

OBITUARY: JACK ALLAN 1929—1995

by Bruce Johnson*

One of the most important visits to Australia by an American jazz musician was that undertaken on the initiative of Graeme Bell by the cornetist Rex Stewart in 1949. This was the first direct contact for the general public with 'the source' since the 'Coloured Idea' tour of 1928. Apart from the Bell band, one of the few groups selected to work with the American was the Sydney 6, an arrangement so mutually congenial as to result in a number of recordings for Wilco. The leader of the Australian group was the pianist Jack Allan, and the Sydney 6 evolved into The Katzenjammers, one of the most active exponents of that swing-based, bop-inflected jazz through which progressive styles in Sydney were mediated during the 1950s.



The Katzenjammers in the early 50s, L-R, Don Andrews (guitar), Keith Silver (clarinet), Frank Marcy (drums), Jack Allan (piano), Ron Tame (vocals)... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

**When this was written in 1995, Bruce Johnson was Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of New South Wales, and an active jazz musician who had worked with a number of bands in Australia, England and the USA. He was a prolific writer for various jazz publications, and also President of the Jazz Co-ordination Association of New South Wales.*

Jack Clarence Allan was born in Sydney on September 28, 1929. As a child he played accordion, and his public career can be dated from an appearance on Australia's Amateur Hour at the age of 12. He later switched from accordion to piano (self-taught on both), drawing particularly on the influences of Teddy Wilson, John Lewis and Art Tatum. He came to prominence in the nightclub and jazz concert scene that constituted the main public outlets for jazz in Sydney in the postwar decade. The groups he assembled under the name The Katzenjammers included Frank Marcy and Alan Geddes (drums), the bassist Reg Robinson, Don Andrews (guitar), Billy Weston and Johnny Bamford (trombones), Al Vincer (vibes) and the reed players Don Burrows, Errol Buddle and the massively influential Frank Smith.



The Katzenjammers included at times trombonist Billy Weston (above) and Frank Smith, (below, pictured on alto saxophone at the El Rocco 1958 with L-R, Ralph Stock, Cliff Barnett, and unidentified waitress, possibly Pam James). WESTON PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE, SMITH PHOTO COURTESY CLIFF BARNETT OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ



In addition to prolific concert work, The Katzenjammers recorded, and undertook touring commitments which included a memorable concert in a convent near Yass, where they gave a recital and lecture on the development of jazz. Jack also toured with packages that included Gene Krupa and Louis Armstrong. The band presented broadcasts for the ABC Swing Club, as well as having its own radio series, *Katzenjammer Jazz*. With the advent of television, Jack's photogenic features and larger than life frame (he was billed as 'Australia's Jackie Gleason') found a new medium, in which he backed Hal Lashwood's Minstrels for four years. He wrote and directed a jazz revue called *The Benny Goodman Story*, disclosing a feel for the theatre which also emerged in his career as an actor and comedian. His film and TV work included *They're a Weird Mob*, *Ned Kelly*, *Far East*, *Homicide*, *Skippy*, and a particularly strong performance in *Caddie*.



The Katzenjammers in the early 80s, L-R, Don Graham (guitar), Allan (piano), Terry Rae (drums), Alan Lee (vibes)...

Collectively his bands brought together probably the most significant Australian jazz musicians active during a decisive period in the synthesising of bop innovations and the swing tradition. It was a phase during which musicians were attempting to assimilate radically new ways of thinking about the music, before the conventions became institutionalised through jazz education courses and publications. Apart from the great pleasure he provided audiences (and, as I can report from first hand experience, his side musicians) through his piano playing, Jack Allan's chief importance is as a focal point for, and exemplar of, a major transitional moment in Australian jazz history. He died on February 7, 1995.
