

OBITUARY: BRIAN BROWN 1933-2013

by John Shand*

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World music slant ... Brown later left jazz behind...

Brian Brown was a mould breaker in every sense. Here was a musical revolutionary who became a gatekeeper, establishing the jazz studies course at the Victorian College of the Arts and running it for two decades. That duality ensures a legacy as one of Australia's most important improvising musicians.

Brown's first revolution was to replicate America's ferociously driving hard bop jazz style of the 1950s in mild-mannered Australia. His second was to try to make modern jazz that escaped the thrall of the American model. His third was to abandon his beloved saxophones and move away from anything that was recognisable as jazz.

**John Shand is a playwright, librettist, author, journalist, drummer and critic. He has written about music (and occasionally theatre) for The Sydney Morning Herald for over 24 years. His books include Don't Shoot The Best Boy!: The Film Crew At Work (Currency), Jazz: The Australian Accent (UNSW Press) and The Phantom Of The Soap Opera (Wizard). His website is www.johnshand.com.au.*

Brian Brown was born on December 29, 1933, in post-Depression Melbourne's down-at-heel Carlton, the second child of Lesley Brown, a labourer, and his wife, Eileen. Nine years later, Lesley went to war and never returned, dying in a prisoner-of-war camp.

Brown attended Northcote High School until he was 15, and played cornet in the Northcote Municipal Band. He heard Graeme Bell's group in his late teens and found the emotion in their playing "a revelation". Cue instant conversion to jazz, whereupon he took up the saxophone.

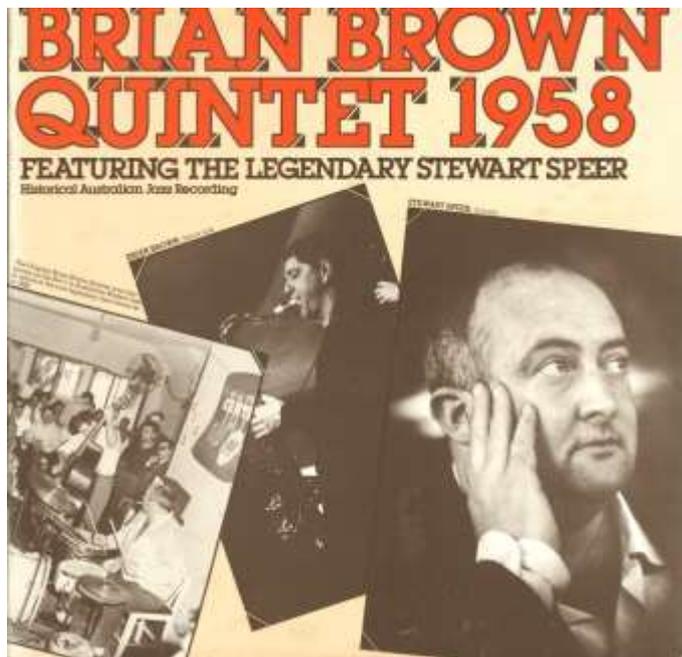


Burning saxophone ... Brian Brown favoured original compositions and produced his own take on American jazz... PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

On a trip to Britain in the mid 1950s, Brown bought two hard bop records. These were like tapping into the source for a man who viewed what Australia's modernists were playing to be "a white copy of a white copy".

Back in Melbourne he linked up with the trumpeter Keith Hounslow, who introduced him to the great drummer Stewart Speer. Brown had intended to go to the US, but after hearing Speer he realised he had all he needed at home.

The result was the formation of the first of 12 Brown-led bands, completed by David Martin (piano), Barry Buckley (bass) and his own burning tenor saxophone. They really lit the fire of hard bop at St Kilda's fabled Jazz Centre 44 from 1957. Brown's take on the music almost immediately assumed an Australian slant, with such original compositions as *Digger's Rest*. His zeal for original material was not fully shared by his colleagues, however, and the group disbanded in 1960, the year Brown married Nicole Phillips.



Front cover of the classic 1958 album featuring the quintet that performed at Jazz Centre 44...

Brown had belatedly matriculated at night school and now completed a bachelor of architecture at Melbourne University, while working at night in the Channel Nine Orchestra. He subsequently worked as an architect for three years.

By 1964, he had a new quartet and, across the decades, many prominent musical names passed through Brown's bands. They left many albums and national or international tours in their wake.

Brown's compositional ideas and group sound deviated ever more from American jazz during the 1960s, until by the 1970s, what he was doing was unique. This architect became more interested in the music's drama than its structure, as he sought to stimulate interactive improvisation. He added flutes and soprano saxophone to his arsenal in the 1970s, and gradually discarded the tenor. He also embraced electric instruments and influences from rock, world and classical sources. Indeed, he ceased to call his music "jazz" at all.

Despite this, Brown set up the jazz course at the VCA in 1980, which he ran for the next 18 years. About 600 young musicians were exposed to his ideas on group performance via the weekly Workshop class. By this time, his marriage had disintegrated and he fell in love with Ros McMillan, who would become head of music education at Melbourne University, and they married in 1980.



Ros McMillan, who would become head of music education at Melbourne University, married Brian Brown in 1980...

In 1993, Brown was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia, about which time his oeuvre evolved again, as pan pipes, synthesisers and blow horns became his instruments of choice for creating ambient soundscapes. Following his 1998 retirement from the VCA, he became a prolific CD maker, although much of this material was of modest interest.



Brown on soprano saxophone in performance with the Adelaide pianist Ted Nettelbeck: by the end, he had more or less burned up his creativity and achieved his ambitions...

Brian Brown died at home from a sudden heart attack on January 28, 2013 and is survived by Ros and his daughters Katya, Chantal and Pascale. By the end, he had more or less burned up his creativity and achieved his ambitions - an ideal epitaph for an artist.