

OBITUARY: BRUCE HANCOCK 1948-2018

by Ted Nettelbeck*

[This obituary was completed on November 8, 2018 shortly after the death of Bruce Hancock which occurred on October 31, 2018]



Ted Nettelbeck (left) and Bruce Hancock at John Davis Music in Adelaide, in March, 2014...

Bruce Hancock's many contributions to the cause of jazz music in South Australia, as an outstanding jazz artist, superb jazz educator and dedicated administrator, have been exceptional, as recognised by his admission in October 2018 to the South Australian Music Hall of Fame.

Born in Kadina on 24 December 1948, his early musical experiences were shaped by his father's involvement in music for local country dances and community functions. Darcy Hancock was an accomplished, popular musician in the wider Yorke Peninsular community, who played saxophones, piano, clarinet, guitar and ukulele with local bands. The music was typical of styles popular during the 1930s and 40s, including big band swing and traditional jazz.

**Ted Nettelbeck is a professional jazz pianist and academic. He retired as paid staff recently at the University of Adelaide, where he is now Emeritus Professor in Psychology, and relocated to Melbourne.*

There was always music in the home; Bruce was introduced early to classical music, completing Piano Grades 1-7; and he was constantly exposed to his father's music interests. Darcy practiced regularly and held rehearsals with other musicians and he frequently played recordings of US jazz stars – Benny Goodman, Count Basie, the Ellington bands with Johnny Hodges, Fats Waller. All of these influences Bruce heard and absorbed; and before he had turned 12 he was already sufficiently accomplished as a pianist to occupy the piano chair in his father's band, a role that not only hastened the development of his playing and music reading skills but also served to protect him from any participation in dancing at community functions, an activity which he'd always been pleased to avoid!

By the time in 1964 when the family finally moved to Adelaide, just before Bruce turned 16, he was a sufficiently accomplished pianist to be able to begin developing a presence in the metropolitan scene, at a time when live music was still at the centre of popular entertainment, with bands playing for dancing, in ballrooms, local community halls, and clubs and for entertainment in hotels and restaurants. By the time that Bruce had turned 20 he was firmly established as a sought-after jazz pianist who could play in diverse styles, from early ragtime and stride to bebop, also provide music for dancing, accompany a singer and play for a show that required competent sight reading. He also continued to develop his skills on clarinet and saxophone, instruments that he played occasionally for the rest of his life.



L-R, Gordon Boyd , Bruce Hancock, Roger Hudson: Hancock and Hudson reached the semi-finals in Boyd's TV program Holden Showcase...

His piano playing early attracted attention from the media and in 1969, together with the traditional jazz pianist Roger Hudson, they reached the semi-finals in Gordon Boyd's TV program *Holden Showcase* playing *Little rock getaway*, four hands, two pianos. Throughout his career he continued to make regular radio and television broadcasts, including Jim McLeod's *JazzTrack*.

At around the time that the family relocated to Adelaide Bruce found permanent daytime employment with the Postmaster-General Department (PMG), initially as a technician/engineer trainee. Always adept with learning new technology, he advanced rapidly, eventually becoming a lecturer in communications and electronics within Telecom, which replaced the PMG in 1975 and which later became Telstra.



Bruce Hancock at 17...

However, throughout this time he always remained heavily involved in music performance, regularly playing several nights a week and extending his playing skills to include the Hammond organ and the rapidly developing electric keyboard. And in 1981 he took an opportunity to resign from Telstra and take up a continuing full-time career as an academic engaged in tertiary jazz studies.

The forerunner to the current jazz studies program leading to a bachelor degree at the Elder Conservatorium within the University of Adelaide was set up in 1980 at the Kintore Avenue campus of the Adelaide College of Advanced Education (ACAE). This initiative was established (with input from Don Burrows, who had been influential in establishing the first jazz studies program at the Sydney Conservatorium) under the direction of Hal Hall, an American expatriate jazz saxophonist previously employed within the WEA, the nongovernment, not-for-profit post-secondary adult education organisation.

Bruce was among those local Adelaide jazz musicians initially employed under contract arrangements to start up this program and from the outset his innovative ideas about teaching jazz played an important part in shaping the curriculum for the program as it evolved. By 1981 he was employed full-time on the program, teaching theory and practice of Jazz Piano to student pianists, Jazz Improvisation and Performance to all students and teaching Electronic Keyboards, Small Ensembles and Instrumental Workshops. Later, his responsibilities extended to include the supervision of postgraduate students at Master and PhD levels.

When Hal Hall retired in 1990 Bruce was appointed Head. The tertiary educational reforms in 1991 of Federal Labor Minister for Employment Education & Training John Dawkins merged the Kintore Avenue campus of ACAE with the University of Adelaide, and Bruce became Head of Jazz within the Elder Conservatorium, a position that he held with distinction until his retirement in 2015.



When Federal Labor minister John Dawkins (above) merged the Kintore Avenue campus of ACAE with the University of Adelaide, Bruce became Head of Jazz within the Elder Conservatorium...

He had firm ideas about how to develop a strong jazz curriculum based on a set library of tunes, graded according to level of difficulty, which had to be studied intensively. These tunes formed a basis around which theory and practice in small and large group playing were built and they provided the basis also for assessment that included a major performance component. Acquaintance with jazz history and different styles was included, and a principal focus was on a keen understanding of the vertical harmonic-scalar skills underpinning thematic development in bebop and post-bop styles. He encouraged students to improve listening skills, to practice transcription, was a strong advocate for the use of practice tools like *Band-in-a-Box* and music writing programs like *Sibelius*; and, above all, he encouraged students to get out and create opportunities to play. All final year students had to organise and present a final concert that was graded against criteria reflecting both ensemble and solo performances and content, which required different styles, familiarity with meter other than duple and triple, and control at fast and very slow tempos.



Hancock: he successfully resisted attempts by senior management to dilute the jazz content of the degree courses by introducing pop music into the program...

He successfully overcame some degree of prejudice in some areas of the Elder Conservatorium, winning inclusion of staff and students into the regular Friday lunch-time concerts programmed in the Elder Hall; and he ensured that student performances within this venue were well represented. Importantly, he successfully resisted attempts by senior management to dilute the jazz content of the degree courses by introducing pop music into the program. The outcome was a high-quality program in jazz studies, including a first-rate big band and a jazz choir – The

Adelaide Connection – of very high standard, which he took to the US. He was a popular, well respected performer in these concert series, which attracted substantial audiences each week from within and outside the university; it is beyond question that his performances exposed many people to jazz for the first time, under circumstances that were undoubtedly enjoyable. He played his last Elder concert with students in May 2018 but collapsed at the piano following an attack of severe arrhythmia that may have been related to his cancer treatment and that required cardiopulmonary resuscitation to revive him. Following release from hospital, he continued to perform but at a much-reduced rate.

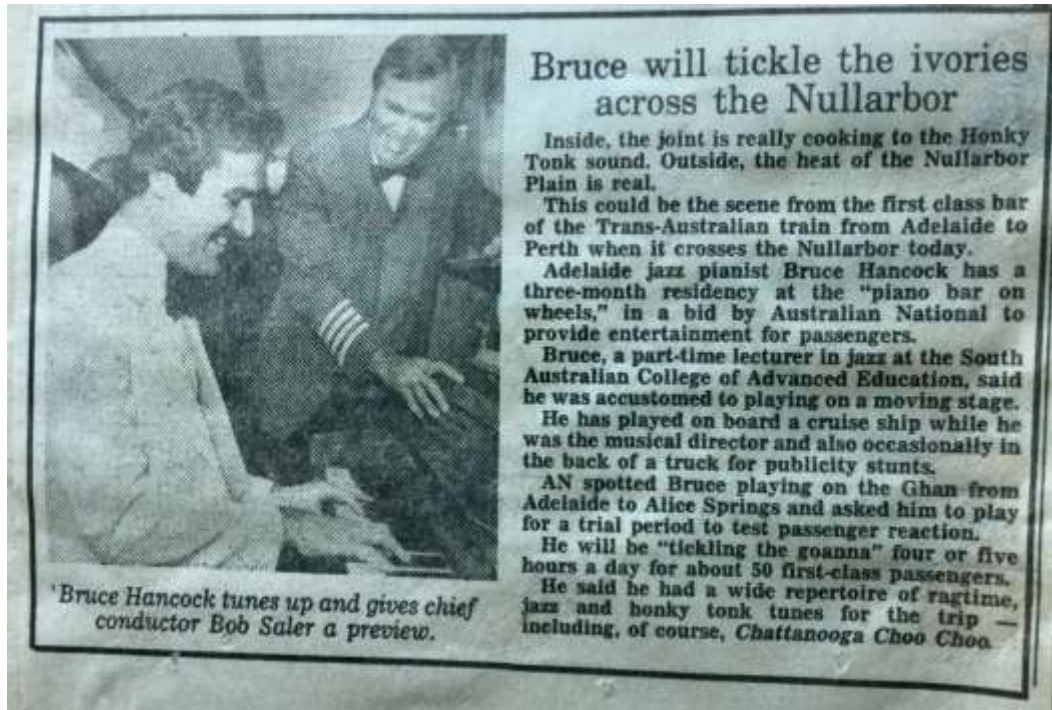


Bruce Hancock pictured at his last concert in Elder Hall in May, 2018, where he collapsed at the piano...

Bruce was a dedicated, generous teacher who worked hard to impart his wide knowledge of diverse jazz piano styles to his pupils. Although he had early acquired a sound keyboard technique and had excellent facility (he was reliably capable at 400 beats/minute), his jazz skills were largely self-taught, there being little by way of an alternative before the advent of tertiary training courses, the development of which in South Australia he was at the forefront.

However, he had extensively studied available jazz instruction materials like the Jamey Aebersold series, attending and eventually assisting in many of Aebersold's tutorials within Australia, and thereby meeting and playing with some of the leading jazz figures associated with this enterprise at the time, like Rufus Reid and David Liebman. He studied George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept and numerous transcriptions that were then becoming available of the styles of his many models, like James P Johnson, Art Tatum, Teddy Wilson, Bud Powell, Lennie Tristano, Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans, and Keith Jarrett. And he always maintained a busy playing schedule; clubs, pubs, cafes, restaurants, private functions, even a couple of seasons on cruise liners, a stint playing solo piano on the Ghan passenger Rail Service

between Adelaide and Alice Springs and a regular weekend gig aboard the “Popeye” motor launches cruising Adelaide’s River Torrens. He took care to ensure that his performances were invariably highly professional; and, because he continued to work within a broad range of genres, his playing impacted and extended jazz audiences across a very wide age group.



He taught literally dozens of student pianists, several of whom subsequently developed distinguished careers as jazz pianists, including Dave McEvoy, Tom Kassai, Christopher Martin and Mark Ferguson, who in turn taught the talented Matthew Sheens and who is himself now Head of Jazz at Adelaide. Advocating



Bruce taught literally dozens of student pianists including Mark Ferguson, now Head of Jazz at Adelaide, who in turn taught the talented Matthew Sheens (pictured here)...

strongly for opportunities for Adelaide students to be exposed to live performances by seasoned jazz musicians, Bruce arranged several important visits to Adelaide by musicians of the stature of the third-stream composer Gunther Schuller, the Dave Liebman 1985 quintet (Terumasa Hino [tpt], John Scofield [gtr], Ron McClure [bss], Adam Nussbaum [dms]), Jerry Bergonzi's 1989 quartet (Salvatore Bonafede [pno], Bruce Gertz [bss], Bob Gulotti [dms]), as well as major Australian jazz artists Don Burrows, George Golla, Errol Buddle, James Morrison, Mike Nock, Julien Wilson, and outstanding Adelaide alumni like Andrew Firth, Michelle Nicole and Anita Wardell.



Bruce at the piano, in concert with Errol Buddle (tenor saxophone) at Elder Hall in 2015...



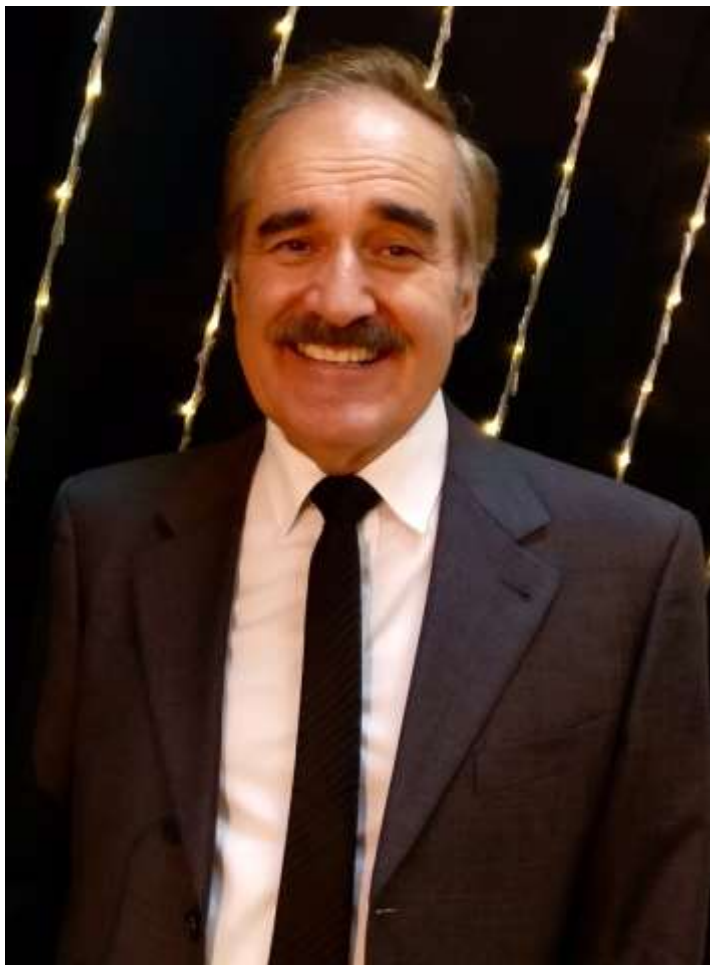
Hancock in concert at Elder Hall with outstanding Adelaide alumnus saxophonist Andrew Firth...

He was an exemplary administrator because he worked hard at it and he coped extremely well with the internal politics of academia, within a climate where internal competition with other forms of music for funding was inevitable. An important consequence of this was that the jazz program had to function with only a small core of permanent staff, supported by larger numbers of part-time contract appointments. This situation required endless organisation, which he managed superbly, always insisting as essential that all jazz students received as much individual tuition as classical students and had the same performance opportunities by way of large and small ensemble playing. Of course, as Head of Jazz he managed the core of permanent staff and during his 25 years he was responsible for several outstanding appointments to the permanent teaching staff, including saxophonists Jeff Alkire, Dusty Cox (Head immediately following Bruce's retirement) bassists Erik Applegate, Darcy Wright and John Aue, singer Connaitre Miller and guitarist James Muller.

Beyond his involvement with jazz studies at the University of Adelaide, Bruce has been tireless in his devotion to the promotion of jazz within the wider community. He was involved in the very successful South Australian Jazz Co-ordination program as a member of the management committee during much of the period for which the program was active; and he was Chair of that committee (1998-2001) during the tenure of Margaret Reines, the successful co-ordinator who systematically advanced

a vision for South Australian jazz across almost two decades (1989-2007), significantly changing the face of the Adelaide jazz scene. A major accomplishment during this time was the publication of a very high-quality collection of jazz compositions by 17 Adelaide-based musicians, including the internationally recognised Bryce Rohde and the pioneer of early Australian jazz Dave Dallwitz (*The South Australian Real Book*, collated and edited by Bruce Hancock, published 1999).

He was a very active member of the committee of the South Australian Jazz Archive, which he joined in 2012, replacing the drummer Laurie Kennedy who at that time retired to NSW. Despite illness, he devoted considerable time to the electronic archiving of their considerable collection and, because of his post-retirement continuing connection with the Elder Conservatorium, he was a valuable link between the Archive and the Jazz Studies program. In 2010 the Archive produced his CD *My Blue Heaven*.



Bruce Hancock: it can truly be said that he touched the lives of virtually everyone who is today part of Adelaide's jazz scene....

Bruce Hancock died on 31 October 2018, a couple of months shy of his 70th birthday, after a year's battle with pancreatic cancer. He is survived by his wife Christina and their two adult children Fiona and Ian. He will be sadly missed by many, including those within Adelaide's jazz community. It can truly be said that he touched the lives of virtually everyone who is today part of Adelaide's jazz scene.