

OBITUARY: DON HARPER 1921-1999

by Eric Myers

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Don Harper was born in Sneddon, Melbourne, on March 18, 1921. He died, after a long battle with cancer, at Bulli Hospital on the New South Wales South Coast, on May 30, 1999, aged 78.



Don Harper: he acceded to his parents' wish for him to qualify as a tradesman, so he became a metallurgist... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

He took up the violin at the age of eight despite some parental opposition. ("It's the only bloody instrument I can't stand", said his father). In his teens he discovered improvisation, and initially Joe Venuti and Duke Ellington. He later became interested in the Hot Club, Stuff Smith, Roy Eldridge and Coleman Hawkins.

As music was a shaky career, Don acceded to his parents' wish for him to qualify as a tradesman, so he became a metallurgist. But during the war years, he was already playing violin and baritone sax with Melbourne big bands, and in 1944 he became the bandleader at St Kilda Town Hall where, for ten years, two or three thousand people would line up to dance to Don's two nine-piece ensembles. His band, Don Harper & His Music, became one of Melbourne's most popular attractions.



British entertainer Tommy Trinder (above), who introduced Harper into lucrative television, recording and broadcasting work in London...

Don's quartet, which played at the Galleon Coffee Shop in Footscray, and did other gigs, consisted of himself on violin, Jack Grimsley (piano), Roy Blakston (drums), and Geoff Mallett (bass). In 1954 they won the Floorcoverings Talent Quest, and Don used the prize money to take himself and his wife Gloria to England.

There he looked up the British entertainer Tommy Trinder, with whom he'd worked in Melbourne. Trinder immediately introduced Don into lucrative television, recording and broadcasting work in London, which went on for almost 30 years. "I became, I suppose, the number one jazz and country fiddle player in London for sessions for quite a while," said Don in an interview published in *Jazz Magazine* in 1986. "I was always first call if there was a jazz track go on to a record." He also established himself as a cabaret artist.

Returning to Australia in 1962, he studied composition with Raymond Hanson at the NSW Conservatorium of Music. On his return to England in 1966 he broke into television composition in a big way, writing music for such programs as *Champion House*, *Sexton Blake*, *Devil In The Fog*, *Saturday Night Theatre*, *The Inside Man*, and *Dr Who*. He also composed the theme music for the BBC's *World of Sport*, which ran for 15 years, and secured him substantial royalty payments. "I reckon *World of Sport* must have made me \$100,000 dollars", he said in 1986. "I still get the cheques; they're beauties."



After 1962, Harper studied composition with Raymond Hanson (pictured above) at the NSW Conservatorium of Music...

In 1983 Don and Gloria, worried about political trends in England - Thatcherism, IRA bombings, race riots, and the threat of nuclear war - returned to live in Australia. They settled in Wollongong, south of Sydney. Don soon formed the Australian Chamber Jazz Ensemble, which included his nephew Steve McKenna (guitar), Julian Lee (piano), Ed Gaston (bass), and Alan Turnbull (drums), and established the jazz studies program at Wollongong University, in the Department of Creative Arts. In 1987 his house was destroyed in a landslide, and he and Gloria were lucky to escape unhurt. He lost his most valuable violin in the accident, and many important manuscripts.



Harper's nephew the guitarist Steve McKenna who was a member of Harper's Australian Chamber Jazz Ensemble... PHOTO FROM FACEBOOK

Despite failing health, he continued to perform well into the 1990s. In 1997 he released the CD *Images of Australia*, with paintings by Pamela Griffith, on ABC

Classics, featuring the Don Harper Constellation, with rhythm section and string quartet.



Harper: ceaselessly promoting his music and looking for opportunities to perform and spread jazz to a wider audience... PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

Don Harper was in regular contact, by telephone, with the jazz co-ordination office in Sydney, ceaselessly promoting his music and looking for opportunities to perform and spread jazz to a wider audience. He watched *JazzChord* carefully, and his energy was infectious. We extend our deepest sympathy to his wife Gloria, and their three children Rodney, Sally-Anne and Donald, who survive him.
