

OBITUARY: IKE ISAACS 1919-1996

by Eric Myers

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Ike Isaacs was born into a musical family on December 1, 1919 in Rangoon, Burma. A self-taught musician, he started on piano at an early age and was influenced by his brother Maurice, who played classical violin. He discovered a natural affinity with chord sequences when he decided to play the guitar which his uncle had in the house. He and his three brothers heard swing musicians such as Benny Goodman when they listened to American jazz broadcasts on shortwave radio. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree and intended to become a petroleum technologist. When the Second World War broke out and the Japanese occupied Burma, he went to Calcutta, India and worked in a munitions factory.

During the war he jammed with musicians from the British Army. Through a friend in bomber command he was offered a job in Britain, where he arrived in 1946. In the 1950s he led his own quartet for the BBC's weekly *Guitar Club*, where he was able to work with many distinguished musicians, amongst them the young John McLaughlin. For the 30 years after World War II Ike Isaacs was one of the leading studio musicians in England. He worked with the Ted Heath band for 12 years, and was a founder member of the BBC Showband, led by Cyril Stapleton. He played on dozens of film scores, and worked with singers such as Frank Sinatra. He also recorded under his own name, two of his best-known recordings being *The Music of Michel Legrand* (which sold over 200,000 copies) and an album *Fourteen Great TV Themes*, which was played by a choir of six and 12-string guitars. In Australia in 1992 he issued the CD *Intimate Interpretations*, produced by his nephew, the well-known Sydney classical/jazz musician and composer Mark Isaacs. This CD included music on which Ike had worked all his life, and he regarded it as his personal statement. He never retired, and was planning further recordings.



Ike Isaacs' nephew Mark Isaacs: he produced Ike's CD Intimate Interpretations, which included music on which Ike had worked all his life...PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Described as "a master technician" in the book *Jazz: The Essential Companion*, by Carr, Fairweather & Priestley, Ike Isaacs was the dominant guitarist in English jazz up till the mid-1970s. The director of the Australian Institute of Music, Dr Peter Calvo, says that he knows of no major jazz guitarist to emerge in England after the war who did not come under Ike's influence in one way or another. Guitar students the world over came to know Ike Isaacs through his column "Guitar Forum", which he wrote in the magazine *Crescendo*



Ike Isaacs is probably best-known for his work with the French violinist Stephane Grappelli (pictured here)...

International. It commenced in the 1950s and ran for over 20 years. He also wrote guitar education books such as *Guitar Moods*, which was published in England in the early 1970s and became part of the curriculum at London's Royal Academy of Music. Ike also wrote the book *Guitar Explorations*, based on his *Crescendo* articles, which was later re-published under the name *Jazz Guitar School*. The name *Guitar Explorations* was transferred to his guitar education video, which became a best- seller worldwide.



Ike Isaacs (left) pictured here playing with the American guitarist Wes Montgomery...

Ike Isaacs is probably best-known for his work with the violinist Stephane Grappelli. In 1975 he had a call from Diz Disley, who is credited with reintroducing Grappelli to the British music scene, and this led to Ike joining Grappelli for two-and-a-half years, from 1976-79. The

group played in Europe and the USA, but it was on a tour of Australia, where Ike caught up with an old friend, the classical guitarist Peter Calvo, who ran what was then the Sydney School of Guitar. Calvo offered him the job of setting up the school's jazz department, and Ike and his wife Moira arrived in Sydney in 1981.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s Ike Isaacs was a much-loved member of the Sydney jazz community, and an inspiration to Sydney guitarists, both emerging and established. He performed occasionally, including several tours with the British guitarist Martin Taylor, and continued to teach at the Sydney School of Guitar (which became the Australian Institute of Music in 1987) until 1992. A gentle and humble man he was frequently described by his friends as simply "a great human being". He was unfailingly supportive of young guitarists making their way in a difficult profession. He believed in personal contact and had "open house" in the Sydney suburb of Carlton, where guitarists were always welcome to drop in to play and talk.

After a courageous battle with cancer Ike Isaacs died on January 11, 1996 in Sydney. He is survived by his wife Moira, and brothers Saul, Maurice and Benny.

[Editor's note: This obituary was written in 1995. Since then Ike's brothers Saul, Maurice and Benny have passed away, while his wife Moira is still living, as of April, 2017.]