

DICK HUGHES

by Clement Semmler*

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I can't remember exactly when I first met Dick Hughes. Perhaps about 1957, though it may have been earlier, but I think at the Macquarie Hotel where he was playing with Bob Barnard and Ray Price. It was pretty exciting for the faithful few of us in those days to think that at last, in Sydney, you could hear such jazz in pubs.



Dick Hughes at the piano: not only a terrific jazz pianist, but a journalist and a university graduate to boot... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM



** When this article was written for Jazz Magazine in 1982, Clement Semmler was formerly Deputy Chairman of the ABC, and writing on many subjects, including jazz, for The Bulletin.*

But our paths had crossed in a sort of way some years before that. In the early 1950s when I was in charge of radio programs for the ABC, a very bright lass who had worked in my department as a program planning officer and had gone to London to pick up a few ideas from the BBC, wrote me that she had met over there a very clued up young bloke, who wasn't only a terrific jazz pianist, but was a journalist and a university graduate to boot, and he could get me some marvellous interviews for Eric Child's Saturday morning show.

This must have been about 1953 because a year before I'd met Eric in Brisbane along with Darrell Miley and Ian Neil who were there in those days, and I'd arranged for him to start his national jazz show then.

Anyway, Dick went ahead and with the co-operation of the BBC recorded some of the best jazz interviews I'd ever heard. There were Billie Holiday, Teddy Wilson and others, and I remember one in particular with Marian and Jimmy McPartland that was a beauty. (Funnily enough I caught up with Marian a couple of years later at New York's Birdland where she was on the same bill as my old Adelaide mates, Jack Brokensha, Bryce Rohde and the rest of the Australian Jazz Quintet. She remembered Dick and that interview quite well.)



Jimmy & Marian McPartland: Dick Hughes's BBC interview with them was a beauty...

As a matter of fact I was so impressed with these interviews I seriously thought of offering Dick a job in the ABC Talks Department as a radio interviewer and reporter when he came back — until I heard him at piano. After that I wouldn't have changed his career for worlds. Incidentally, he continued his radio interviewing with great success.

In Paris in 1954 he met up with one of his idols, Sidney Bechet, listening to him night after night at the Vieux Colombier and striking up a friendship with him. Eventually, with the help of RTF (the French equivalent of the ABC) he got Sidney into a studio and did a marvellous interview.

There's a strange parallel to that. About the same time I was in New York paying nightly visits to a jazz dive in 46th Street, striking up a similar friendship with Henry

“Red” Allen who was leading a wonderful group there including Buster Bailey and Claude Hopkins. Red was intrigued that I knew so well an old track of his called *It Should Be You*. Anyhow I persuaded the BBC’s New York office to give me a studio, and Red came down from Harlem and did a great interview which, like that of Dick Hughes, was heard in Eric Child’s program.

In the late 50s and early 60s, before the heavier cares of ABC office caught up with me, I used to trail around the various jazz spots and see and hear a good deal of Dick. He became and remains for me one of the few jazzmen I’d go out on a cold night to hear — he probably more than most. I remember some happy nights at Adams Hotel where he played superbly with John Sangster, John McCarthy and others, and also a roaring stint at the Ling Nam, then in King Street.



Port Jackson Jazz Band, 1958, at Macquarie Hotel, Sydney, L-R, Doc Willis (trombone), Bob Cruickshanks (alto sax), Ray Price (banjo), Bob Barnard (trumpet), John McCarthy (clarinet), Dick Hughes (piano),... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

Dick would be one of the best natured and most genial of jazz men I’ve ever met — in the category of Wild Bill Davison, Jack Lesberg, Graeme Bell, Don Burrows and people like that. I got into the habit of asking him to play and sing *Every body Loves My Baby* which I honestly believe he does as well as Fats Waller did, but always in his own style. Not that that sort of praise would be new to him — there was an occasion when a homesick negro seaman heard him singing and playing *Flat Foot Floogie* one night and said, “Man, I couldn’t hear better in Harlem”, or words to that effect.

Another time, in those earlier years, I remember Douglas Fleming, the BBC man in Australia (who was nuts about trad) was in our party listening to Dick playing at his best and one thing led to another and he (Dick) invited us around to his pad later in the evening. Well, it was in the small hours when we remembered this, but we imagined him waiting for us, so we headed for Darling Point at about 2 am. Somehow we got into his room and he was fast asleep. But he woke up, produced some cans of beer, a player and some records and we had a session till dawn's early light. Now, even Southern hospitality couldn't beat that!

Years later I was hosting a small party at the Journo's Club where Dick was playing, I think with Bruce Johnson on trumpet. There was a bit of dancing going on, and my daughter, who had a thing about my Dorsey Clambake Seven recording of *The Music Goes Round and Round*, asked me if I thought Dick could play that. I thought it unlikely but I said I'd give it a go. He not only played it — it brought the house down and suddenly the whole dining room was dancing and singing it.

That's one of the secrets of Dick Hughes' popularity and success — he's perhaps the most infectious jazzman I've ever known. When he gets to that piano it's an involvement of Hughes, piano, audience and if he's in a group, his fellow-musicians, all in one — an empathy that's quite remarkable.

Dick's success in top jazz company on the concert platform are too well-known for me to have to re-chronicle, but I remember a night when this empathy was almost mind boggling. It was the last Sydney night of that incredible Eddie Condon, Pee Wee Russell, Bud Freeman group that Kym Bonython brought to Australia in 1964. (My God, just think of them, there was also Vic Dickenson, Dick Cary, Cliff Leeman and Lesberg — the Australian jazz concert-going population should have been put in jail for not giving Kym greater support than he got with that lot.)



Dick's group which included John McCarthy and John Costelloe (both pictured above) and Bryan Kelly, opened the show, and ran hot that night... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Anyway, Dick's little group of McCarthy, Costelloe and Bryan Kelly which opened the show, ran hot that night, and despite their distinguished partners-in-concert, almost carried the night in one number, *Tin Roof Blues*, which was absolutely fantastic.

Of course none of this is, or should be surprising. Dick had a jazz upbringing par excellence, as he would admit in his impeccable French. What could have been better than the Melbourne boys he ran with in his youth — the Bells, Ade, Bill Miller, Tony Newstead, Willy McIntyre (his mentor), George Tack, Wokka Dyer, Smacka Fitzgibbon and the rest. Melbourne was the cradle of Australian jazz in the 1940s, make no mistake about it, and these musicians did much to inspire the early Jazz Conventions where Dick played so notably too.

Since then he's rubbed shoulders and played with some of the best jazzmen in the world — in England, in France, in the USA. He's one of the most, if not the most, cosmopolitan of Australian jazzmen, and this is reflected in his playing anytime, anywhere.

Dick Hughes is always generous in his praise of his fellow musicians. Yet he himself good-humouredly deprecates any suggestion of his own greatness. Well, it's about time the record was set straight. In a lifetime of listening to jazz pianists on record and in the flesh all over the world, I consider he ranks with most I've heard. He has few peers in Australia.

At any rate, from Mike Nock and Rohde to Taperell, or from Johnny Adams, Jack Allen, Graeme Bell to Col Nolan, Dick Hughes sits in the top echelons, playing his way, memorably and truly, into Australian jazz history.

Last year, in a jazz article in *The Bulletin*, I referred to Dick "outstriding Fats Waller". In a Christmas card to me he obviously thought it was a joke. It was no such thing. As a stride pianist Dick Hughes is simply superb — that style where in his own words... "the left hand maintains a steady, unrelenting, roaring bass while the right hand smashes thirds and rips off clusters of notes."

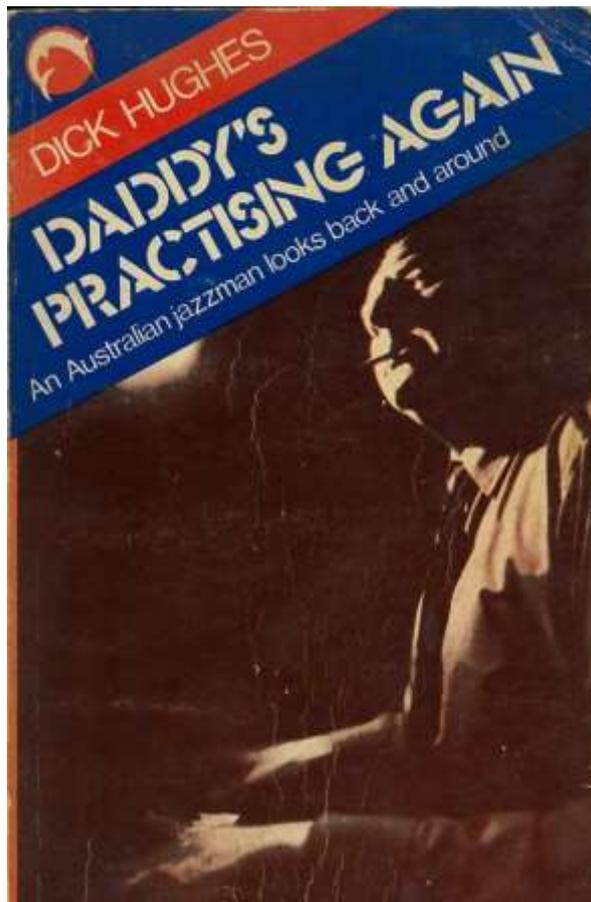


The pianist Mary Lou Williams, from whom Dick took lessons in London in 1954...

There may be a very good reason for this. Among the masters of this style, such as Waller, Joe Turner and the rest, is Mary Lou Williams, especially in her earlier work. If you listen to some of her tracks like *Night Life* and *Drag 'Em*, you'll see what I mean. Well maybe when Dick took lessons from Mary Lou in London (as her only pupil) in 1954, a few important things stuck. And when he combines his exciting stride piano with his unique singing, well frankly I think he's capable of outstriding all corners.

Not for a moment that that's the limit of his piano style. His lyrical, meditative and blues work is as polished in execution as it is emotionally moving in its context. If you listen to tracks like *Winin' Boy Blues* and *Blues Serenade* on his Festival LP of piano solos you can be in no doubt about that.

His contributions to Australian jazz as a performer have been matched by his work over three decades as a jazz journalist, critic and reviewer — all this, it should be stressed, as a part-time occupation since Dick is a full-time newspaperman by profession. A few years ago he capped all this with his jazz memoirs, *Daddy's Practising Again*, which I regard as one of the most entertaining books in the whole literature of jazz. You have to go back to Condon's *We Called It Music* and the Shapiro-Hentoff *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya* for the same ebullience. The only other jazz book I've enjoyed as much in recent years was one, the title of which eludes me for the moment, written about the Scottish clarinettist, Sandy Brown, who died in 1975.



Dick Hughes' memoir Daddy's Practising Again: one of the most entertaining books in the whole literature of jazz...

Interestingly enough, Dick played on and off with Sandy Brown in 1954. He categorises him, quite unequivocally, as “Britain’s best”. That’s another thing I admire about Dick Hughes as jazz critic and journalist. His judgements are spot on, and even if they mightn’t meet with everyone’s agreement, his wealth of experience can produce convincing evidence. Of course Bud Freeman is the greatest of the white tenormen (a conclusion I had come to when I heard him in the flesh for the first time at Condon’s in Greenwich Village in 1955). Of course Pee Wee Russell was the greatest of the white clarinettists. Ditto. Of course Bob Barnard is in the world’s top ten of jazz trumpets. And so on.

But Dick’s shrewd and individual jazz judgements, which always distinguish his weekly jazz columns, can go into the lesser-known by-ways of the music. For instance years ago (he may even have forgotten this) he wrote some sleeve notes for the EMI disc of *Three Strings and a Dash*, that marvellous combination of Mick Fowler with his nose trombone, Wally Ledwidge and Jack Craber, plus Bob Barnard. Dick wrote, inter alia, that the record included “some of the finest jazz trumpet ever put down on record in Australia”, and that one track, *Honeysuckle Rose*, was “one of the most relaxed jazz recordings ever made in this country.” Well, if you listen to this album you know that once again he is in the ten-out-of-ten class. (Personally, I believe this record is, or should be, a collectors’ piece I wouldn’t part with my copy for a thousand bucks.)



Jack Craber, pictured in 1977: he played on Three Strings and a Dash, a record which should be a collector’s piece... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Anyway, there it is. Time, place and circumstances have meant I’ve seen much less of Dick Hughes in his many stints in recent years, but I’ll catch up with him again, sometime, some place. At least, praise be, I know he’s around. In the meantime I quote Bill Haesler’s words of ten years ago: “Few Australian jazz musicians have contributed so much to Australian jazz music as Dick Hughes”. But that, as I say was ten years ago. What is owed in 1982, I can only say, is getting near the proportion of the national debt!