

OBITUARY: TOM BAKER 1952-2001

by Bruce Johnson

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Tom (John Thomas) Baker was born in Oakdale, California, on September 14, 1952, just over 100 miles from San Francisco. He died in Holland, on October 23, 2001, aged 49. Tom Baker began piano lessons at the age of six, with the parental expectation that he would one day become a concert pianist. His interests, however, lay more with contemporary pop, but it was a concert by a US Marines band in San Francisco that turned his attention to brass instruments.

Already with a strong grounding in theory, he looked forward to a career as a band director or music educator, and in high school, given the option of any of the brass instruments, he took up the trumpet at age of 15. He played in the school marching band, and a smaller version, the 'Pep Band', whose repertoire included written versions of jazz standards like *Sweet Georgia Brown*. But it was not until after graduating from high school and while he was attending university, that jazz became the focus of his attention. In the weeks immediately preceding the family's migration to Australia, Tom heard a radio broadcast of a concert by Turk Murphy's band; in particular he recalled them playing King Oliver's *Mabel's Dream*. His conversion to jazz was immediate.



Tom Baker (right) performing at The Basement in Sydney in the eighties with the American cornetist Warren Vaché ...

This unfolded for me as an audience member and as a performer, and it is in the latter capacity, standing on stage with someone improvising a dialogue, that you become deeply aware of how someone's voice is changing, how a developing sensitivity in interaction is proclaiming some kind of growth that goes well beyond musical execution. Tom's evolution was extraordinary and along so many axes. He was soon able to give up his day job at Palings record shop to become a full-time jazz musician - in itself a considerable achievement. Part of the reason for this was his increasing versatility both instrumentally and stylistically. I first heard him as a trumpet player and he had always sung since joining a school choir at the age of 12, but within a couple of years he was also being heard on brass bass in the band led by Ray Price.

By the early 1980s he had added a range of saxophones to his palette, beginning with alto and moving down the registers through tenor to baritone, and with a command and assurance that took this

erstwhile 'dixieland' trumpeter into the Morrison Brothers Big Band sax section. That is, the expansion of Tom's expressive range was stylistic as well as instrumental. Most jazz musicians with a continuing curiosity begin to straddle the stylistic barriers which are largely erected by followers and reviewers. But Tom Baker's amphibiousness was remarkable, and disclosed a profound interest in an enormous range of musics that can be gathered together under the jazz umbrella. He continued to traverse that terrain throughout his career. He formed his first bop group, Groove City, in 1981, but then in 1983, established the first of his Swing Street Orchestras, a seven-piece band that redirected attention back to an earlier phase in the jazz tradition. Most recently, he took up the trombone, with the mellifluousness and drive of Jack Teagarden, and with what seemed to be an immediate facility that took him into Graeme Bell's touring band. Apart from becoming one of the best known and admired jazz musicians in Australia, Tom also developed an equally strong international reputation. He first toured overseas with the band that really established his name locally. His San Francisco Jazz Band made its 'national' debut at the Australian Jazz Convention held in Balmain in 1975, and he



Tom Baker's San Francisco Jazz Band. Tom is seated in front. Rear L-R, John Bates, Hans Karssemeyer, Mal McGillivray, Don Heap, Eric Holroyd, Dave Robison, Paul Furniss.

took it on tour to the USA in 1978, where it was then accorded the great honour of being one of the first foreign bands to attend the Sacramento Dixieland Jubilee.

From the early 1980s he spent increasing amounts of time touring overseas, most frequently as a multi-instrumental guest soloist at such festivals as Breda in Holland, where he worked with a range of other luminaries including Bob Wilber, Ralph Sutton and Major Holley. He was on tour in Europe at his sudden and untimely death from a heart attack. The analogy I made earlier between jazz and conversation serves well in so many ways. We are all aware of the so-called conversationalist whose only interest is in displaying how much more he knows than others in the dialogue. The outcome is not conversation at all, but an exclusionary power game that disrupts the potential for harmonised fellowship, a form of social dysfunctionality. It says a great deal about the Tom's musical magnanimity that he never tried to disrupt the coherence of any band by the kind of intimidation that

is not at all uncommon among musicians with what they regard as superior stylistic insights. Whether working in a bop or traditional setting, his voice was right, was focussed on harmonisation, on making the music work in the best way the materials at hand allowed. Like a good conversationalist, he was a good listener, a player who understood the musicality of self-effacement. Sometimes, indeed, totally so.

In 1987 I produced an anthology of Soup Plus bands for the then owner, James Duprée. He suggested the bands and I invited the bandleaders to nominate the song by which they would be represented. Recording was by no means the relatively inexpensive acoustic business-card it has become with cheaper and more accessible technology. It was a rare and significant career opportunity, to put one's musical voice into the public domain beyond earshot. At this stage Tom had only a few albums to his credit, none of which displayed the stylistic breadth he was developing and which was on display in these live recordings. We listened through the sessions we had recorded with his Quartet and he insisted on one on which he had not played at all, a feature for pianist Vince Genova, simply because he thought it was a lovely performance. This is conspicuous generosity of spirit; I in turn insisted that his group should have another song included.

The word 'dedication' has lost much of its resonance because it is so casually invoked in journalistic hype. One mark of it is that you take your instrument in from the boot of the car after every gig, and you take it out and play it every day, gigs or no gigs. You listen to music with respect and unremitting curiosity, and without ever taking it for granted. You don't apologise for what you play just because it might not have all the hip mannerisms - in fact that is what really makes it richer than hip. And you might get paid for playing jazz, but that's not why you play it. You discover dignity in all music-making, and you have such clarity and honesty about what you play that whatever that style happens to be, it is its own vindication.

As an individual and as a musician, Tom Baker had dedication of the highest order, and the gap he leaves in Australian jazz and its potential is dreadful to think of. Like having our house burgled, we will keep discovering afresh over the years just how much has been taken from us.