

## CLEMENT SEMMLER: THE FORGOTTEN JAZZ PIONEER

by Eric Myers

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*[A slightly different version of this article appeared in the September/October 1982 edition of Jazz Magazine.]*

I met Clem Semmler in the early 1980s after I began publishing and editing *Jazz Magazine*. I understood that he had enjoyed a distinguished career at the ABC, and that he was Deputy General Manager when he left in 1977. He had been previously head of ABC radio, TV and overseas programs.

Clem took up with alacrity my invitation to write for *Jazz Magazine*. Accordingly, he wrote exceedingly well-informed reviews of jazz albums that I was glad to send him.

At the time I was dimly aware of his legendary status as a warrior for jazz in the ABC over many years and, as Dr Clement Semmler, was a distinguished scholar and author in his own right.

I also understood that, as a lone voice for jazz, he had virtually singlehandedly and courageously (because of the hostile ABC program climate in earlier years) succeeded over his career of 35 years in giving jazz its due and rightful place in ABC programs.

When I had the opportunity to speak with him for the first time in detail, he filled in the gaps as follows.

For several years from 1940 in Adelaide he compered one of the first jazz shows on the ABC. Later on in Sydney in the early 1950s as chief radio planner he instituted *Thursday Night Swing Club* (he described this as “a revolutionary feat in those fusty ABC days”), giving men like Alan Saunders, Ellis Blain and others, as well as live jazz combos for the first time, a broadcasting opportunity.



*The Graeme Bell band pictured in 1947: they toured Australia in 1949 courtesy of ABC Concert Management... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

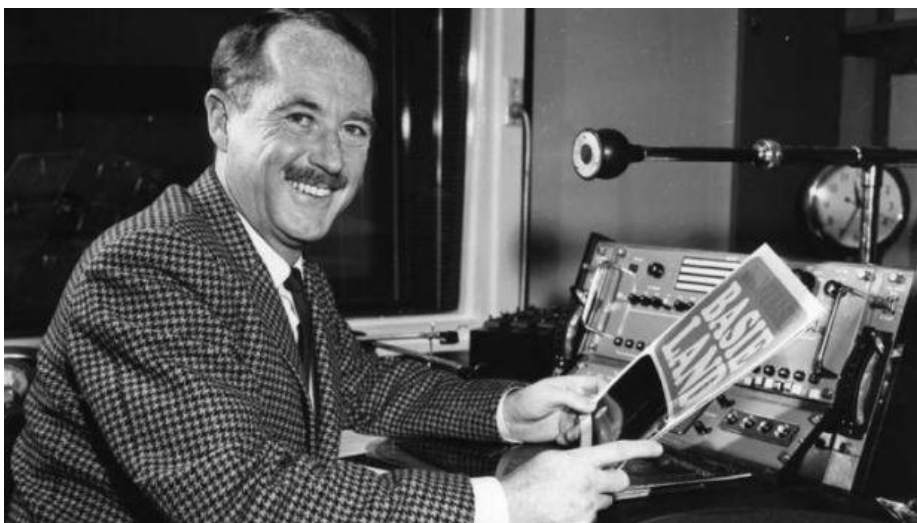
Semmler considered that one of his greatest achievements was in 1949 persuading an almost entirely classically oriented ABC Concert Management to tour Graeme Bell's band after its triumphant return from Europe. Later on, in the mid-1950s he did the same for the Australian Jazz Quintet, and just before he left the ABC he again persuaded the ABC Concert people to tour Len Barnard's band.

Early in 1950 he went to Brisbane where he met Eric Child and was so impressed with Child's jazz know-how and enthusiasm that on his return to Sydney he made a place for Eric's Saturday morning jazz program — which continued successfully for more than 30 years.



*ABC Radio personality Eric Child: broadcasting in Brisbane when recruited by Clem Semmler... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

It was Semmler too who, some years later, persuaded a by now jazz-converted ABC to allow him to program a Friday night jazz show which Kym Bonython and Eric Child ran alternately (eventually compered solely by the latter).



*Arch McKirdy: Semmler talked him into accepting a contract with the ABC...*

Moreover, seeing in 1965 the great opportunity for late night jazz on radio, Clem Semmler contacted Arch McKirdy and talked him into accepting a contract with the ABC. McKirdy was then running a successful nightly jazz show on 2GB. So began the nightly *Music To Midnight* (*Relax With Me* was McKirdy's original title) which was later taken over by Ian Neil and which became an ABC program institution.



*Ian Neil: he took over Music To Midnight, which was the heir to Arch McKirdy's Relax With Me...*

“Arch has been my firm friend ever since,” says Semmler.

Semmler was proud to claim in 1982 that there was not, over 30 years to that time, a radio jazz initiative on the ABC which was not the result of his work.

Semmler's departure from the ABC in 1977 was marked by controversy. “When I left the ABC I chose to be critical of some aspects of the ABC's administration”, says Semmler, “criticisms, incidentally, which were justified when the Dix Enquiry incorporated most of my strictures and suggestions for an improved ABC, in its Report. But, in the manner of thwarted bureaucrats, there were, as a result, some dark mutterings in ABC corridors.”

Semmler referred to a report in the *National Times* in November 1980, which stated that, on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Clem Semmler's pioneering Adelaide ABC jazz show he was invited by Eric Child to take part in an interview commemorating the event in Child's Friday night program.

Semmler takes up the story. “I willingly agreed and suggested a list of records. But a few weeks later an embarrassed Eric Child rang to tell me that a higher ABC authority had vetoed my appearance on the ABC... surely a most ungracious and churlish act of censorship.”

Semmler said that the *National Times* report expressed no doubt that this veto and Semmler's criticisms of the ABC were related.



*Eric Child (right), pictured with Turk Murphy (left) and Dick Hughes (centre): in Eric Child's 50th anniversary program there was no reference to Clem Semmler's achievements for ABC jazz...PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

“But the most outrageous happening of all was the exclusion of any reference to my achievements for ABC jazz in Eric Child's 50th anniversary program of a month or two back”, says Semmler.

Child apparently featured interviews and voice-pieces by Alan Saunders, the late Ellis Blain, Kym Bonython and others, all of whom Semmler had been instrumental in bringing onto ABC air (not to mention Child's own programs).

But apparently there was no reference to the man who had alone pioneered the introduction of jazz to the ABC. Clem Semmler was the forgotten man.

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