

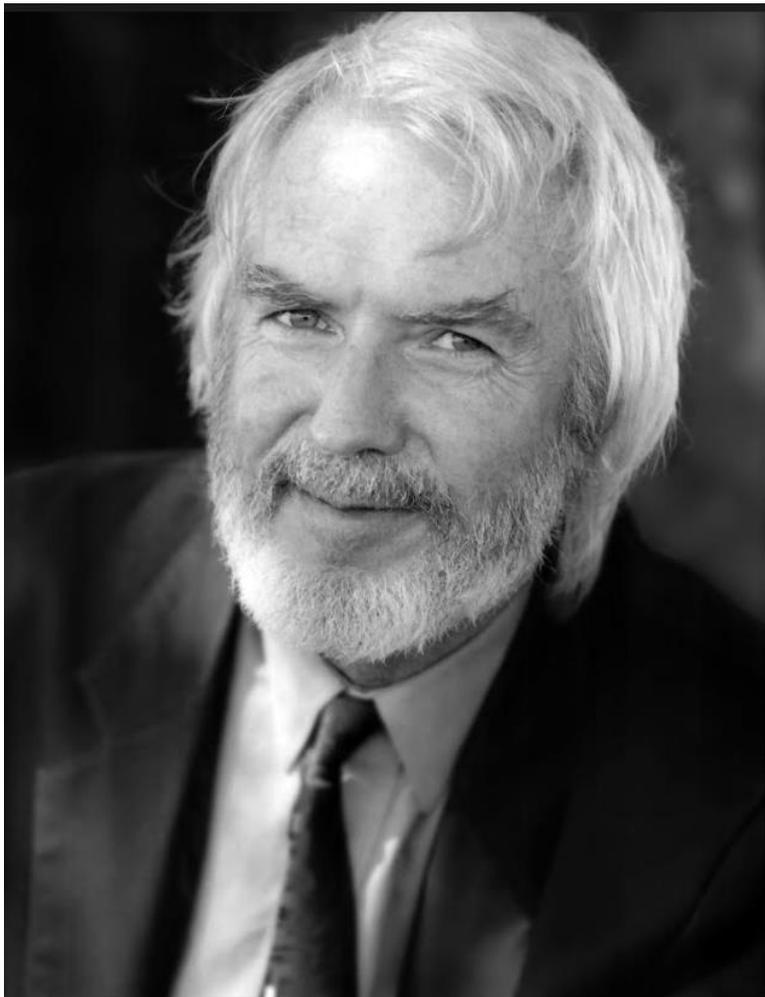


OBITUARY: JOHN POCHÉE 1940-2022

by Eric Myers

This appeared in the December 2022 edition of the Music Trust's e-newsletter Loudmouth, and can be read there at this link

<https://musictrust.com.au/loudmouth/obituary-john-pochee-1940-2022-a-giant-of-australian-jazz-has-passed-away/>



John Pochée: drumming language at a high level...

“John Pochée is a drummer. He has aspirations to no other role. He has shown what it can mean to be a drummer; that there is a certain nobility in this calling. Pochée is in the very vanguard of an elite group of drummers in clearly and forcefully projecting a complete musical concept. Through leading and/or playing in some of our most important ensembles, Pochée has influenced the sound of contemporary Australian music - jazz in particular, but not exclusively jazz - as much as any living musician. A feature of his style is the sudden contrast between expansive, complex rhythm patterns and straight time, expressed minimally as scarcely more than a ticking, yet generating terrific propulsion. He is one of the few drummers who can develop a solo compositionally. The sounds and textures of his drumming are uniquely musical. This is drumming language at a high level.”

-the late John Clare, Sydney music writer

“Pochée as a player has developed a uniquely distinctive jazz voice that is immediately recognizable and solidly in the great jazz tradition but that is nevertheless warmly Australian. His musical style has, along with the depth and maturity one would expect from a figure with his musical stature, a larrikinism that appears to be definitively Australian. Pochée's intuitive understanding of composition and musical structure make him one of the most exceptional drummers in the Australian jazz scene. The feeling one has when playing with him in the rhythm section is that he is always there before the soloist.”

-Sylvan “Schmoe” Elhay, Adelaide jazz saxophonist



John Pochée in 1986: his intuitive understanding of composition and musical structure make him one of the most exceptional drummers in the Australian jazz scene... PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

“John is one of the truly great Australian musicians who deserves the highest accolade for his enormous contribution to Australian music. As a drummer, John has consistently been an innovator and a virtuoso who, along with a handful of others has led the way for modern jazz drumming in Australia. John’s playing is very spontaneous and is a great example of the true meaning of improvisation. He has the ability to lift the music to a level way beyond the mundane, with his tremendous energy and creativity, while always remaining true to the musical form.”

-Sandy Evans, Sydney jazz saxophonist & composer



Sandy Evans: John’s playing is very spontaneous and is a great example of the true meaning of improvisation.... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY IMPROVISED MUSIC ASSOCIATION

The jazz musician and bandleader John Pochée was born in Sydney on September 21, 1940, and died in Sydney on November 10, 2022, aged 82. Of the contemporary jazz musicians active since WW2, few were more significant than he. He began his working life as a journalist at the *Sydney Morning Herald* but, by the time he was 18, had committed himself to music at a time in the late 1950s when modern jazz in Sydney was in its infancy.

In many ways Pochée's whole musical career reflected the dichotomy between the popular but arguably safe music of an earlier generation of modernists centred around Don Burrows which emerged after WW2, and the music of a slightly younger generation which emerged ten years later during the 50s. While Burrows' music to a great extent reflected the swing era of the late 1930s, and later resembled the smooth West Coast styles emanating from the US, Pochée and musicians such as alto saxophonist Bernie McGann, and pianist Dave Levy preferred jazz with a much harder edge and looked to the music of African American groups such as Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers coming out of New York. They congregated first at a small venue in Newtown the Mocambo but, as early as 1958, performed at the El Rocco in Kings Cross, which became the centre for progressive jazz during the 60s.

While Burrows and his colleagues dominated Australian jazz for many years, more adventurous groups associated with Pochée often struggled for recognition. This situation transpired until the 1980s when arts funding authorities increasingly recognised the artistic worth of groups such as the Bernie McGann Trio and The Last Straw, and levelled the playing field.



*L-R, Pochée and pianist Dave Levy, performing at The Basement in 1975 in an early version of The Last Straw; bassist Jack Thorncraft is obscured behind Levy...
PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE*

The groups which included Pochée were always a who's who of highly creative musicians, whose activities were championed in the media by the influential critic John Clare. The Heads for example, active in the mid-60s, included pianist Dave MacRae and saxophonist Bob Bertles, as well as McGann, and was a precursor to the later Bernie McGann Quartet.



Pochée (right) and saxophonist Bernie McGann (left) performing with The Heads at the Fat Black Pussycat in Melbourne in 1964 ... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POCHÉE

In the 70s Pochée was for five years a member of the hard-hitting Judy Bailey Quartet which toured internationally with Australian government support. In 1974 Pochée formed his own hard-bop quintet The Last Straw, which lasted for 25 years until 1999.



The Judy Bailey Quartet in the 1970s, L-R, John Pochée, Bailey, Col Loughnan, Ron Philpott, ... PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE



Pochée's quintet The Last Straw, which existed from 1974 to 1999, L-R, Tony Esterman, Lloyd Swanton, Ken James, Bernie McGann, Pochée... PHOTO COURTESY TONY ESTERMAN

In the 80s, with an increasingly sympathetic context for more innovative jazz, two groups with Pochée on drums came to the fore: the Bernie McGann Trio and Ten Part Invention (TPI).



The Bernie McGann Trio, L-R, John Pochée, McGann, Lloyd Swanton...

TPI owes its existence to far-sighted arts festival director Anthony Steel who wished to have an innovative jazz component on the program of his last Adelaide Arts Festival in 1986. It was he who commissioned Pochée to form Ten Part Invention to perform at the festival.



Adelaide Arts Festival director Anthony Steel, who commissioned John Pochée to form Ten Part Invention...

It was always Pochée’s dream to create a band with the loose, flexible rhythm section characteristic of a small group, with original music written for brass and saxophone sections over the top by talented composers within the band.

As Pochée quipped in 2017 when accepting the APRA/AMCOS award for Distinguished Services to Australian Music, “I got sick of listening to *A String of Pearls*”. Those compositions which most characterised the original sound of TPI were written by Roger Frampton, who died in 2000, Miroslav Bukovsky and Sandy Evans, both still with the band today.



John Pochée, on the night he received the 2017 APRA/AMCOS Art Music Award for Distinguished Services to Australian Music... PHOTO CREDIT TONY MOTT

Pochée was able to take TPI's unique music into the international arena. A 1994 tour in South East Asia was followed in 1998 by the Philippines, China and Taiwan. In 1997 the Bernie McGann Trio performed at the prestigious Chicago Jazz Festival. Pochée took TPI to the same festival in 2004, going on to gigs at universities and jazz clubs, and performing at the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC.



The classic Ten Part Invention line-up, back row L-R, Sandy Evans, Steve Elphick, John Pochée, James Greening, Ken James, Warwick Alder, Bob Bertles; crouching in front, L-R, Miroslav Bukovsky, Roger Frampton, Bernie McGann... PHOTO COURTESY SHIRLEY POCHÉE

Pochée said that Ten Part Invention “had to be a band with no egos, and where everyone was there for each other”. Even though the group was full of musicians who led their own bands, and some key members such as McGann and Ken James died, Pochée kept this band together for over 30 years.

Brilliant replacements were always found, including pianist Paul McNamara, and saxophonists Andrew Robson, Paul Cutlan, Matt Ottignon and John Mackey. TPI is still performing on occasions today, with its iconic brass section intact: trumpeters Miroslav Bukovsky and Warwick Alder, plus trombonist James Greening.

A significant outcome of the TPI phenomenon was the emergence of the band’s rhythm section, called The Engine Room, as a unique force in its own right. In 1989 Roger Frampton (piano & saxophones), Steve Elphick (double bass) and Pochée (drums) toured the Soviet Union, the first Western group to appear there since Glasnost.

As guests of the Soviet Jazz Federation for three weeks, the trio was embedded in Soviet jazz culture, and did countless concerts, jazz education workshops, and jam sessions with leading Soviet musicians in various cities. Frampton was celebrated as a giant of jazz piano while Pochée, courtesy of his unique style - he was a left-handed

drummer playing on a right-handed kit – mesmerised the best drummers in the Soviet Union.

At the Petrozavodsk Jazz Festival “Jazz 89”, the trio was sumptuously celebrated. A perceptive local jazz identity Iosif Semjonovitch, described the music of The Engine Room in glowing terms. “In the music of the Australian trio I saw a beautiful culture,” he said. “It was not only technique, not only the co-ordination of the musicians, not only beautiful music, but culture. We have very good musicians in the Soviet Union, but we do not have this culture - the way the musician lives in the music, the way he understands it. In the trio’s music I saw the great civilisation of jazz.”



The Engine Room in performance at the final Moscow concert of the 1989 tour, in the Union of Soviet Friendship Societies building, L-R, Roger Frampton (alto saxophone), Steve Elphick (bass), John Pochée (drums) ... PHOTO CREDIT ERIC MYERS

The 1989 tour of The Engine Room was so successful that Pochée was able to arrange for his quintet The Last Straw to do a similar tour the following year in 1990.

With his own bands and the Bernie McGann Trio Pochée won five ARIA and five 'MO' awards. He was elected to the Montsalvat Jazz Festival Roll of Honour in 1996. At the Australian Jazz Awards in 2006 he was the third inductee into the Graeme Bell Hall of Fame for career achievement. In 2008 he delivered the sixteenth annual Bell Jazz Lecture at Waverley Library, Sydney. On Australia Day 2014 he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for services to the arts as a jazz musician.

In 2011 Pochée ceased playing with TPI and the drum chair was taken over by Dave Goodman. For three years he continued to lead a group called The Space Cadets, which was dedicated to bringing along promising younger musicians. Owing to deteriorating health he ceased playing entirely in 2014.

During following years Pochée battled ill-health on a number of fronts, including peripheral neuropathy and asthma. In his later years he had a number of falls and on more than one occasion, after being admitted to Emergency, was at death's door, and expected to die overnight. The two Shirleys (his wife and his sister both known as Shirley Pochée), would be called in to say their last goodbyes, only to discover that, the following morning, Pochée not only had survived, but was bright as a button, cheerfully acknowledging congratulations from all those in attendance.



John's wife Shirley Elizabeth Pochée (known professionally as Shirley Smith): called in to say goodbye, only to discover that, the following morning, Pochée had survived... PHOTO COURTESY THE INTERNET

In his declining years he sorely missed many of his buddies who had passed away: drummer Barry Woods, who died in 2011, saxophonist Ken James (2012), and drummer Alan Turnbull (2014). He told me often how terribly he missed those three musicians in particular. I do not suppose that I am the only person in the jazz community who received his prolific emails, full of passionate opinions. I am already missing them; they were arriving regularly up till the very eve of his recent hospitalisation.



In his declining years John sorely missed many of his buddies who had passed away: drummer Barry Woods (left, who died in 2011), saxophonist Ken James (below, who died in 2012), and drummer Alan Turnbull (far below, who died in 2014)... JAMES PHOTO CREDIT TOMAS POKORNY; TURNBULL PHOTO COURTESY DAVID MARTIN



I first met John circa 1970 – over 50 years ago - when the showband I was with, Henry Hess and The Skyliners, took a six-nights a week gig on the Gold Coast backing the aging comedian Stan Bourne. Then playing keyboard bass on a Farfisa organ, I found myself with Pochée in a rhythm section of two, with a front line of Miroslav Bukovsky (trumpet), George Barna (saxophones) and the late Ken Tait (trombone).

This was a “reading” band with a chart for every tune we played, so we needed a drummer who could read. Pochée, then on a break from his gig as MD with the cabaret act the Four Kinsmen, was available for three months so we hired him. Henry and I, who co-led the band, were somewhat concerned, as our new recruit had a reputation as something of an *enfant terrible*. Needless to say, we need not have worried. Pochée did a splendid job and one of the first things he did was to reorganise and re-number our books of charts for each instrument, making it considerably easier for all players to find the relevant music.



Pochée: an amazing ability to create whirling energy, what John Clare called “terrific propulsion”... PHOTO COURTESY JOHN POCHÉE

I once wrote somewhere that playing in a rhythm section with Pochée on drums was “an experience not for the fainthearted”, which caused some mirth in later years when this comment was brought to his attention. Of course I was referring not merely to his immaculate time, but also to his amazing ability to create whirling energy when it was called for, and make the rhythm section fizz with what John Clare called “terrific propulsion.”

In early November, 2022 Pochée had a fall in his apartment and was taken by ambulance to Prince of Wales Hospital where a serious brain haemorrhage was diagnosed. He was placed in ICU in an induced coma, but never regained full consciousness and died on November 10. He is survived by his wife Shirley Elizabeth

Pochée, his sister Shirley Pochée/Bagwell, his daughter Lani Welling, and two grandchildren Emily and Jack.

Lloyd Swanton, the bassist who played alongside Pochée for many years in both the Bernie McGann Trio and The Last Straw, expressed on Facebook feelings widely shared by members of the Australian jazz community: “So sad to hear of John's passing. What a man, irrepressible and irreplaceable. A volcano of energy on stage and off. Gregarious, hilarious, larger than life. So many stories. I will miss you dreadfully mate.”



Lloyd Swanton, performing in Leningrad in 1990 with The Last Straw... PHOTO CREDIT EVGENY RASKOPOV

A shorter version of this obituary by Eric Myers appeared in The Australian on November 19, 2022, and can be read on this website at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-23>