

OBITUARY: HORST LIEPOLT 1927-2019

by Eric Myers

[The jazz promoter Horst Liepolt was born in Berlin, Germany, on July 27, 1927. He died in New York, USA, on January 9, 2019, aged 91. This is a longer version of the obituary which was published in The Australian newspaper on January 15, 2019.]

Influential in three cities — Melbourne, Sydney and New York — Horst Liepolt came from an artistic family. His grandfather was a classical oboe player from Sweden, who migrated to Germany to join the Berlin Philharmonic, and his mother a concert pianist. His father was a writer.



Liepolt (right) pictured here with the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie...

The young Horst was uninterested in classical music, and frequently fell asleep at the classical concerts to which he was dragged by his mother. Still, as a child, he was into sound. In an interview in 1979, he told me: “I used to really dig the bells ringing in the churches in Berlin — just the sound of them — at the time after everybody had knocked off work, before the night-life started, at a time when all cities are quiet, except maybe in the pubs”.

He grew up in Nazi Germany, where the government was opposed to jazz. Still he listened to jazz records with friends and, during the war years, spent time in underground jazz clubs in Berlin. He was turned on to jazz in 1944, a time in Germany history when Allied bombers were flattening Berlin, shortly before Hitler retired to his bunker, near the end of the war.

In 1944, aged 17, Liepolt heard Louis Armstrong’s *Savoy Blues*, which changed his life. That year was a crucial turning point, which explains why the club he opened in Melbourne in 1957 was called Jazz Centre 44, and his record label, established in 1975, 44 Records.

He then discovered for the first time that his mother possessed records by Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, and he began to

develop what became his life's passion. In 1945 he saw his first *Down Beat* magazine, and collected records from American troops who occupied Germany.



Horst Liepolt (right) pictured in 1981 in Sydney with his great friend David Martin (left) and the American singer Anita O'Day...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

After the war, he was part of the massive migration from Europe to Australia. He arrived in Launceston, Tasmania, in 1951, and worked as a “powder-monkey” on construction projects for the Hydro-Electric Commission for six months, before going on to Melbourne.



The famous (split) shot of the Brian Brown Quintet, performing at Horst Liepolt's Jazz Centre 44 in the late 50s, L-R, David Martin (piano), Brown (tenor saxophone), Keith Hounslow (trumpet), Barry Buckley (bass), Stewart Speer (drums)...

In Melbourne in the early fifties, the traditional jazz scene was going through a unique and golden era which, Horst believed, was difficult to explain to those who did not experience it. The whole era was beautifully documented, in his opinion, in Dick Hughes's book, *Daddy's Practising Again*. Liepolt also noticed the emergence of talented modern jazz players, and in 1957 opened Jazz Centre 44, a small club at the Katherina Cafe in Melbourne's bayside entertainment precinct. It lasted only three years but, as the writer Kaye Blum notes, it became "the Australian mecca for musicians, artists and audiences for all that was the newest and most creative in jazz, art, poetry, film, photography."

Jazz Centre 44 provided the first major engagement for the legendary hard-bop quintet led by the saxophonist Brian Brown, the members of which would dominate Australian jazz for decades to come. Other than Brown it included Keith Hounslow (trumpet), David Martin (piano), Barry Buckley (bass) and Stewart Speer (drums).

Unlike some European migrants, Liepolt never lost his thick German accent, which was fondly imitated by friends: "Tell you vot, baby; ze band voss svingink und groovink!"

The pianist/journalist Dick Hughes once told Liepolt that his new girlfriend was not keen on jazz. Liepolt quipped, "That's so right, man. Der dames, dey don't dig der jazz."



Liepolt told Dick Hughes (pictured above), "Der dames, dey don't dig der jazz" ...PHOTO CREDIT JANE MARCH

Liepolt arrived in Sydney in 1960, and became influential during the next decade, when a confluence of events stimulated jazz activity. Bruce Viles opened the Rocks Push in 1971, and in 1973 The Basement, which would become the city's leading jazz venue for many years. The group Galapagos Duck, then managed by Liepolt, played for several consecutive nights, with Liepolt presenting more non-commercial and innovative groups early in the week.



Members of Galapagos Duck, L-R, Willie Qua, Doug Robson, Chris Qua, unidentified ABC broadcaster, Liepolt, Marty Mooney, Tom Hare...

Over the following decade, Liepolt built up performance opportunities for many jazz musicians at a number of venues, such as the Australian Museum, the Sydney Hilton, the African Queen, and the Paradise Jazz Cellar. His *Music Is An Open Sky* festivals were surprisingly successful, and his 44 Records label released some 30 LPs of Australian jazz. 24 editions of his magazine *Jazz Down Under* were published between 1974 and 1978. He introduced a substantial jazz component into the Festival of Sydney and, in 1980, shortly before he left for New York, began the Manly Jazz Festival, which is still in existence today.

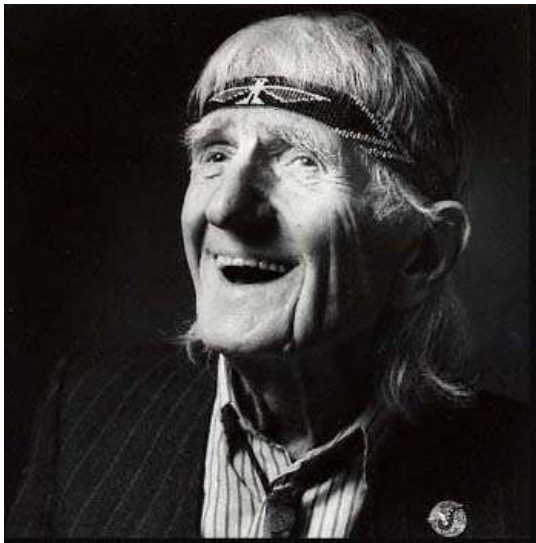
In New York Liepolt made his mark swiftly. Having met Mel Litoff and his wife Phyllis Weisbart, who took over the venue Sweet Basil in August 1981, Liepolt became the club's music co-ordinator, and did what many said could not be successfully done at the time in New York: put contemporary jazz into an essentially commercial setting.



Phyllis Weisbart who, with her husband Mel Litoff, took over Sweet Basil in 1981...

Liepolt and his two partners subsequently took over a bar called Lush Life, and presented jazz there too. In 1982 they started the Greenwich Village Jazz Festival in an effort to reinforce the sense of community in that vibrant, somewhat bohemian area. Spread across 13 venues, its opening concert in August 1982, starring Dizzy Gillespie, was attended by 10,000 people in Washington Square Park.

Liepolt's greatest coup was to offer a regular Monday night gig at Sweet Basil's to the arranger/composer Gil Evans, then a relatively neglected figure despite his legendary status. Miles Davis, who regarded Evans as his best friend, came to Sweet Basil's on one occasion and expressed his gratitude to Liepolt for giving Evans this opportunity. The Gil Evans Monday Night Orchestra gig lasted for five years, and resulted in the release of a number of successful albums produced by Liepolt. The *Bud and Bird* album won a Grammy.



Gil Evans: the Monday Night Orchestra gig lasted for five years...



Liepolt (right) with his wife Clarita...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

In 1990 Liepolt married his wife Clarita, a Colombian woman 25 years his junior, who survives him. A celebrated artist/sculptor in her own right, she encouraged Liepolt in his parallel activity as a visual artist. He exhibited his paintings in Berlin and New York, including his Zen Impressions exhibition in NY which took place as he celebrated his 90th birthday.



Clarita and Horst Liepolt, pictured in 2017... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Clarita and Horst first saw each other at Clarita's cousin Julie's dry cleaners in Greenwich Village. "He was a regular there and I had just arrived from Colombia," says Clarita. "My immediate thought was 'wow he has very good energy'." They met up again a year later, when Horst asked Julie to invite Clarita to dinner. Five months after the dinner engagement, they were married.

When Horst asked her to marry him, Clarita said, "I don't like to cook". Liepolt responded that he was not looking for a housewife, but for a partner, a friend, someone to share his life with. "The love that Horst has shown me isn't limited to me", says Clarita. "It goes into his creativity (art, music), friends, partnerships, and his zest for life. It's what made him such an amazing man".