

OBITUARY: ERIC CHILD 1910-1995

by Clement Semmler*

[Editor's note: Eric Child was born in London on 27/4/10 and died in Sydney on 23/4/95, aged 84. This obituary first appeared in the Jun/Jul, 1995, edition of Jazzchord.]

On a Pacific cruise some years ago I heard to my delight in an evening cabaret show a brilliant clarinetist, Carl Barriteau. I had thought he was killed when a bomb destroyed the Cafe de Paris in London in World War II and killed most of the members of Ken Snakehips Johnson's band. Barriteau's playing with the band I cherished on an old 78 of *Snakehips Swing* and *Exactly Like You*.

Barriteau showed me a shrapnel scar on his forearm - his only injury. He had settled in Sydney some years back and played mainly on cruise ships. Back in Sydney I immediately rang Eric Child with my "discovery". I should have known better. The jazz-wise and omniscient Eric had been in touch with Carl since the latter's arrival, frequently dining and lunching with him. And with good reason too, for Eric, in pre-war years in London as a young drummer, had sat in with this West Indian band on many occasions.



Eric Child: a seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of jazz and jazzmen... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

**At time of writing, 1995, the late Dr Clement Semmler AM OBE was a former Deputy General Manager of the ABC, who was in charge of ABC radio programs from 1950. He introduced jazz programs by Eric Child, Kym Bonython, Arch McKirdy, Ian Neil and others, and arranged regular programs from jazz groups all over Australia – the first on Australian radio. He arranged record-breaking concert tours by Australian jazz bands, first with Graeme Bell in 1949 and later by the Australian Jazz Quintet, Bob Barnard's band, and others. He was then Patron of the Highlands Jazz Club in Bowral.*

This was only one example of Eric's seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of jazz and jazzmen. Was it not he who had dated in those London years a beautiful black cabaret star, Lucille Buchanan-Wilson, starring in an American stage show and told her of his admiration for Louis Armstrong? Lucille hadn't heard of Louis - she wasn't much into jazz - but back in the States, later on, she met and married Louis, much to Eric's great delight.



L-R, Louis Armstrong, Eric Child, Lucille Armstrong: Eric had dated Lucille in London...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM



The cabaret star Lucille Buchanan-Wilson. She later married Louis Armstrong, but earlier dated Eric Child... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Eric was a merchant navy radio officer during the war: his ship was blown up by a Jap sub in the Timor Sea and he was rescued floating on a drum. That was always a joke between us - of course it was an empty oil drum. He was repatriated to Australia and joined our Navy.

When I was in charge of ABC programs during the 1950s, and doing my darnedest, against plenty of opposition, to promote jazz on the air, I heard of an announcer on our Brisbane staff with a marvellous jazz collection. So up I went to Brisbane and met this delightful, unassuming Englishman with a pleasant, unaffected voice who had joined the ABC after some country broadcasting experience. I remember at his home sitting up all night listening



Eric Child in London, 1938...

to his jazz collection – he had records, Blue Note, Commodore and the rest that a jazz lover could only dream about. I immediately offered him a Saturday morning coast-to-coast spot. We called it *Rhythm Unlimited* and jointly picked the theme tune, Benny Goodman's *A String Of Pearls*.



Eric Child (right) pictured with Turk Murphy (left) and Dick Hughes (centre)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Eric never looked back. From March, 1952 the program ran for over 30 years - an ABC record. Moreover, he was a tower of support and help to me during the 1950s and 1960s in getting jazz into prime time evening programs, including his own Friday night show and another that Kym Bonython ran. They were truly the golden age of jazz years on ABC radio - in such a marked contrast to the miserly deal given by the ABC nowadays to jazz as far as program times are concerned. Eric was the ideal jazz broadcaster - quirky, personable, transmitting his own enthusiasms, informative but never boringly so, and with a lovely relaxed presentation that made every program a gem of listening.

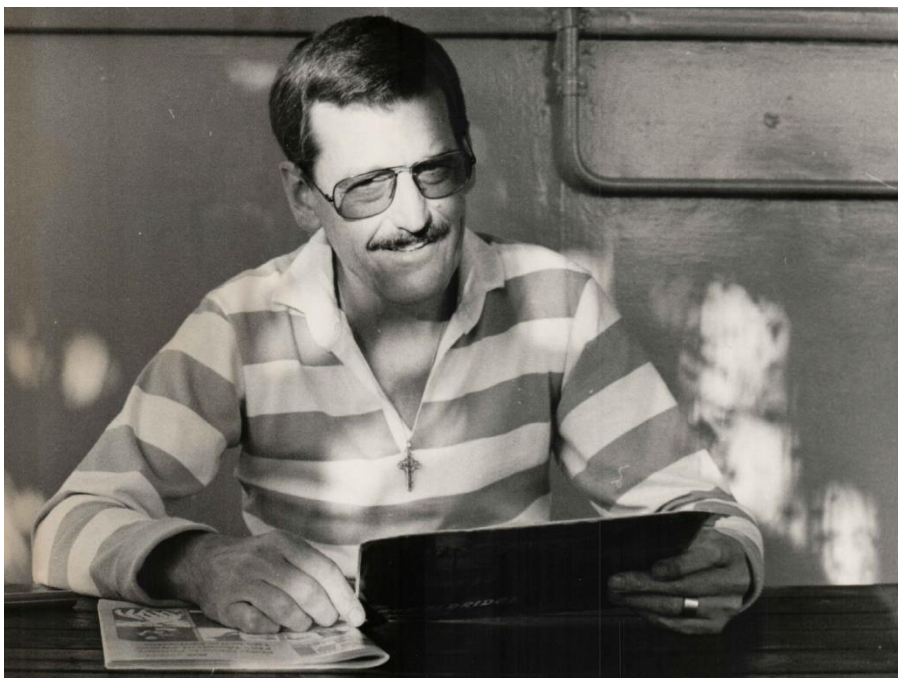
He made friends with, and earned the respect of, almost every Australian jazzman of note as well as the American stars who came to Australia in those years. Graeme Bell composed a

tune in his honour, *This One's For Eric*, which as far as Eric was concerned was better than a knighthood. Blind in his last years, he accepted his misfortune stoically and philosophically, and never lost his spirit - happy that he could still listen to his beloved jazz.



Graeme Bell: he composed a tune in Eric Child's honour, This One's For Eric ...

I doubt if there will ever be another like him. Like so many other jazz lovers I rejoiced in his friendship and most sadly mourn his passing. Jim McLeod's tribute program for him a few



Jim McLeod: his tribute program for Eric Child was beautifully done...

weeks ago was beautifully done, but I hope more substantial recognition by jazz organisations will result in a permanent memorial to a man who made such a magnificent and enduring contribution to the appreciation of jazz in this country.