

OBITUARY: JUNE SMITH 1930-2016

by Garry Lee*

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The Perth jazz community recently mourned the loss of its original Lady of Jazz, June Smith, who passed away on the 5th May, 2016. June was an inspiration to generations of jazz musicians and especially jazz vocalists from Helen Matthews to Libby Hammer.

Born in Tranent, Scotland on June 9 1930, June (née Robinson) and husband Lew Smith migrated to Melbourne in 1961 and then made Perth their permanent home from 1974. The story of June and Lew provides a fascinating insight into the life of musicians in Britain after World War II and the promise of greater opportunities for those prepared to take a chance to migrate to Australia. Although primarily known as a vocalist, June started in music as a trumpeter. She performed with Britain's most famous all female swing band, Ivy Benson and Her All Girl Orchestra. This band really came to the fore in WW2 when male musicians were called up but continued for decades after.



June Smith: an inspiration to generations of jazz musicians and especially jazz vocalists...

**Garry Lee, who plays vibes and guitar, is one of Perth's leading jazz musicians, a jazz writer, and former WA Jazz Co-ordinator.*

June and Lew met at a Butlin's Holiday Camp in Filey, North Yorkshire in 1951. The chain of Butlin's Holidays Camps provided a glimmer of hope for the future for a Britain that was suffering in austerity and rationing after its second major war in less

than four decades. However June and Lew were both musicians in different bands employed to entertain the punters as they enjoyed their hard-earned summer vacation. Although both were only 21 with June travelling with the Benson Band, not only around Britain but also Europe and North Africa, they became engaged and were married in Tranent on December 8 1952. June and Lew enjoyed a marriage of over 63 years.

In 1961 they migrated to Australia making their home in Melbourne with eventually a family of four children – Katherine, Andrew, Sarah and Clifford. Their decision to migrate was assisted by an English musician friend, Eric Jupp, who in the late 1960s hosted a popular music program on national ABC TV.

In Melbourne with Lew working as a musician and librarian, June had a full-time vocation looking after the four children. However she still found time to join a pop band of the day called Division Five with a three-night-per-week residency and a repertoire including tunes by Janis Joplin and Creedence Clearwater Revival. With Lew later joining the band it was renamed Maximum Load and enjoyed a three-night-per-week residency at the Beaumaris Hotel that was to last three years.



June Smith (left) pictured here with Perth trumpeter Matt Jodrell (centre) and her husband, the clarinetist Lew Smith...

In late 1973 the family moved to Perth where Lew had secured a well-paid full-time position in the Library Studies program at the Secondary Teachers' College in Nedlands. After a week on the road in their Kombi van, the family arrived in Perth on

1st January 1974. Assisted by the late Harry Bluck, then Secretary of WA Branch of the Musicians Union, both June and Lew rapidly became a part of Perth's music community. In 1975 June was a featured vocalist with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra before an audience of 5,000 at Perth Entertainment Centre receiving plaudits from all including then Premier, Sir Charles Court.

Over the next decade Perth saw sweeping changes in its jazz scene. The formation of Perth Jazz Society (1973), Australian Jazz Convention (1979), Jazz Club of WA (1983), WA Jazz Festival at York (1983), formation of WA Youth Jazz Orchestra (1983) and the commencement of tertiary jazz studies at what is now the WA Academy of Performing Arts (1984) were all very positive signs that jazz was flourishing.

June quickly established herself as a riveting jazz vocalist always guaranteed to give a 100% knock-out performance with various bands at regular weekly gigs with Lew and musicians such as Barry Bruce (piano), Barry Cox (drums), Murray Wilkins (bass) and Viv Booker (bass). These gigs and the annual Ladies of Jazz concerts presented by Perth Jazz Society ensured she had a strong legion of fans.



Lew Smith (left) and June Smith performing for the Perth Jazz Society, 1985...

June embodied two vital ingredients with her vocal delivery: an ability to swing and an ability to create blues inflexions with her voice. Perhaps not coincidentally these are the two ingredients jazz great Wynton Marsalis suggests are mandatory for an authentic jazz performance. June's deep understanding of the nuances of jazz gleaned initially as a trumpeter gave her jazz performances an integrity that can only come after years of performing and listening. June was not a teacher in the formal sense but she provided an inspiration to generations of younger jazz vocalists and instrumentalists.

Despite an early education that took place during WW2, June as a mature age student in 1981 also received a Librarians Degree and worked at the WA Department for the Arts as their librarian.

In 1992 many who were fans of June formed Jazz Fremantle. This weekly meeting jazz club has enjoyed subsequent success due in part to Lew's two-decade role as band booker. June and Lew have always given encouragement to up-and-coming young jazz musicians including Mat Jodrell, Jordan Murray, Troy Roberts, James Sandon and Graham Wood, and Jazz Fremantle has provided the venue in recent decades.



The Perth saxophonist Troy Roberts: one of many up-and-coming young jazz musicians always given encouragement by June and Lew Smith...

It was most fitting that a celebration of June's life took place at the Navy Club presented by Jazz Fremantle on Sunday 15 May, 2016. An array of Perth's most talented jazz vocalists and instrumentalists performed to honour June's memory to an absolutely packed audience. Hosted by her family the program included footage of June performing and being interviewed. Especially moving was the performance of a tune strongly identified with June – *It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing* – by her grandchildren Sofia aged 10 on vocals, and Sebastian aged 12 on clarinet.

The Perth/Fremantle jazz community will be all the poorer for the loss of June, named lovingly by husband Lew, the "Caledonian Canary".