

RAY MARGINSON: HIS EARLY DAYS IN JAZZ

by Ken Simpson-Bull

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At 87 years of age our former Chairman, Ray Marginson AM, was recently interviewed for the Victorian Jazz Archive. Ray's involvement with the formation and running of the Archive is already well-known and documented. However, some fascinating stories of his early activities related to Ray's favourite passion emerged which should be transcribed.



Ray Marginson (left), pictured here with the Melbourne entrepreneur Diana Allen...

Ray first became aware of anything resembling jazz while he was still attending the East Kew Central School. He recalled seeing Hollywood films at the Rialto Picture Theatre which featured watered-down swing like *Tuxedo Junction*. The first jazz record he bought was Will Bradley's *Down the Road A-Piece*, but it was in 1942 at the University of Melbourne that, with his good friends Ray Bradley and John Campton, he discovered improvised jazz. The University had a large collection of imported jazz records that had been donated by the American Carnegie Foundation, and thus Ray was able to study the world of jazz, which was largely not then possible through locally available records or dedicated radio programs.

The occasional jazz records which were released locally were highly sought after and Ray remembers gathering at Sutton's Music House with his friends to hear the weekly release in the Rhythm-Style Series and then adjourning to the nearby London Tavern Hotel to discuss its merits. Ray became a "jazz purist" as he described himself and got involved with the University Rhythm Club, putting on lunchtime record and live band sessions in the Union Theatre and convincing the University Union to use

the Bell Band for some of its dance functions. (Ray had first met Graeme Bell and Don Roberts at a coffee shop where they played.)

Record collecting: Ray soon became a record collector (remember they were 78s in those days) and recalls fossicking, with his mates Ray and John, through second-hand shops and the like in his search for recorded jazz. Some of his finds were remarkable. For instance he once picked up a rare Fletcher Henderson (*When You Do What You Do* with its remarkable solo by Louis Armstrong) for just sixpence.

In 1943 Ray got to meet Australia's best-known jazz record collector, disseminator of jazz, and later washboard player, Bill Miller. Bill had left Melbourne Grammar in 1932 to attend Oxford University where he became interested in jazz and amassed a huge collection of international jazz records which he brought with him when he returned to Melbourne in the late 30s. (This collection is now in the vaults of the VJA.) Ray remembers an occasion at Bill's place with friends. Looking up at a Melbourne Grammar oar, mounted above the fireplace, which Bill had won in a "Head of the River" event, Ray said, "You've got the old oar up there, Bill." "No," he replied, "she's in the kitchen making the coffee."



Bill Miller: Australia's best-known jazz record collector, disseminator of jazz, and later washboard player... PHOTO CREDIT NORM LINEHAN

A mud-brick house: It was during 1943 that Graeme and Roger Bell and Peter Glass decided to build a mud-brick house in Eltham. The two Rays occasionally went to the site to help out. On one occasion Ade Monsbrough, who had a dry sense of humour, was there when Gordon Ford hit his foot with a mattock and let out a yell. Ade looked at Gordon and without hesitation said, "Ford Mattocks Ford" (punning the author Ford Maddox Ford).

When the Artie Shaw band arrived in Melbourne in 1943 it was Ray Marginson and Ray Bradley who made first contact with the famous Chicago trumpeter Max

Kaminsky. Max was staying at the Victoria Coffee Palace, a very prim and proper temperance establishment. Ray said they bluffed their way into determining Max's room number (which he was sharing with drummer Dave Tough) and they knocked on his door. They were admitted and, with their passion for jazz and the effrontery of youth, they bombarded Max with questions which he was kind enough to answer. (Apparently Dave Tough, exhausted from his tour of the islands, just lay on the bed and said nothing.) "What I really would like," Max said, "is to get a quart of gin since this hotel is dry." Ray offered to go out to buy one. Fortunately he happened to have some money (for once) and, because he was wearing a trench coat with huge pockets he was able to obtain the gin and return with it to the hotel undetected. Max instantly became a friend for life. It was Ray who phoned to inform Roger Bell who, with Bill Miller, arranged the now historically famous *Ja Da* session with Max. Graeme Bell was in Brisbane entertaining troops at the time and thus missed out on this session, but he later roomed with Max Kaminsky and got to know him well before he returned to the United States.



The American trumpeter Max Kaminsky: a friend of Ray Marginson's for life...

The Artie Shaw band: Max arranged for the two Rays to be invited to the Melbourne Town Hall for an invited-servicemen-only concert by the Artie Shaw band. Although the lads were behind the stage, Ray said that the performance was a memorable experience. The other occasion that Ray heard the Shaw band in Melbourne was the day before, when it played at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. The hospital had been converted to a military hospital during the war and all of the patients had been gathered on the balconies overlooking the north courtyard where the band had been assembled. Ray said that the precision playing combined with Max Kaminsky's occasional hot solos and Dave Tough's exuberant drum work was electrifying. It was in 1943 that Ray became musically involved playing drums with a small group called the Centre-Way Cellar Boys (they recorded an acetate in Centre-Way Arcade). Bill Tope, later guitarist with Frank Johnson, played with them. However, Ray's drum career didn't last long. One night at Lome where the Bell Band had an engagement at the Pacific Hotel, Graeme's drummer (Laurie) Ghost Howells fell from the podium and was incapacitated (Ray suspects he'd been drinking vodka

all day). Roger Bell looked back at Ray and said, “Well, come on, get up.” Ray got behind the drum kit (his own ‘kit’ had been extremely limited) and played his first fully professional engagement. At the end of the first bracket Roger looked at Ray and said, “Can’t you even bloody-well keep up!” That was it. Ray realised that he did not have the stamina and experience to perform at such a pace and decided that he wasn’t going to play drums any more.



Ray Marginson and friends, left to right: Charlie Blott, Don Roberts, Max Kaminsky, Roger Bell, Ray Bradley, Marginson.

Jazz for dancing: 1943 was also the year that the Bell band introduced jazz to the Heidelberg Town Hall. Ray said that the hall had wonderful acoustics and that the band was experimenting with two trumpets (Roger and Ade) in the model of the Oliver/Armstrong concept. “People who heard Roger Bell in later life don’t realise what a force he was, driving the band on to additional choruses. He really was remarkable,” Ray said. The Bell’s next engagement was at the Palais Royal, behind the Exhibition Building but now long gone. Ray was a fixture on the floor in front of that band also and firmly believes that it was at these two venues that the Bells honed their stagecraft.

Ray related the way he “corrupted” his brother Max into jazz, who then founded the Melbourne High School Jazz Society. Max proceeded to wear-out Ray’s 78 collection, along with his mates from school which included Geoff Kitchen and (Ray thinks) Nick Polites. Max took up clarinet for which, being a second hand A flat instrument, Don Roberts made a special brass fitting to re-tune it to B flat. But the mouthpiece was so heavy it nearly wore his jaw off. Around the time of the formation of the Eureka Jazz Club, Max took a good look at the life-styles of the jazz musicians and decided to give up thoughts of becoming one of them and instead became a scientist.

Ray remembered 1945 as being the year of the Eureka Youth League, and the Uptown Club where one wasn’t allowed to drink on the premises so everyone drank out in the lane! Ironically, whilst you weren’t allowed to drink you were allowed to

smoke. By the time of the 50th anniversary in the Eureka Hall you were allowed to drink but not to smoke! On another occasion Don Roberts borrowed a Harley Davidson motorbike which he drove through the front door of the Uptown Club and broke his leg. “That’s why Geoff Kitchen and not Don Roberts is on the first Regal Zonophone recordings of the Bell Band,” Ray pointed out.



Pixie Roberts (top left), pictured here in 1948 with Roger Bell (top right) and Graeme Bell (bottom)...

The Jazz Convention: The first Jazz Convention in 1946 is very big in Ray's memory. Although it was not widely publicised it was very, very popular and Ray made many great friends there which included Tom Pickering, Ian Pearce, and C Ian Turner who took over the long running *Jazz Notes* from Bill Miller and George Tack, whose family owned the Tai Ping Café at St Kilda junction that many will remember. “They had the best dim sims in Melbourne!” Ray said.

In 1947 Betty and Ray were married, and because flats were almost impossible to obtain unless one had influence or lots of money, the newly married couple were lucky enough to take over the flat in South Yarra that Graeme and Roger Bell vacated when they embarked on their first overseas trip. For the next few years Ray concentrated on his employment and the purchase of their first house (at Lower Plenty) and so dropped out of the jazz scene for a while. Oddly, this is the very period

that so many of the present volunteers and supporters of the Jazz Archive were most active. Visits to Sydney however did keep him up with Dick Hughes and others at Soup Plus, Don Burrows, and Graeme Bell now playing with his All-Stars, while in Hobart Ray caught up with Ian Pearce and Tom Pickering. In addition he maintained contact with the Eltham scene, giving jazz talks to the Eltham Art Group.



Eddie Condon (pictured here) and his group were playing at Jimmy Ryan's in New York where Max Kaminsky was also playing...



At the Rainbow Room at the Rockefeller Center, Marginson and Bradley were sitting only six feet from Johnny Hodges (pictured here)... PHOTO CREDIT LEE TANNER

Touring the USA: Jumping forward to 1968, Ray was appointed an Eisenhower Fellow which gave him the opportunity of studying in the United States subjects related to his field of interests. Ray drove 12,500 miles (20,117 kms) over some nine months while attending 250 separate appointments. Along the way he soaked up a fair bit of jazz. Functions he remembers were the Condon Group at Jimmy Ryan's in New York where Max Kaminsky was playing. At the time, Max was flogging his book at every opportunity and Eddie Condon nicknamed him "Max Buy-de-book".

Another wonderful experience in New York that Ray well remembers was to hear Duke Ellington play in the Rainbow Room at the Rockefeller Center. Ray (along with his old friend Ray Bradley who was visiting the US at the time) was sitting only six feet from Johnny Hodges and the rest of the band. "It was a magical night," Ray said. 'We bought an obligatory bottle of crook French Red and paid a fortune for a pretty-awful meal. We were just beginning to enjoy ourselves and [the waiters] came up to us and said the first session was over, and they kicked us out."

Visiting Tulane University, Ray was able to spend nine days in New Orleans where he got to know Armand Hugg (the pianist) very well. He also met George Lewis and others at Preservation Hall. Armand Hugg gave Ray a recommendation to Joe Darensbourg whom, a few days later, he was able to meet and hear playing on the paddle steamer at Disneyland in Los Angeles.



Collections manager Mel Blachford (left) talking to Ray Marginson. Photograph taken at the Yarra Yarra Jazz Band exhibition, VJA, 2010...

The Victorian Archive: Back in Australia (not to mention a visit to London) Ray kept up his interest in jazz right up to the present time. As mentioned, his passionate involvement with the formation of the Victorian Jazz Archive is well-documented. What is not so well-known are the many items of memorabilia and rare acetate recordings that Ray has deposited with the Archive. For instance, his complete life-time collection of 78s is now in the vaults and there are his LPs and many files and photographs to come. Ray is in good health and the Archive can hopefully look forward to many years of his continuing support.