

DON BURROWS AT 80 YEARS OF AGE

Interviewed by Andrew Ford

[On Saturday August 9, 2008, Don Burrows was interviewed by Andrew Ford on The Music Show on ABC Radio National. The program began with a track from George Trevare's Australians, a group which included Don Burrows, then aged 16.]

Andrew Ford: Back to Croajingolong that was. We heard George Trevare's Australians, and among them was the young Don Burrows playing clarinet, and it's a very great pleasure to say: Welcome back to the Music Show, Don Burrows.

Don Burrows: Thank you very much, Andrew. Gee that brought back some memories, hearing that.

Andrew Ford: How young were you?

Don Burrows: I was about 15, and when they came out I was 16. Yes, it was during the war, it was about 1944 we recorded it, and I think it came out in '45 or something like that. Yes, but all those guys are gone now, except the drummer - Al Vincer - and Al lives up in Newcastle somewhere, I haven't seen him in many years, the drummer and vibraphone player on it. But the others have all gone. And I'm 80 soon.



The George Trevare Jazz Group, July 19, 1945, L-R, Pat Lynch, Wally Norman, Trevare, Al Vincer, Don Burrows, Morgan McGree, Rolph Pommer, Horrie Bissell...
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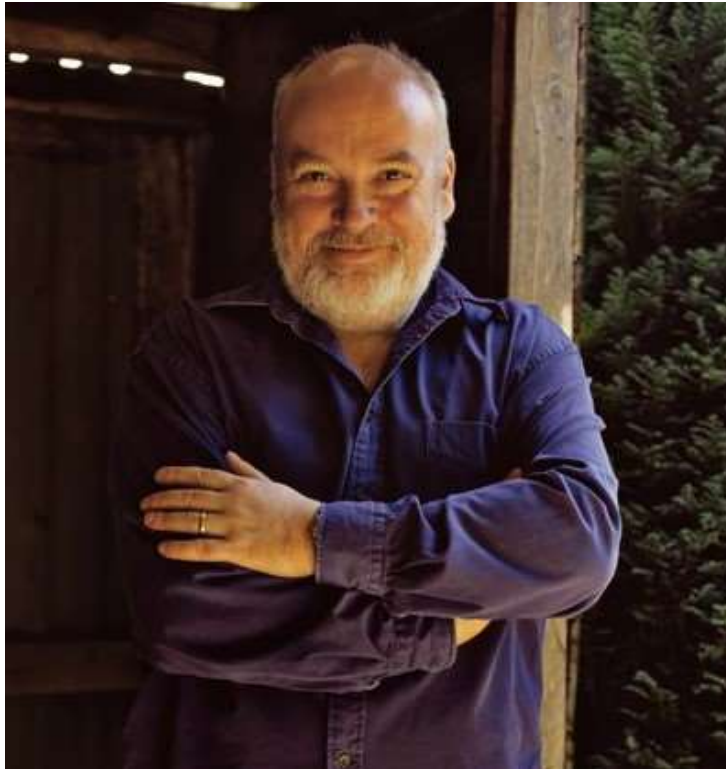
Andrew Ford: You're 80, yes. Some very nice playing on that actually.

Don Burrows: Oh gee, I tell you, that was a big event for me, being invited to do those.

Andrew Ford: How did that happen?

Don Burrows: George Trevare rang me.

Andrew Ford: He was the trombonist, perhaps I should say.



ABC Radio National broadcaster Andrew Ford...PHOTO COURTESY MUSIC TRUST

Don Burrows: That's right, and the leader, and at the time he had the band at the Trocadero for a period, not for long, but he did. But he was very well known, and he was also quite a... he did a lot of recordings in those days backing singers of the day, like Johnny Wade, and so on, and his recordings were quite popular in wartime, and they sold very well. And if I remember rightly, I was told that that set of six tunes we did, three recordings on 78s, they were supposed to have sold about 10,000 in England, which was hard to do when we were a colony and we were colonials.

Andrew Ford: And if you called yourself "George Trevare's Australians" was the name of the band, then everybody knows, as well.

Don Burrows: That's right, yes. But I remember at the time we did those, I was working, because it was wartime. You had to be in a protected industry, like an essential industry, because it was wartime, and I was too young to be in the army, and I had been playing in the nightclubs. But I got caught in a raid by the Child Welfare Department and I had to go into radio, which was an essential industry, so I was working on the staff at Macquarie Network. But those recordings were going to be recorded out at Homebush, that's the only place where EMI had a studio. So I had to pretend I was there. I remember getting into the office early in the morning, and made sure I said hello to everybody, so they all saw me, and then I disappeared on the train to Homebush and made those recordings, and came back just before they closed down. They said, "Gosh you've been hard to find today." I said, "Oh, I've been

all over the building.” I'd forgotten that until I heard that track and it all came back. That's how it was in those days.

Andrew Ford: Now how did George Trevare know to ring a 15-year-old?



Burrows: when world wars break out, the rule book goes out the window a bit...

PHOTO COURTESY ALCHETRON

Don Burrows: Well the way it was, everything happened terribly, terribly quickly for me, because I'd always tried to play an instrument of some sort even when I was tiny, just a comb and tissue paper, you know, playing along in the lounge room with the radio. And then a tin whistle, a ukulele, then a B-flat school flute on which I sort of shot ahead because that was the beginning of music in the schools. And the late Victor McMahon played at the school one day and started all us kids off with... we were the first bunch in Australia to be Music in the Schools, a school band, you know. And naturally, because I'd only been listening, or mainly listening to jazz music, I started to play jazz, like improvising the best I could on that little instrument. And I had notice taken of me because I was going in talent quests -- even if the prize was a block of chocolate I was in there to win the chocolate. So word spread around about anybody that was doing something in those days, there was no big distracter of attention like television, that hadn't happened. And then playing on all those radio programs for children, that got my name bandied about, and that's how I got the job playing in the nightclub bands, under-age that I was, and so I didn't finish school, you see, and they knew about me. And Rolph Pommer, who played alto on that, and Wally Norman who played on that, they were in a band that I was in as a 15-year-old, at the Roosevelt Club, a nightclub owned by Sammy Lee. And that was a notorious place, in a blacked-out Kings Cross. When world wars break out, the rule book goes out the window a bit. So I would never have gotten away with that in peacetime.

Andrew Ford: No, no, I'm sure you wouldn't.

Don Burrows: But word spreads, but it was just an amazing period because the band leader of the band at the Roosevelt Club was the late Bert Mahers, and Bert was a Canadian alto player, and he came out, I think with the Americanadians before the war and didn't go home. But he used to run what was called the Hot Plate Cab Service after the gig; we generally used to play till 2 in the morning, and he had a great big hutmobile that looked like something out of the gangster show that used to be on -- like the Roaring Twenties, one of those sort of cars, and he used to run American officers home to the camp they were based at out at Bankstown, which is a heck of a way. And it had a “producer unit”, it was called, on the car because you had

to have this furnace thing and stoke her up with coke to make it go; you couldn't get petrol, you see. All this. And I used to be what was called the jockey. And what he was doing was called jitneying. These words have gone out of use now. And he'd give me a quid, a pound, for being a jockey, so if you got pulled up, he was Uncle Bert and I was his nephew, and we were just taking our American friends back to their base. But he was charging them 10 quid a head and he was making more money there than he ever would have as bandleader there. Because I was playing flat out six nights a week there all night, and the pay was only 9 pounds 6 shillings, and I'd get a quid for sitting in the car, going for a ride instead of going straight home. It was wild days.

Andrew Ford: They sound like it. Now we left you as a flute player, but we've just heard you playing the clarinet, and if you were doing this by 15, you were already acquiring instruments at quite a rate.



Burrows on clarinet: he did his first performance on the instrument three weeks after he got it... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN REAL BOOK

Don Burrows: Yes, well the flute I mentioned was a little B-flat school flute, like a fife, but it has six holes and five keys, and that gives it a chromatic scale so it makes it into the flute family.

Andrew Ford: So you graduated quickly to clarinet?

Don Burrows: Yes. Yes, very, very quickly. I did my first performance on that three weeks after I got it. I got it on 6 April 1942, and I got this booking to appear on *The Youth Show* on Macquarie Network, a national thing you know, and with a big orchestra behind me. And I'd been booked as the kid who plays jazz on the B-flat school flute, but I got the clarinet in the meantime, so I set about figuring out the routine on the clarinet, and I had to go in and see John Kay, who was the arranger, a week before the performance to see what I was going to play. And I said "I'm going to play *Sweet Sue* and *12th Street Rag*. He said, 'Righto'. And I didn't have a case for the clarinet, it didn't come with a case, and I had it in one of Mum's tea towels, and I unravelled the tea towel and there's the clarinet, and he's looking on the application form about what I did, and he said, "It says here you're playing the B-flat school flute." And I said, "Oh yes, I've got a clarinet now, so I thought I'd play it on that." And he said, "How long have you been playing it?" I said, "Well two weeks". He said, "But the show's next week, it's on next week, you've only been playing three weeks, I'd better hear it." So I said, "Well, OK". So I played *Sweet Sue* and *12th Street Rag*".

And he said, "That's surprisingly good, but why do you only play in the low register?" And I said, "I haven't figured out yet how to get into the high register". He said, "It's the one around here with your left thumb". I said, "I've tried it and it gives you wrong notes", because I didn't know the clarinet was built in 12ths, and the only things I'd played up to that time were built in octaves, and I thought it was the wrong key. He said, "No, that's the one, it'll sound better with a big orchestra behind you, you should finish a bit higher than the low register."

Andrew Ford: But you had another week, didn't you, so I mean if you got that far in two weeks on your own...

Don Burrows: Well I had to do it there on the spot so he'd know how to voice the background you see. So I said, "Well I'll have a go, just a second." I mucked around, and I found out that your fingers went in an entirely different place to what they would have done on the school flute. So he said, "That's better, finish up there." I said, "Righto", and that's what I did.

Andrew Ford: Before we leave the B-flat school flute you should tell us the story about playing it in Carnegie Hall.

Don Burrows: Oh, I did, I had to do that because you see Mum and Dad had to pay that B-flat school flute off, we were just coming out of the Depression for years, and no-one had two bob, and we had to pay them off at threepence or sixpence a week, whatever you could afford, you know, and the struggle, just for that even, you know. But I always appreciated it very much, and I always made a point of playing that little B-flat school flute in every performance I ever did at a concert. It was very, very important to me, and then the big one came, to play in Carnegie Hall on the Newport Festival, and I made sure I played one of Johnny Sangster's tunes, which really displayed the little thing, a little 6/8 jazz thing you know. And so when we came off-stage I immediately went and found a phone and I rang home and I said, "Hey listen, I had to ring you to tell you the thing that went best when we played, I played on the B-flat school flute, so I reckon you could just about rest assured that the threepence or sixpence a week you had to pay was worth the investment." And Mum was in tears, all that stuff you know. But that was nice. And it was true.

Andrew Ford: I think we should listen to you play the flute...

Don Burrows: The flute, or the B-flat?

Andrew Ford: The flute. This is a Duke Ellington tune, *Don't get around much any more*, and you're playing with a guy called...

Don Burrows: Am I playing that on the flute?

Andrew Ford: You're playing with a guy called Stephane Grappelli.

Don Burrows: Oh, gosh, oh, right-o.

[Music plays]

Andrew Ford: *Don't Get Around Much Any More*, Duke Ellington song, and it was played by a trio consisting of George Golla on guitar, Stephane Grappelli on violin, and Don Burrows playing flute. Good Friday 1977 that was, Don.

Don Burrows: Yes, I remember that. We finished the tour with Steph the night before and it was like midnight when we were saying "goodbye, goodnight". He was going home the next evening, and he said, "You know, we should have made a recording together." "A bit late now," I said, "Steph, you know, you're going out tomorrow." "Oh, but I don't go until six o'clock or something." I said, "Yes, but tomorrow's Good Friday, everything's closed." He said, "But someone must have ze

key". And believe it or not, in the early hours of the morning, we got the bloke out of bed who used to be the sound operator there. He couldn't believe his ears.



The violinist Stephane Grappelli (above) and the guitarist Django Reinhardt (below): Burrows knew everything they did...



Andrew Ford: You had listened to Stephane Grappelli and Django Reinhardt and the Hot Club, those recordings, with your comb and tissue paper I guess.

Don Burrows: Oh, well I grew up in the '30s, I was born in the '20s, growing up in the '30s. The quintet of the Hot Club of France with Django and Steph is one of the most played bands on the earth. And I knew everything they did. I just loved them. But I never dreamed in my wildest dreams that I'd ever meet them. I never met

Django, but I didn't think I'd ever get to play with Stephane. But that's life and that's one of the great things about the music industry, the music business, the profession, call it what you like, but the link is music and you just never know what's coming around the corner for you, it's wonderful.

Andrew Ford: You've played with all sorts of famous people, Nat King Cole, Dizzy Gillespie, were you ever daunted, or were they...?



Burrows' long-term colleague, George Golla: terrific musician, and a great guy, and marvellous company to travel with... PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY

Don Burrows: Every time. When I hear myself playing there with Steph, I can tell, I'm as nervous as a cat. I don't play like that, I think when I'm really relaxed I can play better than that, because it bugs me to hear myself playing like that. I'm as tense as anything there.

Andrew Ford: How can you tell?

Don Burrows: Oh, I can just hear it in myself. If I had a chance to do that again with Steph now, I wouldn't do it like that, I'd do it much better than that. But that's experience, you know.

Andrew Ford: Yes. Let's talk about this business of experience. A great deal of your experience has been on the road, touring, touring, touring, was it simply a matter of going where the work was, or was there some -- I don't know -- ideological thing that kept you touring?

Don Burrows: Well the work was still at home, but I had done most of that. I had done the dance halls, I had done the nightclubs, I had done the radio bands, etc, you know, and I've always been very interested in the whole world, curious about other languages and other cultures, and to think that the clarinet and saxophone and flute get me there to experience them first-hand, was wonderful. And when you've got a colleague like George Golla, that's a marvellous guitarist. Terrific musician, George, and a great guy. And marvellous company to travel with. Nothing's ever a problem.

It's just made for us, and we were together 38 years George and I, that's better than most marriages. We just got on great, and we just got to play with some amazing people. And Ed Gaston was with us in a lot of that, and John Sangster, and then later on Craig Scott and David Jones, Gordon Rytmeister, I could go on and on you know. It's just been a marvellous kind of good fortune to be in music and have people interested in you, it's just... you can't ask more than that.



The Quartet circa late 70s: L-R, Ed Gaston, Burrows, George Golla, Alan Turnbull...

Andrew Ford: No, but one of the things that you've done is also to evangelise on behalf of jazz, isn't it? I mean we'll come to the education thing in a moment, but I mean with George Golla you went and played in some remote Aboriginal communities.

Don Burrows: Oh yes, we loved that. I still do it. I've only recently been doing that up in the Torres Strait, for people up there. And I enjoyed every crotchet. I just love it, and I love them as people, they're terrific people.

Andrew Ford: Is it different, you play at a jazz club like Bennetts Lane or The Basement or wherever, and you're playing for an audience that by and large is aficionados, and then if you go and play to an audience in a remote place anywhere in the world where perhaps they don't know jazz, do they respond differently? Do you feel differently?

Don Burrows: Well I wouldn't know how to play less than having a go at giving the best I've got, you know, which might vary from day to day, but if I was playing to one child under a tree in Arnhem Land, I'd still be trying as hard as I would anywhere else. You know. So it goes with the love and the respect of the whole thing of music. So I just can't explain it any other way, because I've had so many experiences and so many great memories to reflect on at this stage in my life in particular, and it's extraordinary how often the ones I'm really recalling the most might seem very little to other people, but to me they were just absolutely special, and it's the moment that matters where you are. I can't explain it really.

Andrew Ford: You've explained it well. But you're good at explaining jazz because you are also an educator and you have been for a long time, and you set up the first Jazz Studies course in a tertiary institution in the southern hemisphere.

Don Burrows: That's right, that was rather unusual in a way because I didn't even finish school, as I said before, so as far as educational sort of qualifications, I had none. Not a thing.

Andrew Ford: But you've made sure that a whole bunch of other people do have. What's the advantage to having a degree in jazz, would you say?

Don Burrows: Well it's only that the times have changed that created the demand for that sort of thing. You see, for instance, even when I started the jazz education movement in this country, it was going to be in a state school, the Conservatorium of Music, and I was going to be chairman of the department, and that had to be explained away on the front page of the newspapers of the day by the premier, Neville Wran, because I was on paper, unqualified, uneducated, but the only reason it had to be done that way is that the very school of learning in which we were going to be operating, it didn't have any graduates. No-one had ever been trained to do what we did. We just did it the hard way, you know, like on the job. So things were changing, and changing fast. And one of the main reasons I made the move was because the sort of alma mater to my generation is really hanging around the



Burrows picked people for the Jazz Studies faculty at the Con who were survivors, who lived and ate from being jazz musicians, such as Judy Bailey (above) and Bob Bertles (below)... BAILEY PHOTO CREDIT EDMOND THOMMEN, BERTLES PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM



bandstand at the local dance and getting to know the musicians, and then going to the nightclub and knowing some of the musicians and hearing them play, and all this sort of stuff, and getting to know them, word of mouth. But all that had changed, they'd all gone; the dance halls had gone, the nightclubs had gone, the radio bands had gone; I thought the next generation won't know how to play in a sax section or how to write for one, if they don't have some place doing it. And the only thing I'd think of was I guess jazz had to go to college, you know.

Andrew Ford: Was it a danger that it became, I don't know, respectable, or academicised?

Don Burrows: Well a great danger, but that's why I took such infinite care to pick the faculty. I only picked people for the faculty who were survivors, who were jazz musicians, and who lived and ate from being jazz musicians. People like George, of course, Judy Bailey, Roger Frampton, Bob Bertles, any of those people who you like to name, you check who was on the faculty. And they were all among the best players in the land, and there's nothing can go far wrong if, on a regular basis, young musicians want to be in the company of such experienced, reliable, good musicians. I mean in another set of circumstances, they're the sort of guys, they'd go and pay to have lessons from. And when I first set it up, it didn't cost them anything, they could come every week and they're being helped by George Golla and all these guys. I can't see anything wrong with that.



The pianist & composer Roger Frampton: another experienced, reliable, good musician, handpicked by Burrows for the Con faculty...

Andrew Ford: Then what happens? Because I look around today and there's such a wealth of talent among young jazz performers. I say "young", I mean jazz players in their 20s, but also in their 30s and in their 40s and I daresay in their 50s, but where's the work?

Don Burrows: This is the problem. This is the great worry. The only way -- at the risk of oversimplification -- I can say this, that they had to be in those earlier days

where we started referring to, our horizon really finished in Sydney in George Street, you know, I mean everything we needed to be successful in a career in music was in that city. We had the aforementioned nightclub bands, picture theatre bands, radio bands, all this sort of stuff; your world was catered for, and I really didn't know anyone that had ever been overseas in those early days. No-one went anywhere, we were hanging, you know, Australia was a country hanging on the bottom of the world down there. So the horizon was George Street. But now, and coming up then fast, was the world. We were starting to be invited to play all over the world. People were just going and trying their luck overseas and winning. So they had to be trained not now just for Australian conditions, but world standards. Everything changes. That's how it was. And I thought the only way to do it would be to give them somewhere not so much just to meet the faculty but to meet each other, because we got to know each other, it's young musicians all hanging around where the older, good musicians were, and getting to know them. It's like a nexus. And that's what I had in mind. It wasn't like you had to go and learn how to be hot, it wasn't that, it was just a place to play, and if you talk to Kevin Hunt or any of those blokes who are now top players but who were young blokes there at the Con, they say the thing they couldn't get over was that all day long, they just played in really good company, with really good supervision, and top players sitting in with them, in the faculty, of the faculty. You can't do much better than that.



The pianist Kevin Hunt: at the Con, all day long, they just played in really good company, with really good supervision, and top players sitting in with them...
PHOTO CREDIT JOSEPH SAW

Andrew Ford: Well you've mentioned Kevin Hunt and you mentioned the rest of the world. I think maybe we should get to Brazil in a moment. So let's get there with Kevin Hunt and a Jobim tune, and this is from your sessions with Kevin Hunt that came out very recently, *Eye to Eye*.

[Music plays]

Andrew Ford: Well that was Don Burrows, the tenor sax player, with Kevin Hunt and Jobim's tune *Triste*, and it comes from the collaboration between Don Burrows

and Kevin Hunt, called *Eye to Eye* and Don Burrows is my guest on today's *Music Show*. You have a love affair with Brazil, haven't you, Don?

Don Burrows: Yes, and that particular tune, we really had never played that one before and that was recorded at home, at my place. And we recorded the whole lot there. Kev brought a little portable recorder, and he brought over home to see what we could do with it, and also just to check what some of the repertoire sounded like back when we heard it, because we'd never recorded together. And that's how it came about.

Andrew Ford: So that's a demo is it? There's no problems with not being relaxed there, I think. You sounded very relaxed indeed. But tell me about Brazil, I mean you were going to live there weren't you?

Don Burrows: I was going to live there for the first three months of every year for the rest of my life, I loved it. I still do. And then the other nine months was going to be back home here in Australia, because I really just adored the music and the people and everything about it, except that I had a few incidents that scared me a bit on the streets and the last one really scared me, so I just had to re-think that I'm a grey-haired gringo and there's no disguising that and - I don't know - the streets have changed, not only there but everywhere in the world. There's a lot of parts of Sydney I wouldn't wander around with my instruments under my arm too late at night, and it's the same in any big city. So I choose to live very quietly in a very quiet non-city and sometimes it takes a bit of prodding to get me out of that atmosphere into the big smoke again. I'm not as self-assured as I used to be in the city atmosphere.



Burrows: in Brazil he had to re-think that "I'm a grey-haired gringo and there's no disguising that..."

Andrew Ford: But what about the playing, because I know you've had some problems with arthritis.

Don Burrows: Yes, but I've had that troubling me greatly lately since I was 38.

Andrew Ford: Really?

Don Burrows: Yes, so the biggest slice of my career I think, I've had to put up with that, and as I said once in a television interview on the fact of arthritis, I said, (and it's true) that arthritis is not the greatest for playing a musical instrument. But playing a musical instrument is very, very good for arthritis. And I mean it, it's true. And that's why I won't stop. Keep going, you know, as they pin the lid down on the coffin I'll still be trying to play something.

Andrew Ford: And what will you be trying to play? I mean which instrument, that day?

Don Burrows: Well it certainly won't be the bass trumpet I'm playing these days. I'm teaching myself the bass trumpet but I don't think they'd get the lid down.

Andrew Ford: I'm delighted to hear that you're still learning new instruments. How many do you play? Have you counted, ever?

Don Burrows: Oh well, at one stage in the union, you know, where you all had to have the list of instruments we were available on if anyone rang, it was a studio production of some sort going to be on and they needed a doubler, doubler meaning a person who played more than one instrument, I was listed on 13 instruments then, in those days. But that's like all the flute family, the bass flute, alto flute, the C flute, the piccolo and so on, and all the saxes, baritone, tenor, alto, soprano, blah-blah-blah. But these days I'm not far off being able to add a couple of brass instruments to it because I find it great fun to teach myself something I've never played in music, and that's a brass instrument. I started on the trombone, and I'm now onto the bass trumpet, and I do it so I can play in the local brass band, and I've always loved brass bands, and never been able to play in a brass band because I didn't play a brass instrument. So now on Thursday nights I go to band practice.



Burrows, on flute, recording the Babinda Trilogy, 1990...

Andrew Ford: I'm sure they're glad to have you. Listen we've managed to talk about jazz for the best part of an hour without ever having referred to any style of jazz, and we started off listening to you in something like trad mode I suppose. And here we are in the 21st century and there have been a lot of jazz styles come and go, and actually most of them I suppose have stuck around, they don't go, do they, they

just accumulate. But I mean do you have any feelings about style? Are there any styles that you don't feel at home in?

Don Burrows: Well, gee, I just love playing. Full stop. I still look back on the pleasure and experience I got playing for the ice skating at the Glaciarium down at the Railway when I was about 15, and it was so cold, we used to have to wear our pyjamas under our dinner suits, and gloves with the tops of the fingers cut out. But that was very vital to me, and I was learning, and I love to learn, and I'll have a crack at anything that's going to maybe give me something that I'm desperately in need of musically. But I just like music. I love it. I love old music.



L-R, Wally Norman (trumpet), Don Burrows (clarinet), Al Vincer (vibes): Burrows was 16 years old when this shot was taken in July, 1945... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Andrew Ford: So does it depend who you're playing with then, in a sense, and what they want to do, or who they are, or where they've come from?

Don Burrows: Yes. I don't mean I'm an expert on every style or anything like that, or any style, but I just love to play, I love being part of it. I get a big buzz out of on Thursday nights in the brass band when we play hymns, it's just beautiful to hear the sound of a brass band, and I'm playing a part in it. It's lovely music. So as long as it's music, I'm happy. Except I just would have no inclination whatsoever to play in a rock band, a rock 'n' roll band; it's too loud for me. I've played in a lot of big bands, 20 guys playing their heads off, it's only half as loud as a rock 'n' roll band of three people. But that I don't enjoy, that's for another generation to enjoy, that's just not my cup of tea.

Andrew Ford: Well if there was anybody listening to this who was thinking of asking Don to join their rock band, don't bother. Don Burrows, it's been lovely to talk to you again.

Don Burrows: Thanks a lot, Andrew.



Mell-O-Tones leader Phillip Sametz... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

Andrew Ford: I hope you enjoy your 80th birthday, I hope you're suitably feted. And we're going to hear you now in swing mode, along with the Mell-O-Tones.

Don Burrows: Oh, righto.

Andrew Ford: With *The Music Show's* very own Phillip Sametz.

Don Burrows: Yes, great.

Andrew Ford: Thanks a lot, Don.

Don Burrows: Thanks very much, Andrew.