're just playing on chord substitutions, I don't think they're playing by ear and I think jazz is a playing by ear music. I think of Louis' description of playing jazz—playing a tune like I think it should be played—simply I guess, melodically.

Another thing, when I look at the music career of young people these days compared with my era it doesn't look as though it is fun. Music used to be fun to us, apart from being our job. I could say that every job I went to I had a damn good laugh or more than one. I see these young guys playing now with hardly a smile on their face—they're so intent or intense. Whatever they're doing, or think they're doing, there doesn't seem to be any fun in it, and that's a shame. They may have fun after the job but we used to have fun on stage. There was always something to smile at, like the way somebody danced past perhaps or just so many other things to laugh at. There was always something funny happening. To play music well, you have got to enjoy it—apart from getting some money which, by the way, isn't very much.



A laughing Ron Falson: we used to have fun on stage... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

The following, on early Sydney nightclubs, comes from the chapter entitled “Coda” (p 291)

Ron Falson: Just immediately following the war there was a lot of black money around and people had this cash money to spend in the dozens of nightclubs in Sydney. They were all different styles with different size bands. My first nightclub job was a place called the Parkview at Bellevue Hill and the bandleader was John Grant Best who was on piano with Johnny Cerchi on saxophone and Joe Singer on drums. The nightclub was built of imitation stone like a grotto and it looked like you were going downstairs into a cave. The decor was practically nil. We just played jazz—no written arrangements - and the people seemed to like drinking their black money away on the beer and stuff that they sold there at outrageous prices.

Among others, I played at Romano's and Prince's. They were very, very high class, plush with chandeliers etc. They had very good waiters. You'd get three waiters to a table and there were never any problems—if somebody would drop something, a patron, or more rarely, a waiter—the waiters would descend from everywhere to clean it up. There was no 'tough luck it's your job'; they all helped. They were very well run and marvellous establishments, but a bit stuffshirt as far as we were concerned.



The notorious Abe Saffron, who ran the Roosevelt: Falson was invited to his birthday parties... PHOTO COURTESY DAILY TELEGRAPH

Then I went with the Craig Crawford band to the Roosevelt which was run by Abe Saffron who was pretty notorious in those days. I guess he has calmed down since. I'm quite friendly with him still and have been invited to his birthday parties. Quite a lot of strange things happened there. In all the nightclubs in those days and in the

theatres too, I believe, it was traditional on the last night of a show to play a few gags. Nothing to disrupt the show but if they were funny you'd just do them. At the Roosevelt this particular night, the last night of a show, there was a juggler who juggled flaming batons. He used to throw them around—very spectacular with the lights out. The trouble was the bass player who had a crazy sense of humour got a soda syphon and as fast as this fellow would light these things and throw them, the bass player would go out with the soda syphon and put the flames out. The place went into complete darkness and the juggler dropped the batons on the floor. We thought it was funny. I don't know about the management or the juggler.

Then to the Celebrity Club run by Joe Taylor, another notorious character. Again it was with a small group which this time was a cooperative with Don Burrows on clarinet and saxophone, Joe Singer on drums, Ron Hogan on bass, Bill Walker piano and myself on trumpet. The vocalist was Betty Lester, one of the Lester sisters. We were there for quite a while and we played nothing but jazz—jazz all night, we hardly played any written music. That was a marvellous job—just to be paid for playing jazz to a good audience and playing for the floor show. After that we went to Andre's, the same band but this time Don Burrows became the bandleader. But we still did the same thing, played jazz. They were very good periods in my life—playing very satisfying music with good musicians. I don't think that sort of thing happens these days.



At the Celebrity Club run by Joe Taylor, another notorious character, the small group was a cooperative with Don Burrows (right) on clarinet and saxophone and Ron Falson (left) on trumpet... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

The following, on touring with American artists, comes from the chapter entitled "Coda" (p 304)

Ron Falson: I toured Australia with quite a few of the big names. The biggest I suppose was Frank Sinatra who I toured with three times. There was also Sammy Davis Jr, who I toured with two or three times, Johnny Ray, Nat King Cole, Billy Daniels, Mel Tormé, Ella Fitzgerald, Buddy Rich and his big band and his small band. I played solos with each of the Stan Kenton and Lionel Hampton orchestras when they came. So that was a pretty good time of my life.



Frank Sinatra: he was very good to musicians, always friendly... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

Sinatra was very good to musicians, always friendly, not on a one-on-one basis but we always felt that he supported us. I don't think I would have liked to be a personal employee of his but, as far as general musicians were concerned, he treated us very well.

During their tour the Kenton and Hampton bands were on the same bill for a concert at the Sydney Stadium one night. The saxophone player Dave Rutledge was also playing in both bands. Now Dave can be very forgetful. His wife drives him to the stadium, he gets out of the car, waves his wife goodbye, walks inside and goes to the dressing room. No saxophone. His wife has driven off in the car with it and he had no idea where she'd gone. He didn't have a saxophone. Now this is before mobile phones, and panic sets in. Luckily there was a girl saxophonist named Elsie Smith, in Lionel Hampton's band—quite a fine player too. She offered to loan Dave her saxophone. Well, girls wear lipstick. Dave played the saxophone and when his wife came to pick him up she said "Where did that lipstick on your mouth come from? What have you been up to?" And he said "I've just been playing the saxophone" (laughs). A likely story, but that's a true one.



Dave Rutledge, here pictured on clarinet in 1979: where did that lipstick on your mouth come from?... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

There was a particularly nasty aspect to the Lionel Hampton tour. One of his American negro trumpet players, I suppose we call them black these days, took a great objection to me playing jazz. Lionel Hampton told me this afterwards. This guy was very nasty and for nearly the whole of the tour he was trying to goad me into a fight. He was almost to the stage of knifing me. Hampton said this guy thought the black people owned jazz music and that a white person shouldn't be able to play it. He also intimated that maybe they weren't getting enough of their regular drug—marijuana—and they were drinking more than they normally would which made this guy particularly nasty. I didn't enjoy that part of the tour very much.



L-R, Ron Falson (trumpet), Eddie Williams (trumpet), Lionel Hampton (vibes) at the Sydney Stadium, 1950: there was a particularly nasty aspect to the Lionel Hampton tour... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

Stan Kenton was a great guy who didn't ever pull the bandleader act. He was always one of the boys, or tried to be, which is a bit dangerous with Australian musicians if you try to keep up with them and their drinking (laughs). They're notorious I guess. The last night of the tour was in Newcastle. Now I'm talking about 35 to 40 years ago and in those days there were very few aeroplane flights to Newcastle. While Stan Kenton was taken up in some sort of limousine, the band went up in an old double decker bus. It went around that old winding road near Moonie Moonie and the Hawkesbury River which was pretty hair raising at the best of times in a car, let alone in an old double decker bus with a wide open rear platform. After the concert that night Stan Kenton decided he'd go home with the boys in the bus and not with the VIPs in the limousines. He appointed himself guardian of the rear platform and having had a few beers on board some of the guys found the need for a toilet. There wasn't one on the bus so the easiest way was to go on to the back platform and just as you go around a curve let it go. My recollection of Stan Kenton is of him holding on to these guys coats so they didn't fall off the bus (laughs). Honestly, what a memory to have of somebody you admired for all those years. I've never forgotten that. What a great guy Stan Kenton was.



Ron Falson (left), pictured with American bandleader Stan Kenton... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

Johnny Ray, the American singer, was quite a character too. He was quite a scatterbrain. One Saturday, before the matinee at the Sydney Stadium, they couldn't find him. He had disappeared. The promoter, Lee Gordon, said "Come on guys we've got to go and look for Johnny Ray". So all the musicians and a few of his minders are out scouting for him. We found him playing cricket in the park at Rushcutters Bay



Johnny Ray: he disappeared before the matinee at the Sydney Stadium...

with a lot of local kids (laughs). He'd just gone over there and saw this game. Had probably never seen or played cricket before and decided to join in. I don't think the local kids knew who he was because I don't think many people knew Johnny Ray at that stage. That particular tour made him in Australia. I didn't like his singing very much but he really was a great entertainer.

Eric Myers writes: The following is an excerpt from John Sharpe's 2008 book "I Wanted To Be a Jazz Musician" in a chapter entitled "Interests Outside Of Music" (pp 237-240). The interview apparently took place in 1998.

Ron Falson: My interest in photography began before I ever played a musical instrument and it has continued throughout my life, becoming a second string profession. I had a camera and an enlarger from an early age and have always done my own black and white processing. There was a time when the camera went with me everywhere.

During the 1950s I was often a member of the pit orchestra backing the international artists Lee Gordon brought out for shows at the Sydney Stadium. Looking up at the performers I was in a great position to record them photographically. During the rest bars in the trumpet charts, and making use of the stage lighting, I was in a unique position to catch candid shots. When I was on stage playing with the Stan Kenton and Lionel Hampton bands my wife Gill took photos from her seat in the front row.



Ron Falson's shot of Sammy Davis Jr on stage at the Sydney Stadium in 1955...
PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

Mixing with the artists in the dressing room provided the opportunity for casual informal photos. Being in the right place at the right time allowed me the chance to gather a collection of photographs to be treasured, and I am now sorting through them for posterity. I could still spend hours and hours a day in my darkroom if time permitted. There are plenty of things to do there to keep me occupied.



At the Sydney Stadium in 1960, L-R, George Golla, Dizzy Gillespie, Bryce Rohde, Ed Gaston... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

I have worked as a freelancer taking publicity 'stills' for New Theatre, Newtown, and the Phoenix Theatre Company, who held an exhibition of my work in the Willoughby Library. I have several record cover credits, including those of jazz musicians Don Burrows, Graeme Bell and Ray Swinfield. Some of my photographs of local and international musicians have been used in publications such as music biographies and histories.

I am currently compiling albums of musicians' photos taken during a very long career for the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra. Growing up near the sea in Clovelly provided great opportunities for water sports. swimming, surf lifesaving and water polo. Sailing has been another life-long passion. I learned to sail when I was about six years of age and the interest continued until eventually, in 1967, I was able to have a small yacht built to accommodate our young family. We raced, Opus 1, on Botany Bay where I was a founding member of the Botany Bay Yacht Club. In subsequent larger yachts, Opus 2 and 3, I raced successfully in short ocean hauls with the Cruising Yacht Club of Australia, Rushcutters Bay.



Graeme Bell's Skiffle Gang in 1957 with the American singer Johnny Ray, L-R, Geoff Kitchen, Bill Townsend, Bell, John Sangster, Jeff Mack, George Assang (aka Vic Sabrino), George Thompson... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

Over the 14 years our boat was moored there many wonderful times were spent with family and friends, exploring the magnificence of both Sydney Harbour and Pittwater. Having been a keen sportsman when I was young, representing at high school level in both rugby and league, I enjoy watching test cricket, rugby and the 'round ball' game. To support my sons who played, I became a soccer coach and referee for a time. I have another great interest. With a fine cellar, I enjoy wine tasting to excess. That can take a lot of time!



Falson: with a fine cellar, he enjoys wine tasting to excess... PHOTO CREDIT GILL FALSON