

OBITUARY: CHARLIE MUNRO 1917-1985

by Eric Myers

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The distinguished musician Charlie Munro, died on December 9, 1985, aged 68, following a cerebral haemorrhage. He was one of the most important musicians in the history of Australian jazz, his career encompassing the swing, bop and modern jazz eras. A brilliant composer, arranger and instrumentalist, he played the cello — the only instrument in which he had formal training — and the saxophone family, as well as flute and clarinet.



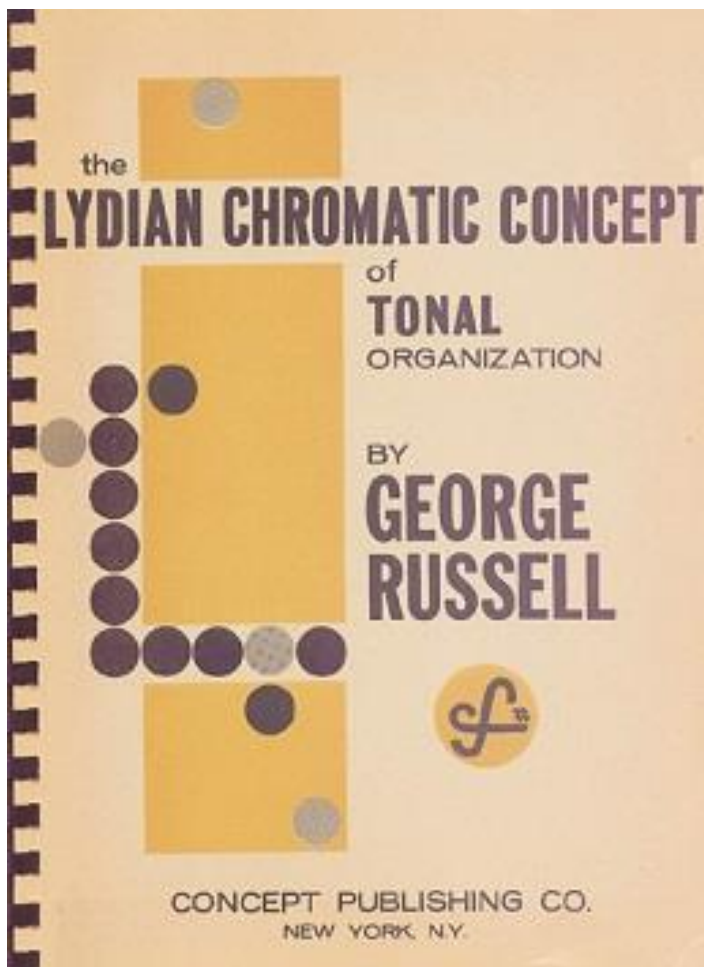
Charlie Munro on alto saxophone... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

He was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, on May 23, 1917. He began playing saxophone at nine, the cello at 11, and became a professional musician at 17. In the late 1930s he worked as a musician aboard ships which travelled between Australia and New Zealand. In 1938 he came to Sydney to pursue a career in music.

He was in the Australian army from 1940 to 1945, where he played with orchestras providing entertainment for the troops, particularly in New Guinea and Queensland. After the war he played with many leading bands in theatres and dance halls. From 1946 to 1950 he worked at the Roosevelt Club in Kings Cross, in groups led by Wally Norman. During these years, he came under the influence of the bebop movement, and became one of the leading exponents of bop in Australian jazz.

He was much admired, and was an inspiration to the young Don Burrows, who also played at the Roosevelt. He joined the ABC Sydney Dance Band in 1952 and was resident with that orchestra as an instrumentalist and arranger until it was disbanded in 1976. Although he spent much of his time involved in light entertainment music, he was always alive to developments in jazz.

In the early 1960s he was one of a group of innovative musicians who explored the theories expounded in the book *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organisation*, by American composer George Russell.

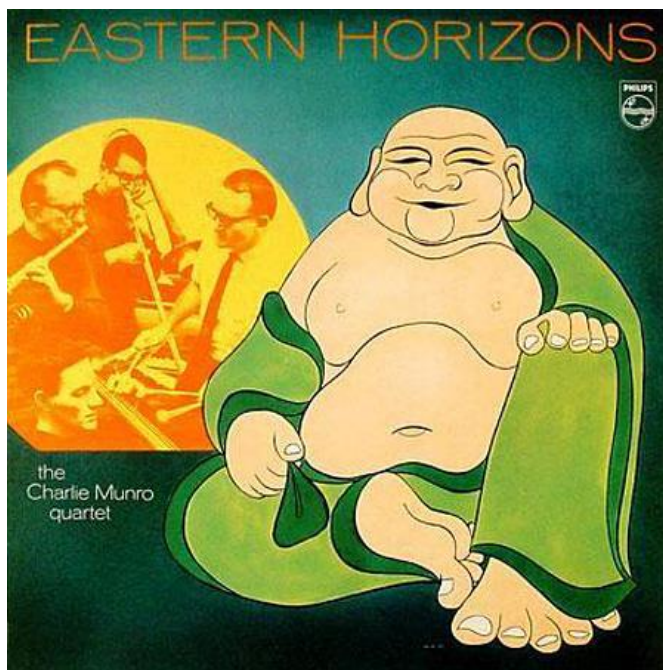


He played with three of them, Bryce Rohde (piano), Bruce Cale (bass) and Mark Bowden (drums) in the Bryce Rohde Quartet from 1961 to 1965. They recorded the important LPs *Corners* and *Just Bryce*, in which Munro's uncompromising saxophone work was notable.

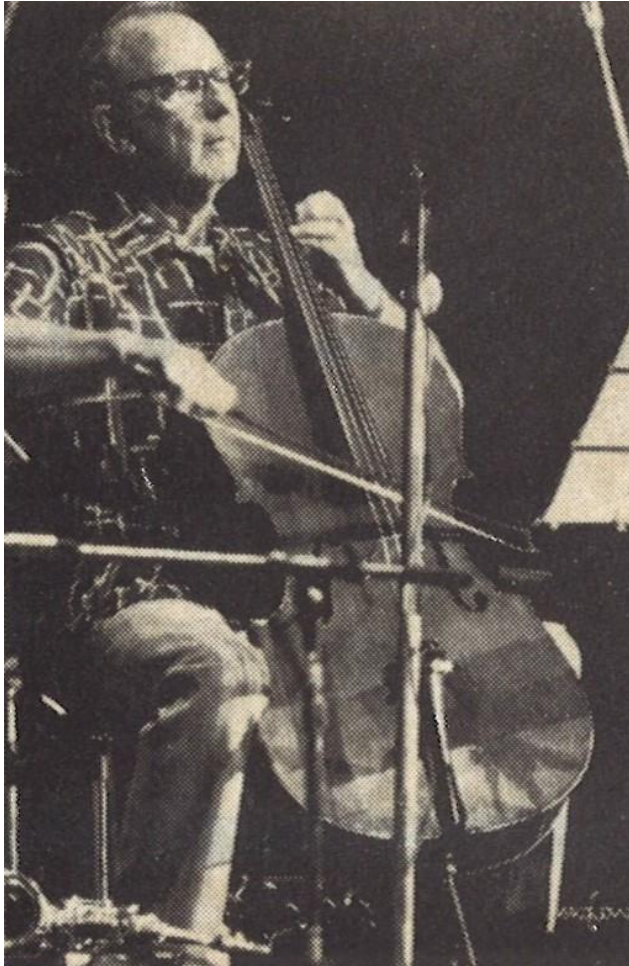


Bryce Rohde Quintet in 1962, L-R, Bruce Cale, Rohde, Mark Bowden, Sid Powell, Munro...PHOTO COURTESY BRUCE CALE

He was fascinated by modal music and in 1967 recorded the LP *Eastern Horizons* with a quartet under his own leadership.



This LP consisted of several Munro compositions based on Indian and Arabic modes. It continues to be one of the major milestones in Australian jazz. During 1979, he emerged out of relative obscurity to perform with the Bruce Cale Quartet, providing younger jazz fans who knew him by reputation only, with their first opportunity to hear him play. They were astonished by his virtuosity.



Munro playing the cello, the only instrument in which he had formal training...

In his last years he continued to do recording sessions in Sydney, and played on Saturday afternoons at the Three Weeds Hotel, Rozelle, with the group Lucy Brown and Friends, and on Saturday nights at Earlwood-Bardwell Park RSL, where he led the resident quintet.

The cultural historian Dr A J B (Bruce) Johnson, concludes that Munro was “one of the closest things this country has produced to a jazz-based genius.”

Charlie Munro is survived by his wife Lucy, daughter Annette, son-in-law Barry, sisters Edna and Emily, and his brother Alex.
