

OBITUARY: JOHN SANGSTER 1928-1995

by Bruce Johnson

John Grant Sangster, musician/composer, was born 17 November 1928 in Melbourne, only child of John Sangster and Isabella (née Davidson, then Pringle by first marriage). He attended Sandringham (1933), then Vermont Primary Schools, and Box Hill High School. Self-taught on trombone then cornet, learning from recordings with friend Sid Bridle, with whom he formed a band.



Sangster on cornet: self-taught first on trombone, then cornet... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Isabella's hostility towards John and his jazz activities came to a head on 21 September 1946, when she withdrew permission for him to attend a jazz event; in the ensuing confrontation he killed her with an axe but was acquitted of both murder and manslaughter.

In December 1946 he attended the first Australian Jazz Convention (AC) in Melbourne, December 1946, and at the third in 1948 he won an award from Graeme Bell as 'the most promising player'. He first recorded December 30th, and participated in the traditional jazz scene, including through the community centred on the house of Alan Watson in Rockley Road, South Yarra.

He married Shirley Drew 18 November 1949. In 1950 recorded (drums) with Roger, then Graeme Bell, and was invited to join Graeme's band on drums for their second international tour (26 October 1950 to 15 April 1952). During this tour Sangster recorded his first composition, and encountered Kenny Graham's Afro-Cubists and Johnny Dankworth, which broadened his stylistic interests.



Graeme Bell invited Sangster to join Graeme's band on drums for their second international tour, October 1950 to April 1952... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM



Graeme Bell's skiffle group, L-R, Sangster (washboard), Bell (tambourine), George Thompson (bass), Jeff Mack (guitar), other guitarist unidentified, Bill Townsend (banjo)... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

With Graeme he toured Korea and Japan, 1954 to 1955, then the two worked in Brisbane, where Sangster began playing the vibraphone. Shirley filed for divorce in 1957 (the decree absolute granted 17 September 1959). Bell and Sangster relocated to Sydney from 3 February 1957 for a residency at the Hotel Bennelong. Playing little jazz, the band recorded current skiffle hits (Sangster on washboard), one of which, *Rock Island Line*, made the top ten, leading to radio/television exposure, and playing support for Johnny Ray's 1957 Australian tour.



Sangster (far right) on cornet with the Ray Price Quartet. Others L-R, Col Nolan (piano), Price (banjo), Pat Rose (clarinet)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Freelancing from 1959, he also joined Ray Price, Don Burrows and Judy Bailey and became active in music for film and TV. By 1962 he lived in an apartment with his partner, nicknamed Bo Diddley*, above the El Rocco, where Sangster became central to jazz experimentation developments. Visiting US pianist Bob James introduced him to avant-gardists Albert Ayler, Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor, expanding Sangster's music to a degree unequalled in Australian music. On a 1966 ABC broadcast his trio freely improvised over pre-recorded percussion; he was 'one of only a few composers who used electronic sounds before the 1970s' in Australia.*

* Real name, Janice Patricia Byrnes. Her death at the age of 43 on June 2/3 1980 (as recorded on her Death Certificate) inspired Sangster's album *Requiem for a Loved One*.

**John Whiteoak, and Aline Scott-Maxwell, *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*. Sydney, Currency Press, 2003, 249.

His participation in Donald Westlake's 1966 'Best of Both Worlds' concerts, combining Don Burrows' Quartet with the New Sydney Woodwind Quartet, included his own compositions. The interest in fusions which informed his experiments with non-Western forms extended to the psychedelic counter-culture, playing in the pit band for *Hair* from 1969's and at Australia's first rock festival, at Ourimbah NSW, 1970.

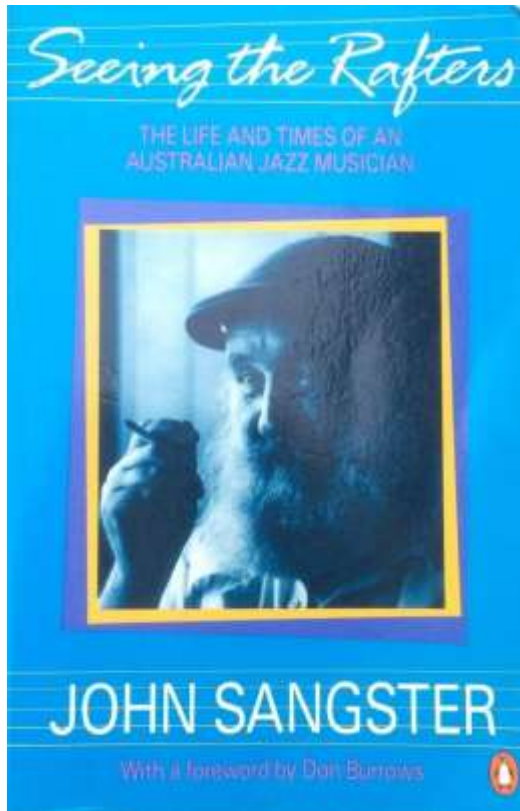


The cover of Sangster's album Ahead of Hair...

His film music ranged from the experimental (Albie Thoms' 1969 *Marinetti*) to children's animation (Hanna-Barbera's *The Funky Phantom* in 1971). His fascination with the musical representation of Australian landscape emerged in his music for the ABC TV series *In The Wild* (1976-1981). In 1971, moving to Narrabeen, he began composing suites based on Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Between 1973 and 1978 he produced over eight hours of recorded music, spanning ragtime to avant-garde. The instrumentation expanded from the standard traditional jazz lineup to include woodwinds, brass, strings, electric guitars, vocals, synthesiser, and studio-produced effects.

In 1988 he was entered on the Montsalvat Jazz Festival Roll of Honour. He moved to Brisbane in 1992 where he met Berlin-born musician Petra Schnese and the two took up residency as partners. In spite of ill-health he continued performing, including at Wangaratta Jazz and Blues Festival, 1994. His final gig was at Noosa Jazz Party, September 1995. He died of liver cancer on 26 October with Petra at his side. In his honour, and that of both her parents, she later changed her name to Petra Schnese-Kleist-Sangster.

Sangster was central in several major developments in Australian music. Bell's band was seminal in the formation of an 'Australian' jazz sound. Sangster was also at the forefront of progressive jazz movements in Australia: experimental, free-form, electronic and fusions. He had the broadest palette of any Australian performer/composer, with influences ranging from the 'classic' jazz corpus to jazz/pop avant-gardists and art music composers, notably Maurice Ravel. The result has been referred to as 'cosmic dixieland'*.



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His life and music disclose a far more complex sensibility than the ocker/hobbit persona that he cultivated on stage and in his memoir *Seeing The Rafters*. He was 'possibly the most talented of all the musicians who inhabit the jazz world of Australia ... one of the most intuitive musicians Australia has produced in any idiom'**.

*Myers, Eric, "John Sangster: Music for Fluteman," *Jazz: the Australasian Contemporary Music Magazine* (December 1982): 21.

**Williams, Mike, *The Australian Jazz Explosion*. London, Angus & Robertson Publishers, 1981.