

## **BENNY FEATHERSTONE: PRINCE OF GOOD FELLOWS**

**by Nigel Buesst\***

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A feature film based on the life of Benny Featherstone, one of Australia's first jazz players, would make a wonderful night at the cinema, bursting with colourful drama. He certainly lived life to the hilt. As a contemporary of Errol Flynn and a fellow Tasmanian, Benny is surely deserving of a biography along the lines of *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, if not a feature film.

But until someone comes up with the big budget needed to stage such a production we might have to settle for my hour-long documentary, shot on Hi8 video. Old stills, newspaper clippings, and numerous interviews with those who knew him, are pieced together to give an impression of this long forgotten jazz pioneer. Unfortunately there is no film footage of Featherstone playing, or even talking, and the few recordings he made in no way present his talents to advantage.



*Benny Featherstone: a long forgotten jazz pioneer but one of the first major figures in Australian jazz... PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM*

Yet by all accounts he was a naturally gifted musician, mastering several instruments and becoming, along with Frank Coughlan, one of the first major figures in Australian jazz. Benny was by all accounts a commanding personality: tall, dark and

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*\*When this was written in 1997 Nigel Buesst was a Melbourne filmmaker whose film *Jazz Scrapbook* was released in 1983.*

handsome, with a wicked sense of humour, and of course an enviable reputation as a ladies' man.

A press report of the day (*Australian Dance Band News*, December 1, 1932) in describing Featherstone, then still a lanky 20-year-old performing at the St Kilda Palais with the Ern Pettifer Band, gives some indication of his versatility:

*The Palais lights are turned down, the dancers crowd around the bandstand, and Ern Pettifer takes Ben's place at the drums. The band strikes up a fast tempo, and Ben emerges from the back playing a penny whistle. One chorus of this, and then follows an Armstrongish vocal. A jump takes him to the piano, and a four-handed chorus follows. Ben taking some marvellous hot chords up at Benny Featherstone, pictured with the vocalist Marjorie Stafford, in front of his first band, at the Rex Cabaret, Swanston St, Melbourne, 1934 the treble end. Not satisfied, he then takes a trombone and shows how Dorsey might do it. Another grab gives him a tenor sax, which is played a la Hawkins. Finally a trumpet is handed up and a reversion to the great Louis continues for a couple of choruses. And then, even though it is his seventh chorus, and all at a colossal speed, he is able to finish on a simply tremendous sustained high note.*



*Benny Featherstone's orchestra, Rex Cabaret, 1934, L-R, unidentified trombonist, Frank Lobb (bass), Mick Gardiner (trumpet), Bill Dardis (piano), Marjorie Stedeford (vocals), unidentified drummer, Featherstone, Vin McCarthy (alto), unidentified tenor saxophonist.... PHOTO COURTESY MIKE SUTCLIFFE*

Featherstone was obviously improvising at a time when increasingly the bands were working from arrangements. He had been initially inspired by the likes of Miff Mole, Henry Allen, Red Nichols and Bix, whose records could sometimes be found in Australia in the late 1920s.

He mastered both trumpet and trombone in the school band at Melbourne Grammar, but left school early to join Joe Watson's Green Mill Orchestra on drums. Here was a recalcitrant of the first order, ignoring parental advice to follow a serious career in one of the professions and instead choosing to follow jazz.

For the 12 years he was on the bandstand he was the life of the party, playing anywhere and anything, so long as it was hot jazz. Benny was a local hero who strode the stage performing acts of bravado and skill, heaping wild emotions on the crowd, being witty and outrageous in a society not noted for these qualities. But the fires of extroversion, good cheer and talent must be fuelled, and the handiest fuel was alcohol... to take you that little bit further, to create a romantic, fun-filled ambience. Inevitably it creates a dependence.



*The Beachcombers circa 1930, L-R, Dave Pittendregh (bass sax), Featherstone (trumpet), Gordon James (piano), Abe Naphthine (alto sax), Lindsay Sergeant (banjo), Dick Bentley (violin), Geoff Smith (drums), Don Binney (trombone), Bill Van Cooth (tenor)... PHOTO COURTESY MIKE SUTCLIFFE & OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ*

When his musical career lost all momentum after the second war, Benny took various unlikely jobs, including a lengthy period as a shipping clerk on the Melbourne wharves. Although playing occasionally as a stand-in with the Bell Band in the 1940s his heart was no longer in trad jazz and his participation in the trad revival was marginal. Despite his great natural ear and a command of all manner of instruments, his career in music petered out. In wanting to be progressive he lost his way stylistically. In response to this dilemma he resorted to irreverent joking, fast living

(whatever that may be!) cigarettes and alcohol. The focus and diligence just wasn't there. A half-hearted comeback in the mid-1950s misfired badly.

It was on the wharves that he formed a deep and lasting friendship with Ernst Grossman, a fellow jazz devotee, record collector and discographer. In attempting to record the details of Benny's life for this video it was inevitable that Ernie became an important source of information. We drove about looking for records, visiting the now derelict docklands, browsing through old newspaper clippings, and reminiscing about times long past. The great pleasure of this project has been in sitting about with Ernie remembering the good old days.

We found the original Featherstone scrapbook and some early 78rpm acetates, though with Benny on drums he is barely heard. Trumpeter Doug Dehn says Benny at his best in the late 1930s played in the high note style of Roy Eldridge. Neville Maddison, who played with Benny at the Fawkner Park Kiosk through the 30s, tells how Benny's trombone slide shot out across the dance floor at a climactic moment. A couple of records have him on clarinet, bouncing around in the Pee Wee Russell manner.



*Featherstone: when he died in 1977 (aged 65) the impact within the local jazz fraternity foreshadowed that of the recent death of Princess Diana. There were inexplicable resonances... PHOTO COURTESY MIKE SUTCLIFFE & OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ*

In retrospect the life of Benny Featherstone parallels that of so many other pioneer jazzmen who lived fast and died young. Benny never actually died though, he just burnt out musically. When he did finally pass on in 1977 (aged 65) the impact within

the local jazz fraternity foreshadowed that of the recent death of Princess Diana. There were inexplicable resonances. Benny had come to represent so much more than one individual. He had assumed almost mythical status, the embodiment of a life given over to jazz with all its struggles and disappointments. The well lived life has been defined as the dreams of youth fulfilled in later years. On that score Benny never really made it. Yet the myth endures, more meaningful than any music he might have created.



*Nigel Buesst, on recordings of Benny Featherstone: just to know they exist is important...*

Copies of this video are available from Nigel Buesst at 785 Rathdowne Street North Carlton Vic 3054, Tel (03) 9347 552 for a mere \$30 plus \$2 pp. Should anyone by some miracle have recordings of Benny I would most assuredly like to hear from them. It's too late of course to include them, but just to know they exist is important. One further aspect could be of interest. Computer software capable of eliminating the clicks and surface noise of old recordings became available as this project was under way. So anyone with rare old records needing a clean up and transfer to tape could give me a ring.

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