

THE LION ROARS: THE MUSICAL LIFE OF WILLIE ‘THE LION’

McINTYRE by Phil Sandford. 214pp, self-published, 2018. EPUB: 9781925579826

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William Landale McIntyre (1919-1987) was a pioneer of Australian revivalist jazz, a contemporary of the Bell brothers, Lazy Ade Monsborough, George Tack, Don Pixie Roberts, Dave Dallwitz; and long-time regular pianist with Melbourne-based trumpeter Tony Newstead in sundry groups including the South Side Gang; and with George Tack (regular clarinettist with Newstead) in different small combos.



Front row L-R, Pixie Roberts, Roger Bell, Graeme Bell, George Tack, Willie McIntyre: pioneers of Australian revivalist jazz... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

In his preface, Phil Sandford has acknowledged the impact that Willie and his fellow musicians had on him as a 10-year-old exposed to the Melbourne jazz scene in the early 1950, inspiring him to take up jazz piano. It is clear too that the book is a labour of love, undertaken after extensive research involving interviews and exchanges with a very long list of people associated in diverse ways with Australian jazz music – all properly acknowledged for their contributions.

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That Willie's music impacted others in important ways cannot be in doubt. The jazz pianist Dick Hughes, who died earlier this year aged 86, has provided a short Foreword wherein he has reminisced warmly on how Willie influenced his piano style, including an account of McIntyre's playing at the sixth Australian Jazz Convention, in Adelaide.



Dick Hughes on piano at the Australian Jazz Convention, Railway Institute, Sydney, 1958: he has reminisced warmly on how Willie influenced his piano style... PHOTO COURTESY DADDY'S PRACTISING AGAIN

Coincidentally, I heard McIntyre at the same event and he therefore played some role in the epiphanic occasion that was to result in my becoming a jazz musician. In the closing hours of 1951, as a 15-year-old, I attended the final afternoon of the Convention at the Norwood Town Hall. I had not previously heard a jazz band, and really had no interest, having vaguely associated jazz with *In The Mood* played on the piano in C with a boogie-woogie left hand; but was persuaded to go to the Convention by the enthusiasm of a school friend.



Along with Willie McIntyre, Keith Hounslow (above) was a member of the 1951 Convention All Stars group: an epiphanic occasion... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Willie was the pianist in that year's Convention All Stars group; the front-line players were Keith Hounslow (tpt), Bruce Gray (clt), Warwick Dyer (tmb). I had never experienced anything like it and I was ecstatic – beside myself with excitement about what I had heard. I immediately became an avid record collector (even though I had for some time to play them on a neighbour's gramophone) and my subsequent life-long interest in jazz dates from that day.

The account of what sparked Willie's commitment to jazz is speculative but persuasive; essentially a smart kid with a natural talent for music, raised in a musical family in Benalla, a small country community in north-eastern Victoria between the world wars, who was a keen pupil of the piano from 10 years of age; and who, after seven years of formal lessons with a local teacher, had acquired good pianistic skills and experienced considerable success in local music competitions; and who, by 1936 aged 17 when the family relocated to Melbourne, had taught himself something of the styles of popular US jazz pianists like Fats Waller, Jelly Roll Morton, Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons.



McIntyre's namesake, the American stride pianist Willie 'The Lion' Smith (left) here pictured with Fats Waller in Harlem... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

To achieve this he would have had to rely on impressions from wireless broadcasts, to have had access to 78 recordings from which to copy solos by repeated listening, perhaps have encountered the occasional transcribed solo published in the US *Downbeat* magazine, first published in 1934; and, of course, gained exposure to local admired models already pursuing similar musical aims. And he would too have engaged in the process of improving his nascent skills by playing for dances and jamming with friends at home.

Sandford's description of these processes, which were already well established within the context of Melbourne's lively jazz scene in the late 1930s, provides an interesting exposition of how jazz skills were almost always developed in Australia during the 40s, 50s and 60s, before the advent of tertiary jazz studies programs in the late 1970s.

Phil Sandford's biography is subtitled "The musical life ..." – appropriate because, although there is comprehensive, extensive detail about McIntyre's musical career, we learn very little about the man behind the entertainer's persona because the book reveals little about his life outside of music. There are small exceptions; we do learn that, during his military service during World War II, he made a number of life-long friends, including the committed Adelaide jazz enthusiast Claude Jarrett, who was involved in organising Willie's many visits to Adelaide.

But, as far as one can tell, all of these friendships were in some way related to his musical interests. He also completed two tertiary degrees, first in Commerce, followed by Accountancy, achievements which presumably aided his advancement within the company where he was employed throughout most of his adult life. But there is nothing in the book that reflects on how he managed to balance full-time employment that presumably carried significant responsibilities with what, for many years, appears to have been a very significant commitment to a musical career.

We also learn that he went to the horse races regularly and was a punter who, on one occasion won 2,370 pounds for an outlay of 5 shillings; (this sum is almost identical to what at that time [1961] I earned in a full year playing six nights [48 hours] a week at The Embers in South Yarra, Melbourne). It is clearly an astonishing sum!



McIntyre, pictured here in 1976: in 1961 he chose to celebrate his windfall by sharing a crate of Penfold Grange Hermitage with his mates...

McIntyre chose to celebrate this windfall by sharing a “crate” of Penfold Grange Hermitage with his mates; all apparently consumed during the course of a weekend. I do not know how many bottles one got in a crate in those days; but Grange has always been relatively expensive wine and to splurge on it in this way does seem extravagant, although perhaps not so much, given the size of the betting return. In any case, the gesture does seem consistent with the exuberant, hard-drinking persona, within a male dominated context where many others shared these characteristics, at least when playing music together.

Perhaps an absence of detail about the man behind the legend is irrelevant; the book is after all about McIntyre’s time and his music. But I would have liked to learn more about the qualities and dispositions of the man behind the colourful “jazz character” who personified the playing and singing showman, especially because the opening to the Preface does hint at a contradiction between the “mild-mannered accountant” (p xv) by day and the hard-drinking jazz pianist and blues shouter by night.

However, the commentators interviewed for the book appear to have limited their comments to Willie’s musical skills. Even his sister Jess, with whom he clearly remained close throughout life, has limited her comments to his musical skills and persona. Perhaps, in the end, that was how everyone thought of him.



McIntyre on piano, Adelaide Town Hall, May/June, 1949: the commentators interviewed for the book appear to have limited their comments to Willie’s musical skills... PHOTO COURTESY PHIL SANDFORD

The chapter titled “At war: 1942-46” does set Willie’s war service, and that of many of his jazz musician peers, within a broad account of major events that defined Australia’s involvement in the Pacific war. He was enlisted in a field hospital medical unit, serving in Victoria, Papua and New Britain. Although opportunities for following his musical interests would obviously have been limited during this time, he did play occasional church services, concerts and parties; and while in Brisbane he was even able to play at the Dr Carver Service Club, an astonishing achievement which would have required special permission because the club was segregated and exclusively for African American service personnel who were billeted in large numbers in Australia’s east coast cities, at a time when the notorious so-called White Australia Policy was enshrined in law (essentially various restrictive immigration Acts only progressively overturned during 1966-1978).



The US Fifth Air Corps Orchestra playing at the Doctor Carver Service Club at South Brisbane on 19 August 1943. Galvin Johnson, Missouri is holding the microphone. Miss Lila Draper is dancing with Private Bob Walker, New York City.

But, other than Willie’s tune *Carver Club Special*, the first track on the CD that accompanies the book (see below), no other memento of this extraordinary episode remains. It was during these years also that Willie became accustomed to playing a harmonium, initially a small portable instrument that he was later to use on Yarra River cruises, although he appears also to have owned a regular larger instrument and was familiar with the electric Hammond organ.

It seems likely that McIntyre gave himself the sobriquet “The Lion”, after the African American Willie “The Lion” Smith (1897-1973), one of the giants of stride piano who was known to have influenced Duke Ellington, and was much admired by McIntyre. When he and others began referring to him in this way is unknown but it seems to have become established practice by the early post-war period when McIntyre was clearly established as a mainstay of the thriving Melbourne jazz scene.

The excitement and dynamic, happy-go-lucky spirit of the emerging jazz scene is well captured in the book by an excellent and extraordinarily informative description of

this time, in two chapters (4 and 5), which cover the years 1946-49. The following chapters 6 and 7 are similarly structured but focus more on the slow decline of traditional jazz as providing the main popular music form for mass entertainment.

These changes do not appear to have so dramatically reduced Willie McIntyre's musical involvement, at least during the 50s; he continued to advance his good-time piano playing and singing and his skills as a raconteur and vaudevillian comedian, working frequently with his close friend the clarinettist George Tack. However, such engagements were now to be found more frequently on the private party circuit than in the clubs, pubs, concerts and restaurants that had provided earlier employment opportunities.

By the mid-60s, however, the frequency of gigs was winding down and were now more occasional than had been the case previously. The research that has informed these chapters is impressive; Sandford has reconstructed the details of who played with whom, where, when, and even the tunes played.



Sandford captures the excitement and dynamic, happy-go-lucky spirit of the emerging jazz scene. This photograph includes L-R, McIntyre, Keith Atkins, Warwick Dyer, Laurie Howells, George Tack, Tony Newstead, probably circa November, 1947... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

In the final chapter Phil Sandford has undertaken an evaluation of McIntyre's contribution to the Melbourne jazz scene of the 1940s-50s, concluding that Willie "The Lion" did make a unique contribution which, although derived from the models

of earlier US jazz and boogie pianists, did reveal an original quality, which influenced several pianists who followed his lead. Sandford's conclusion is confirmed by the brief assessments from several jazz musicians and commentators, with which the chapter ends.

Phil Sandford has provided a valuable, carefully researched and informative account of the important contribution of a jazz pianist, working in that time following World War II when Australian-based traditional jazz was emerging as a somewhat unique sound and attracting national and international audiences. Willie "The Lion" McIntyre was a major figure at the time, loved and respected by his peers and an important influence on the generation of jazz enthusiasts who followed him.

The style of writing is relaxed, accessible and entertaining but scholarly. It has been carefully edited (although I noted instances of incorrectly/inconsistently spelt names, which might be corrected if a future opportunity arises – Richie Gun has a single "n"; Eames's given name is Graham [correct in the book] not Graeme [incorrect on the CD]; and my surname is incorrectly spelled in the preface, although correct elsewhere).

The text is backed by an extensive bibliography, well-constructed indexes, with a detailed record of all sources and what is probably a comprehensive list of McIntyre's issued and unissued recordings, including recordings in private collections. Best of all, it is accompanied by a CD (available from the companion website to the book, www.williemcintyre.com), with 21 tracks recording McIntyre's playing with sundry others and covering 1946, when he was aged 27, to 1985 when he was 66, with only two more years to live.



McIntyre (left) pictured here with Bill Miller (right) recorded frequently for Miller's Ampersand label... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

The first 15 tracks date 1946-49, the time when, having been discharged from the army, he was at the heart of the remarkably active Melbourne jazz scene, involved in

the new Australian Jazz Conventions (AJC) and recording frequently for Bill Miller's Ampersand label. There is a gap of 13 years to three tracks recorded at the 1962 AJC, then a further gap of 23 years, finishing with the final three tracks recorded at the 1985 Mildura Jazz Jamboree.

The quality of these recordings is variable; those in 1962 are very poorly recorded and the music is rough, to say the least; I cannot pretend to have enjoyed these, although the audience clearly did! However, the earlier tracks merit close attention, demonstrating McIntyre's immediate appeal. His style is nicely captured by the book's title *The Lion Roars*; his playing is infused with a feeling for the blues; the approach is intended to entertain and each tune is delivered with infectious enthusiasm -- an energetic, swinging feel and solid time.

I particularly enjoyed the version of *Winin' Boy Blues* with the Adelaide clarinettist Bruce Gray, always a favourite of mine and in whose band I began my professional career. The final three tracks are also very enjoyable. The piano is strong in accompaniment, authoritative although occasionally chaotic when soloing, but the overall performance is very swinging, in no small part because of the excellent playing of Graham Eames, Andrew Firth, James Clark (all Adelaide, at least initially), Paul Furniss and Viv Carter (both Sydney).



The version of Winin' Boy Blues includes the Adelaide clarinettist Bruce Gray (pictured here) ... PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE GRAY OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ

In short, this is an entertaining, informative read. The book will be an invaluable resource for future historians of Australian jazz during this era.